

A Review of Afrofuturism in Black Panther: Gender, Identity, and the Re-Making of Blackness

By Renée T. White and Karen A. Ritzenhoff. Lanham: The Rowan & Littlefield Publishing Group, 2021. 364 pages. \$125.00 (hardcover).

In February 2018, people of color flocked to movie theatres in their best African garb to bear witness to a story about an African world thriving without the influence or intrusion of white people. *Black Panther* highlights one of the major unresolved tensions between Black people in the Diaspora and continental Africans. It grapples with a major question: *who are we to each other?* Wakanda is committed to protecting itself from the horrors of colonization. The brewing internal conflict that situates Wakanda at war within itself is one of fear of repeating history. This land and its people have witnessed what happens when a land, its people, and its resources become too exposed. It heard the cries of those taken from their homeland. It heard the howls of those who sought refuge with Yemonja rather than a life of enslavement. It heard the weeping mothers on the other side of the Atlantic. It heard the call for a hero to lift its people out of captivity. And it chose to protect itself from that pain by producing a sort of captivity for itself and its people. It used the shadows as its saving grace.

For fans and followers of Marvel Comics and the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), the making of this movie was a long time coming. For those who had just been introduced to the genius of Wakanda, this was an introduction to a world not yet touched by colonization and to images of Black people that defied stereotypes. *Black Panther* was complicated to watch and *Afrofuturism in Black Panther: Gender, Identity, and the Re-Making of Blackness* further complicates it. Black people rooted for both T'Challa and Eric Killmonger because they *are* T'Challa and Eric Killmonger. The antagonist and the protagonist were both filled with hero possibilities that Black people wrestle with daily. Eric Killmonger's complicated story left viewers wanting T'Challa to win back the throne, but they didn't want to see Killmonger die either. It also emphasized the complex relationship between Black people in the Diaspora and continental Africans.

It is this tension that the ancestors leave King T'Challa to resolve. He must determine how he can mend the relationship that was divided out of survival. In *Afrofuturism in Black Panther: Gender, Identity, and the Re-Making of Blackness* White and Ritzenhoff examine the lasting impact of *Black Panther*, the film, on our vision of Africa and by extension of ourselves as displaced Black people. The book has eighteen chapters that examine the impact of *Black Panther* on the larger community. Each chapter connects both the movie and comic series to the Black experience in movies and the world writ large. Beginning with an introduction by Renée

T. White, the book moves into the various ways *Black Panther* carved out space for Black people to imagine Blackness outside of the white gaze. *Afrofuturism in Black Panther* also carefully unearths how *Black Panther* strategically curated a space for Black genius to thrive. This book takes up every aspect of *Black Panther* from its careful selection of stunt performance to the ways *Black Panther* re-imagined technology and education as a way of liberating and protecting Wakanda from the outside world. In addition, Eric Killmonger's complex relationship with Wakanda, his ancestors, and the duality and unresolved nature of his identity is measured from various angles. This movie evokes both pride in seeing ourselves as warriors, scientists, artists, and decision-makers, but it also reminds us of a painful history that continues to shape the Black experience. *Black Panther* as a movie, as a representation of Black identity, and as an example of what Black actors, writers, stuntpersons, and thinkers can do when provided with a space to create is highlighted throughout the chapters of *Afrofuturism in Black Panther*.

Chapter 1, *I Dream a World. Black Panther and the Re-Making of Blackness*, Renée T. White encourages the reader to see *Black Panther* as a representation of the "uncolonized mind" (p. 24). According to White, "Afrofuturists create science fiction that disrupts our understanding of blackness by rethinking the past, present, and futures of the African Diaspora; they merge culture, tradition, time, space, and technology to present alternative interpretations of blackness" (p. 22). This chapter poses a variety of questions about the possibilities of a world operating without Westernized interference. Furthermore, it presents questions related to Wakanda's responsibility to its displaced brothers, sisters, and cousins and the ethics around remaining silent in the face of Black oppression. It is Killmonger who unapologetically turns a mirror to Wakanda's elitist stance on its place in the Black Revolution. This chapter ends with a series of questions with one being: what does it mean to be truly free and what is the cost of that freedom? The chapter unearths moral dilemmas that arise throughout the movie. It encourages the reader to think about the nuances related to morality and ethics and how the rules around them are fluid.

In Chapter 2, *The Power in Numbers. Ensemble Student Performance in Black Panther and Histories of Practice*, Lauren Steimer provides a larger discussion around the ways *Black Panther* not only changed the conversation about Black identity and African identity but it changed the opportunities for Black actors, Black artists, and Black stunt performers in general. Historically, Black stunt performers have been excluded from jobs in the industry. White stunt performers were Black-washed in order to perform stunts for Black actors, who have also been traditionally marginalized. Arranged in three sections: exclusion, inclusion, and expertise, Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive history of Black stunt performers' pursuit of equality in training and job opportunities.

Chapter 3, *From Expressivity to Equanimity. Locating New Black Action Aesthetics in Black Panther*, Wayne Wong draws a connection between *Black Panther* and Hong Kong action cinema. Although Wong provides an in-depth examination of the ways the fight scenes in *Black Panther* resemble fight scenes in Hong Kong action films, its analysis somewhat minimizes the African influence on the world. Beyond *Black Panther*, Wong seeks to make broader

connections between the Blaxploitation genre and Hong Kong action cinema. It is a fact that many Blaxploitation films integrated the increased interest in the kung fu culture that was moving its way through films in the 70s; however, by suggesting that symbols such as the gestures between T'Challa and Killmonger were a representation of Hong Kong action cinema culture, Wong's theory has the potential to minimize *Black Panther's* intentional use of African cultural touchstones to demonstrate Black ways of knowing and connecting. Black Americans and others in the Diaspora connect with these subtle gestures and evidence of the withstanding cellular memory that binds them to their ancestors. In a world that has tried to minimize Black genius, *Black Panther* uses its hero and anti-hero as evidence that some things were not lost. In this way, Chapter 3 helps the reader make sense of Chapter 4, *Paid the Cost to be the Boss. Chadwick Boseman, Black Panther, and the Future of the Black Biopic* by Mikal J. Gaines. This chapter focuses on Boseman's role as the biopic king and how these roles provided him leverage as King T'Challa. The very name of the chapter is a nod to Boseman's role as the Godfather of Soul James Brown in the biopic *Get on Up*. In this chapter, Gaines questions the viability of the traditional biopic. He asks if the biopic as we know it is useful as a means of helping Black people reimagine its possibilities. The traditional biopic has ~~only~~ one possible ending, the one that was written in fact. But Afrofuturist films have the possibility to change realities. If the traditional biopic is supposed to be motivating, then the Afrofuturist film and its ability to present possibilities outside of the box can be motivating and architectural in nature. It can provide a blueprint for forward movement by helping Black people see themselves "outside of the box." Gaines states, "We seem to want and perhaps even *need* the superhero film to do things for us culturally, politically, and representationally that the biopic no longer can" (p. 75). The biopic is tied to fact whereas the superhero film is tied to possibilities. Furthermore, the biopic forces viewers to witness trauma without action. It reinforces damaging images and forces Black viewers to work through the trauma and pain in a movie theatre. Gaines suggests₂ that by Boseman performing in biopics as respected Black people, he leveraged those roles to make King T'Challa almost a living, breathing example of Black greatness (p. 77). The Wakanda salute became the identifiable call to action and recognition like the iconic closed Black fist of the 1960s and 1970s. In that way, *Black Panther* is a biopic of a King waiting to be born.

In Chapter 5, *Let Ayo Have a Girlfriend. Resisting Black Lesbian Erasure on Twitter*, Sarah E. S. Sinwell explores Twitter's reaction to the treatment of Ayo's lesbian identity. Sinwell states, "Questioning ideas of normative gender, race, and sexuality, this chapter investigates how the Twitter campaign to #LetAyoHaveAGirlfriend is promoting more inclusive and diverse representation in popular media" (p. 87). This chapter uses this campaign to help readers take a deep dive into the impact of Twitter campaigns on larger issues and how they have real possibilities to shift the public discourse around gender, race, and sexuality. Furthermore, representation is extended to include sexuality and how *Black Panther* as a comic series opened a space for a range of sexual identity representation and how that was later washed or minimized in the movie. Sinwell suggests that *Black Panther* had the opportunity and responsibility to provide authentic meaningful representation of the full range of Blackness. This theme of

queerness is further examined in Chapter 9, *The Prince Will Now Have the Strength of the Black Panther Stripped Away: Reading Disability and Queerness in Killmonger*, where Dominique Young suggests that for all the movie did to enhance representation of Blackness, it essentially excluded representation of queerness and disability (p. 172). Killmonger is presented as a representation of a psychologically disabled Black man suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (p. 172). Young examines the importance of calling these identities by their names as a means of giving an audience to the fullness of Blackness in all its depictions.

As *Afrofuturism in Black Panther* creates and builds a discussion rooted in Blackness and the importance of *Black Panther* to Black people, the chapters examine larger issues related to foreign policy (Chapter 6, p. 103) and enslavement and the ways enslaved people may have imagined freedom and how one can view the underground railroad itself through an Afrofuturist lens (Chapter 7, p. 127). Continuing with a historical theme, Chapter 8 and Chapter 11 gives a deep dive into the Dora Milaje and its connection to other MCU warriors. These chapters also highlight the importance of Dora Milaje to the forward movement of Wakanda. Thus, situating women as major power players in the progression of the Wakandan world.

Afrofuturism in Black Panther: Gender, Identity, and the Re-Making of Blackness is a comprehensive journey into the world of *Black Panther*. There is a balanced examination of the ways *Black Panther* took or created the opportunity to reimagine and remake Blackness and how it missed opportunities to provide full representation of all that is Black identity. The call, *Wakanda Forever*, has transformed from a make-believe to a literal call to action that transcends the movie. The use of language becomes an undeniable call to action, a call to think, and a call to connect. Eric Killmonger's last words, "Just bury in the ocean with my ancestors who jumped from ships because they knew death was better than bondage" not only challenged King T'Challa to reflect on Wakanda's role in the oppression of Black people in the diaspora, but it called all Black people to reflect on their connection and beliefs about the choices their ancestors made to survive the unthinkable and how those choices are generationally present. It asks Black people to give themselves grace and to imagine how people carve out control and peace when there is no clear path. There is a constant call to action throughout *Black Panther* as reflected in *Afrofuturism in Black Panther*. What this book does well is to situate the conversation around *Black Panther* within an Afrocentric framework rather than a Eurocentric context. Like the film, this book uses an uncolonized mind to critique an uncolonized film.

Concetta A. Williams
Associate Professor of English
Chicago State University