‘I Remember You Was Conflicted’: Reflections on *Black Panther*, the African American/African Divide, and Scholarly Positionings

by

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To say that viewing Ryan Coogler’s *Black Panther* has greatly inspired me would be an understatement. While the joy I have taken from this film is not without its own critical caveats,[1] in the age of Trump and the resurgence of a covert politics of antagonism, I am relieved to see the film thrive in, and offer a slice of joy for, a community that has remained under assault by forces too legion to rehearse here.[2] Among other things, the film’s success stands as one more “small but richly symbolic instance of racial justice in the notoriously racist business of mass media entertainment.”[3] Moreover, as a cultural text, this film offers particularly fertile ground for mining. With this in mind, I have been excited about bringing the film into my classroom spaces.

However, as an African American scholar who teaches on a predominantly white campus, and whose scholarly work largely addresses various aspects of the African diaspora, I find myself in a precarious position: I must constantly negotiate the line between speaking about the black community and speaking for it. I feel additional pressure from the fact that, until this academic school year, I was one of only two black faculty members on campus.[4] While many of the students who do not come from marginalized communities willingly concede the multicultural plurality of the United States, few recognize how common views of this plurality retain “an Anglo consciousness at the center as the knower and marginalizes other peoples and cultures as static objects of knowledge.”[5] More often than not, the assertion that one does “not see color” is offered as a way of side-stepping racial difference, leaving students with unnuanced perceptions of the black community within the United States and rendering black histories, communities, and experiences in Europe, South and Central America, the Caribbean, and Africa (to say nothing of Asia, South Asia, and the South Pacific) practically unimaginable. [6]

To say that *Black Panther* abounds with nuances is no hyperbole, nor is it one to say that I have felt a certain anxiety over introducing the film in a course. How can I reach the film’s deeper levels when I will undoubtedly need to first provide a great deal of foundational information (e.g., the difference between “African” and “African American”)?

As I have continued contemplating ways of effectively working the film into my courses, I find it difficult not to agree with scholar Elaine Showalter that often "our internalized anxieties about the infinite amount of literary knowledge and the finite amount of academic time come together in worries about course coverage."[7] The more determined I become to leverage the film's usefulness in helping students not only think about race in today's society but also develop an understanding of the nuances of the Black community, the more I find myself asking the following questions: What is at stake in this film's success? Furthermore, what can the film's principle conflict, between the African T'Challa and the African American Erik Killmonger, teach us about African American scholarly positions?

Speaking of the theater, James Baldwin observed "the tension in theater," the tension that makes that theater so compelling, is "between the real and the imagined *is* the theater."[8] This tension puts the audience and the actors in the position of always "re-creating each other" and, because of this, this tension stands as the truth of the theater.[9] It is when it loses sight of this truth that it becomes perverse. Like the works of those "maverick freak poets and visionaries" of the theater (and Black church) who create environments in which a constant state of reflection and re-creation becomes possible, the *Black Panther* film can be said to have been "created by our need and out of an impulse more mysterious than our desire."[10] Though the film exchanges the stage for the silver screen, it still permits a great degree of the former's ability to create a situation for re-creation. Or to put this in other terms, the joy, fear, pride, and defensiveness of Black people regarding this film all arise from the presence of a somewhat desperate need for affirming representations to sustain us during societal assaults in the form of representations of Black people as voracious, threatening and in need of containment.

When getting students to understanding this complex relationship is challenging enough, what do you do when you are simultaneously called into a relationship of re-creation by two bodies who find themselves in an antagonistic relationship—especially when one is cast as villainous? While T'Challa is, very rightly, presented as the noble protagonist and is set up, as the film's titular character, to be the fulfillment of those desires for affirmation, Killmonger also fulfills those desires, though from across the divide over which he and T'Challa fight. Or more specifically, while T'Challa's nobility allows for the re-creation of a noble lineage in the face of black histories of slavery, Killmonger's desire to right the wrongs of his past *and* his anger at having been abandoned persuasively re-creates the divide African Americans feel between themselves and Africa. In many ways, most African American responses to the film can be summed up accordingly: Like the entire audience around me, I basked in *Black Panther* like a wide-eyed child. . . I was T'Challa. I was Black Panther—until N'Jadaka, Erik "Killmonger" appeared. Then I was Killmonger.[11]

Yes, for African Americans, Killmonger stands as a product of those "impulses more mysterious than our desires."[12] But so does T'Challa. In the context of the African American scholar, the dramatization of their struggle highlights at least one important lesson: Power and progress come through embracing the difficult decisions. The struggle between T'Challa and Killmonger is largely a fight over how to interact with a hostile world and which face should be the one shown. In a time in which "a kind of diasporization of desire, the multiplication, the cross-fertilization, and the mutual relativization of social energies" is needed, this struggle is very much the struggle of the Black scholar.[13] It is especially the struggle of the African American scholar in predominantly white spaces. While the film's resolution of this struggle is in many ways unsatisfying and, in more ways than one, painful to watch, a certain contentment can be found in the fact that this end is in fact truly a beginning. The success of the film has led to promises of sequels and potential spin-offs, and T'Challa's journeys to both the United Nations and to Killmonger's Los Angeles prove promising. More importantly, this ending is sufficient because the real work is in the struggle.

The title of this paper draws on the poem repeated throughout Kendrick Lamar's 2015 album, *To Pimp a Butterfly*. I find this phrase to be a productive way to frame this essay because of the ways it highlights the tensions between power, influence, and responsibility. But most of all, I find its present reflective tense ("I remember") a hopeful indicator of growth and re-creation. When attempting to explain to students who have little familiarity with or understanding of the nuances within the Black community, the conflict between the African T'Challa and the African American Killmonger proves one of the more challenging aspects of the film. Following the film's resolution of this conflict, I choose to embrace this challenge the way the film ends T'Challa and Killmonger's conflict: With an embrace—however tentative and unfulfilled.

Notes

1. In a number of ways, I agree with critic Charles Pulliam-Moore when he points out the missed opportunity the film (and Marvel Studios) had when it failed to include the love affair between two of the Dora Milaje. However, as with Michael Arceneaux, I do not think this missed opportunity to be enough to completely discredit the positive re-presentation the film offers. Furthermore, as Hamid Dabashi notes, the film's cliché's about a hidden trove of resources lying at the heart of the African continent "is as old as Tarzan films where European hunters were ravaging the jungles in search of ivory," and corroborate a certain strand of colonial and imperial logic that still resonates with today's neocolonial expeditions in Africa (e.g., the corporatization of the oil in Nigeria at the expense of the local communities and the environment on which they depend for sustenance and which serves as the foundation of their economic systems.

2. Forces assailing the black community in America include: the prison industrial complex, the school-to-prison pipeline, racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, racial profiling, police brutality, and Anglo/Eurocentric academic curricula.

3. Jared Sexton, "The Ruse of Engagement: Black Masculinity and the Cinema of Policing." *American Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (2009): 40-41.

4. Throughout this essay, I will use the description "Black" as a way of speaking about all African descendent peoples both on the African continent and within the diaspora.

5. Stacy Alaimo, "Multiculturalism and Epistemic Rupture: The Vanishing Acts of Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Alfredo Véa Jr." *MELUS* 25, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 164.

6. Throughout this essay, I focus on the teacher/student aspect of my position as a scholar as a way to simplify my discussion. Peer interactions are greatly more complex and require much more analyses than the limits of this reflection permit. I retain the label scholar, however, as a way of signaling what I see to be the intimate connection between research and teaching.

7. Elaine Showalter, *Teaching Literature* (Malden: Blackwell, 2003): 12.

8. James Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work* (New York: Vintage, 2011): 30, emphasis in original.

9. Ibid., 31.

10. Ibid., 31.

11. Hamid Dabashi, "Watching *Black Panther* in Harlem," *Al Jazeera* February 27, 2018, accessed May 15, 2018, https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/watching-black-panther-harlem-180227091520981.html.

12. Baldwin, 31.

13. Robert Stam, "Multiculturalism and the Neoconservatives," in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, edited by Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 200.

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