

It's Not Magic": The Black Body As An Aesthetic Site And Sight

by

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When there is no perceptible logic, or available framework for understanding the existence of a phenomenon, the imagination takes over, and with it a litany of possible explanations. There are few perfectly logical explanations available to support the survivability of Black life-worlds. Enter, the imagination! The loose translation for the wielding of the imaginary onto a phenomena that is out of the tangible reach of comprehension is *magic*. I would argue that it is easier to believe that Black bodies are magical than it is to see, acknowledge, or honor their humanity.¹ It is why culturally we can celebrate *Black Panther*—the Marvel magical fantasy—and condemn Black Panthers—the materialist vanguard of revolution.² The Black body, however, while a miracle and every form of genius, is not magic, much to the chagrin of rational logic.

Baldwin supports this notion as it pertains to Black expression, writing “the black man has functioned in the white man’s world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar: and as he moves out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations.”³ The expectation communicated here is that Black bodies make peace with the limits of the white imagination. Whiteness, as a result, is the fundamental organizing principle that structures Western society, and imperialism globally, grounded in the need to explain and define the boundaries of existence.⁴ For the Black body, this has meant *stay in your place* or be *put in your place*. Baldwin’s metaphor of a star—an extraordinary incantation of great power, pull, and mystery—is a useful illustration here because Black bodies have always been as fascinating as they are overwhelming in the white imagination and thus a thing that can and should be controlled.⁵ History owns a long record of terrors against the Black body in an effort to remind Black life-worlds of their fixed positions—Black people feel less pain, or no pain at all; Black people receive less medical treatment, or worst, are treated more harshly; enforced sterilizations of Black women; mass incarceration—a concept the Christina Sharpe calls *the wake*.⁶

In articulating the wake, Sharpe⁷ describes it as “the history and present terror, from slavery to the present, as the grounds of everyday Black existence; living the historically and geographically dis/continuous but always present and endlessly reinigorated brutality in, and on, our bodies”⁸

Black Panther addresses the Black body, in the wake, in myriad ways, but most profoundly through the brilliance of Princess Shuri. Among her many brilliant productions in the movie, this essay highlights two: 1) Princess Shuri challenges tropes of Black intelligibility in her short dialogue with CIA agent Everett. 2) The design of the Black Panther suit, I submit, enlarges our understandings of the Black aesthetic and its possibilities in the wake. Specifically, this material and imaginative work/suit, capable of absorbing kinetic energy into the suit, holding it, and then redistributing it elsewhere, provides a methodological “route to reconstruction.”⁹ Discussing the body as both the site of injury and pain, and the sight of healing and possibility, I consider Black feminist geographer Katherine McKittrick’s call for a return to the body to assist witnesses in (re)seeing and (re)inhabiting bodies in the wake of crisis, and to (re)present the Black subject in a world that has tirelessly labored to dehumanize and erase the possibility of their interior lives.¹⁰

CIA agent Everett has just awakened from what most, including him, would believe should have been a life altering wound at best, and fatal at worst. Surveying his surroundings, he is astonished first by his mobility and secondly by the sophisticated, technologically advanced laboratory that he found himself in. As if this were not disorienting enough, his first encounter in this new world is a Black woman! It is worth pausing here to point out the disequilibrium he must have been experiencing because of three seemingly disparate recognitions: 1) I’m alive; 2) I am in a mysterious place; and 3) The only person I see is a Black woman. The “fixed and immovable star” that Baldwin discusses has been thrust out of orbit and into his gravitational pull. Bewildered by his surroundings, and struggling for meaning, he proffers the only potential solution available: “*It has to be something like magic.*” What Princess Shuri says next, in my estimation, is a central theme in the cultural work that the *Black Panther* movie performs. With accomplished certainty, and an understandable irritability, she corrects “It’s not magic. It’s technology.” In a single breath she confronts the multiple prefixes—sub, non, super—assigned to the humanity of Black bodies and their intelligibility. Refusing to be categorized as that which is beyond comprehension, or something undeserving of it, she revises his conceptions on the limits of Black genius in a language he is able to understand, making the larger case for the Black body as a legible *sight*. In this sense, the Black body begins to take on new meaning for witnesses as a dynamic entity.

If Shuri’s statement does the intellectual reordering, then it is her design of the Black Panther suit that locates the project of reclamation by situating the Black body as a *site* by which creative capacities are possible. This maneuver allows us as witnesses to envision the fullness of Black personhood where cultural suggestions tend to favor the mind over the body. As it relates to Black life-worlds, the body is favored, if anything at all. Shuri’s idea for the suit is not magic; rather, it is a physics lesson on Black survivability in the diaspora.

The suit's mastery, again, is in its ability to store kinetic energy ($\frac{1}{2} \text{ mass} \times \text{velocity}^2$), similar to the way a spring works, in what is scientifically termed *elastic potential energy*. In essence, the very energy that is intended to shatter, break, move, or at the very least reposition, may cause some shift in posture to the suit wearer, but is ultimately taken in as an additional resource (contracting spring), ready to be repurposed in acts of agency (expanding spring). Pointed in her critique of the myths of survivability, in this lesson, Shuri proves that the Black body is not impenetrable, nor is it indestructible. Black life-worlds, in fact, do feel pain, and in many ways are forced to sit with an undeserved amount of it. As Audre Lorde reminds, "waste nothing... particularly not pain."¹¹ Shuri's genius lets us know that pain, and various forms of distress, however, need not be fatal. The body can become a site that exists, not just to be berated by forces competing for its possession, but as a site where new knowledge is constructed, and healing and joy are probable.

(Re)inhabiting the body as a mental, emotional, spiritual, and spatial construct, in a culture that benefits from its rational disembodiments is fraught with tension—Princess Shuri's Black feminist sensibilities, which confront myths of intelligibility, and position the body as site and sight possibility, assist in charting a new pathway forward. As a Black cisgender man witnessing the film, I am further convinced of the potential for Black feminism(s) to serve as an intervention in and against heteropatriarchy, and a (re)organizing principle by which Black people broadly, and Black men in particular, can (re)see themselves in the world as embodied entities who have some say in the ways in which they make sense of, and respond to systems of oppression.

References

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Notes

¹ I borrow Black girlhood scholar Dr. Dominique Hill's language to frame the body [bodies] in this manuscript as a dynamic entity with personal and collective manifestations. It is interlaced as a mental, emotional, spiritual, and spatial construct that is always mediated through history. D. Hill, February 7, 2018, personal communication.

² *The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution*, directed by Stanley Nelson, (New York: PBS, 2015).

³ James Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time," In *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948-1985*(London: Macmillan Publishing, 1985): 336.

⁴ I am arguing here, as Cheryl Harris does in her essay "*Whiteness as Property*," that whiteness meets the theoretical and functional criterion for property, and in doing so, governs who has sociopolitical power.

⁵ bell hooks, "Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination," In *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990): 165-179

⁶ Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016)

⁷ Sharpe, *In the Wake*.

⁸ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 15.

⁹ Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 32.

¹⁰ McKittrick, *Demonic grounds*.

¹¹ Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (London: Persephone Press, 1982), 236.

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