

Combat, Couture, and Caribbeana: Cultural Process in Coogler's *Black Panther* (2018)

by

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Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* lies firmly within some key modalities of postmodernism, namely visual spectacle, allusion, pastiche, wearing of masks, and the conflation of art and commercialism. More importantly, *Black Panther* has given cultural acknowledgement to a large segment of the world's population not serviced in such African grandeur since Eddie Murphy's *Coming to America* (1988). Its abundant African aesthetics and talent, arrayed in splendor and engaged in noble battle, is due to the powerful Marvel Cinema Universe and the film's late placement—the eighteenth film—in the franchise. Situated here, it earns acceptance into Bourdieu's "universe of [allowable] discourse" (254). In her contribution to the visual elements, costume designer Ruth Carter has created a Pan-African pastiche representing diverse places in which African descendants can find reflections of themselves.

In the story, Prince T'Challa (Chadwick Boseman), in a contest about his coronation day loses a ceremonial challenge to a violent interloper, a royal black sheep named Killmonger (Michael B. Jordan). Abandoned by his uncle, King T'Chaka, in America's slums as a child, forged in the crucible of multiple military tours, Killmonger seizes the throne of Wakanda, an isolated and technologically advanced nation, plunging it into civil war to avenge his childhood abandonment. It is up to T'Challa and his people to rescue their beloved nation and its traditions from a madman hell-bent on destroying it.

As a first-generation Jamaican-American, a daughter of immigrant parents, I project onto Wakanda's isolationism resonances of Jamaica's historic Maroons, a West African warrior clan that won independence from the British through warfare even as other ethnic groups remained enslaved on the island. This brief reflection considers the third act civil war sequence that resonates with Maroon War dances and costumed rituals in the Jonkonnu festival of Jamaica that I saw as a child, focusing on the importance of the female in this sequence. Coogler's directorial choices in this sequence together with Carter's innovative mélange of indigenous and Afro-futurist stylings produce a cultural processing toward reunification, mutual understanding and transcendent ideals.

Arrayed in Ruth Carter's visual pastiche of African styles, *Black Panther's* final battle sequence is an elegant, meticulously choreographed spectacle free of the vulgarity of bullets. This sequence gives new meaning to the "art of war"—art, because of its extreme stylization which serves to heighten the stakes of the narrative. This sequence is a War Dance. War dances were integral in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Maroon culture. The purpose of one dance in particular, the Myal medicine dance, was unification, i.e. "to bind together people, not of the same *family*, but of the same *belief, conviction, cause*, its ritual of death and resurrection was in effect a war dance, a war ritual extension of the 'martial dances.'" (Wynter 36) The ultimate goal of Wakanda's war dance is the reunification of the nation. Symbolically, Ruth Carter binds together Mali, whose brilliant indigo mud-cloth comprise the Border Security Soldiers' forcefields, the Ndebele people, whose *Idzila* permanent necklaces are the neck armor of the Dora Milaje, and Jamaica, whose Jonkonnu Festival's animal masks are evoked by the masks of the Black Panther.

Jonkonnu is a festival celebration of John Konny, an Ahanta chief who was Prussia's trade broker in Ghana (Forts 1). When the Dutch and British joined forces against Konny in 1711, he raised a "well-armed and disciplined force of nine hundred [that] defeated the combined Dutch and British forces," (Konadu 74) winning not only in battle but in Gold-Coast politics and land acquisition for indigenous people. The Jonkonnu festivals later took on greater spiritual meaning. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they involved communing with African gods through drumming and the wearing of masks. "On donning the mask, the dancer enters into this force, the god possesses him, and ... the dancer '*delivers*' himself by patterning the steps of the god, or a spirit." (Wynter 40). This too is the aim of King T'Challa, to pattern his steps in the way of the god/force of Wakanda. The shimmering costume of the panther with its shoulder-chain of teeth, symbolizes, not violence, but justice. Interestingly, African drums were outlawed under pain of death when the British realized the rhythms constituted a sophisticated communication system.

Inspiration for the visual elements of the Dora Milaje comes from myriad sources. Their forearms are armored in a version of Ethiopian silver cuff bracelets which extend from wrist to elbow. Their sensibly shaved heads recognize the beauty of Kenya's Maasai women (Boakye 1). The greatest influence appears to be the Fon Minos of the Kingdom of Dahomey (Benin), an elite corps of women warriors (Cooke 141) who wore reddish, knee-length dresses with beaded breastplates, necklaces over the jugular, and who were skilled with swords, spears and rifles. The Doras, as the Minos, are not sexualized to satiate the male gaze, but are sheathed in the dignity and strength of warriors, offering a positive example for girls today.

This battle sequence is not without controversy. Some audience members bristled over the spectacle of black men and women locked in a death match, perpetuating a trope fetishized in mainstream media. Viewed as metaphor and as ritual, it depicts a process and it is not the end or means in and of itself. Its stylization elevates it above media patterns of racialized strife. Coogler and Carter recognize the beauty, strength, grace, intellect, purpose and the unshakable devotion of the feminine. For example, the most revered Jamaican hero is the heroine Nanny of the Maroons, known for leading her people into the mountains where they defeated the British with uncanny knowledge of terrain and cunning strategy (Akinleye 95). The yearly Myal dance in the Maroon village of Accompong Town is performed by the Maroon women to the once-outlawed drums and Abeng horns played by the men beneath the tree where the peace treaty was signed (Abramson 121). “This ritual symbolizes the central role of scarce, but precious, women in reproducing Maroon polity [traditions]” (120).

Girls and women are precious, as are boys and men, pulling together as co-dependent genders, and pulling together as an empowered and cohesive unit. But you will hear few stories of this unity such as under a majority-female parliament, Rwanda reunified *itself* and became a major tech hub.(Young) On February 19, 2018, the day after *Black Panther’s* release, another 110 schoolgirls in Dapchi, Nigeria, were kidnapped by Boko Haram and all but five have been returned. (Searcey, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/24/boko-haram-kept-one-dapchi-nigeria-girl-who-refused-to-deny-her-christianity>). But *Black Panther* is an oasis in a diasporic media desert. It is inspiration, an infusion of a new image. And although it boasts little in the way of African drums... the beat goes on.

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