Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry, 7(2), pp 103–106 April 2020.
© The Author(s) 2020. Published by Cambridge University Press doi:10.1017/pli.2020.2

Introduction

Adélékè Adéẹ̀kọ́

The epigraphic function of the following quotes is to acknowledge the aesthetic and sociopolitical currents navigated by Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* (2018), the subject of the following cluster of papers. The first is excerpted from an interview with Haile Gerima, the famous filmmaker.

> Turner: What advice would you give the Black film student wanting to pursue a career?
> Gerima: Be confident not to be a duplicate clone of somebody but to know that you are a voice. To say, "I want to make a film to free Black people." That is an offensive proposition. Black people do not need that: Black people need storytellers … (982).[1]

The second quote reformats words from an interview-based article:

> Massaquoi: Were you serious when you proposed to send armed guerrillas into Mississippi to protect civil rights workers?
> Malcolm X: Dead serious. We will not only send them to Mississippi, but to any place where Black people's lives are threatened by White bigots (39).[2]

Black Panther was an elephant of a blockbuster, a mammoth of a film about which only a liar and, or, an incompetent euphemist will say "I caught a glimpse of something." It grossed nearly $1.5 billion in worldwide box office earnings, of which half a billion dollars is straight profit. The record achievements routed all the impediments of perception and expectation that racial and cultural stigmas constitute for the commercial potentials of a Black superhero film. The film's impact shows in an even more prominent relief given the slim filmography of its director and cowriter.

What is the source of *Black Panther*'s universal appeal? To begin to hazard an answer, I cite, and discuss briefly, the words spoken in one of the film's most reflective episodes, moments after T'Challa inflicted a devastating spear wound on his cousin, Erik Killmonger. The audience hears the mortally wounded explicitly appreciating the splendid beauty of Wakanda's physical environment. Sensing his cousin's physical pain and the drain in his emotion, T'Challa offers to help, saying "Maybe we can still heal you." But Killmonger retorts, "Why? So you can just lock me up? Nah. Just bury me in the ocean, with my ancestors that jumped from the ships 'cause they knew death was better than bondage." Killmonger does not wait for a reply; he pulls out the spear buried

The Ohio State University, Department of English, Department of English, Columbus, Ohio, (Email: adeeko.1@osu.edu)

1 Diane Turner and Muata Kamdibe, "Haile Gerima: In Search of an Africana Cinema," *Journal of Black Studies* 38.6 (2008): 968–91.

2 Hans J. Massaquoi, "Mystery of Malcolm X," *Ebony* (February 1993 [September 1964]): 38–40, 42, 44–46.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2020.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in his chest and ensures a prompt death for himself. The life and death exchange raises profound questions about dominion, recognition, sovereignty, and self-governance, and addresses problems about just transcultural relations.

These topics also happen to have been central preoccupations of postcolonial and Black studies scholarship in the last half a century. More importantly in the context of this cluster, the conversation discloses that the film convenes its record-breaking audiences by embedding fundamental themes of global relations in actions that complement its moving, majestic, alluring images of a narratively innovative, African film world. T'Challa's sunny, not-quite-naive nativism iterates the problem inherent to the dilemmas of modern being as they are highlighted in "Afro-pessimist" high thinking. Killmonger's "lock me up" quick rebuff is also pregnant with meaning. At the minimum, the exchange registers an acute awareness of the terrible exchange launched at that moment in the process of enslavement—and ancillary relations of domination superintended by modernity—when the captured assimilated its continuous, bare, biological existence into the realities of social death so inaugurated.[3] By taking his own life so promptly, Killmonger cites, and rebukes, the acceptance of the deferment of literal death in exchange for the permanently unhappy condition of social death. In effect, however, the repudiation toward which the act gestures is at best dubious because the historically enslaved could not have anticipated their fates in the clear manner that ancestral experience grants subsequently to successors like Killmonger. While the verbal retort and the suicide affirm that only the victorious can be truly free after capitulation in the war of self-possession, to the historically captured surrendering was probably a strategic retreat meant to postpone the conflict for a more opportune time. In other words, Killmonger's motivating conclusion could have been gained only after a reflexive understanding based on the experiences of the captured to whom historical immediacy denied such self-conception.

Killmonger has no doubt that his maternal, Wakandan, ancestors—whether they accepted social death under slavery, or they committed literal death by refusing to be enslaved—were free. He seeks to perpetrate that *original* free state by taking his own life. But it is not so clear if the salute to freedom does not include the paternal Wakandan ancestors who did not make it to the slave ships and were perhaps culpable in the enslavement process. I am trying to point out here that some unresolved melancholy lurks in a pivotal narrative moment that is justly celebrated for its resolute optimism. Coogler's deft management of the cohabitation of these antithetical outlooks on modern, particularly Black experiences presents another explanation for a lot of the film's global appeal.

* * *

3 Saidiya V. Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) is often cited as the founding text. See the interview, Saidiya V. Hartman and Frank N. Wilderson III, "The Position of the Unthought." *Qui Parle* 13.2 (2003): 183–201. Analyses of decisive questions in Afro-pessimism could be found in Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15.1 (2002): 11–40, trans. Libby Meitjes; Fred Moten, "Knowledge of Freedom," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 4.2 (2004): 269–310; Nahum Chandler, "Of Exorbitance: the Problem of the Negro as a Problem of Thought," *Criticism* 50.3 (2008): 345–410; Jared Sexton, "The Life of Social Death: on Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism," *InTensions Journal* 5 (Fall/Winter 2011): 1–47.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2020.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The following articles analyze and evaluate the textual and cultural subsoil on which Coogler's film draws sustenance, and the enrichment of which it advances. Ananya Jahanara Kabir's "Alegropolis: Wakanda and *Black Panther*'s Hall of Mirrors" explores the film's staging of the unavoidably divergent consequences of the history of slavery and colonization in historically Black societies. Kabir asks: "What cultural and aesthetic forms must Africanity assume today to be meaningful to constituencies whose connection to the African continent and its disaporas may be affiliative as well as filial, structural as well as genealogical, achieved as well as immanent?" She suggests that the film offers an Afro-futurist resolution to the mis-recognition that is inherent to the power tournament that pits the postcolonial panther against the postslavery panther. Far more significant than T'Challa's defeat of this cousin is that the critical silences in the heavily redacted family biography handed down by T'Chaka are filled out and that future relations will be secured by self-consciously "reconstituted signifiers of a 'strategic-essentialist' Afro-tribalism."

Dilip Menon's "Fifty Shades of Blackness: Recovering an Aesthetics of the Afrifuge" also commends Coogler's auto-critical, metonymic deployment of the many pasts of modern Black experiences, the most significant being the cruel racisms that slavery and colonization perpetrated, and the signal achievements of the cultural and sociopolitical liberation movements created to further anticolonial, civil rights, anti-apartheid struggles. At the level of narrative and thematic focus, Menon argues, the range of the Black body in *Black Panther* far exceeds the repetitive abjection that has stunted imagination for a very long historical while. Coogler's film-work revels in "visions of future reconstitution." Menon's article recognizes as well the fraught history that Coogler distills and arrests for contemplation. The focus on the many twists and turns in the itineraries of the Black Panther character, especially the spectrality of its relationship to proclamations of Blackness since its inception in Marvel Comics Universe in 1966, leads to a question that is more likely to generate an ambiguous response than an unassailable answer: Is the Black Panther "black in any meaningful sense, and if so how and why?"

Adélékè Adéẹ̀kọ́—"Postcolonial Critique in Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther*"—focuses, like Menon, on an element of the film's persistent references, this time its mostly allusive "quotations" of conventions of the figurations of self and Other in postcolonial criticism and fiction: inventions of historical grandeur, pointed deployments of what could be described roughly as "structures of feeling," and conspicuously copious dramatization of ideologies of difference. According to Adéẹ̀kọ́, Coogler's "heavily stylized mythography" offers "a direct invitation to examine the contents of its allegorical significations on global postcolonial life."

Compared to either Kabir's or Menon's analyses of futurism, Tolu Akinwole's political reading, "Of State Progress and Strangeness," is less celebratory. The analysis acknowledges that the film's mythopoesis deploys an off-center sense of time, place, and rationality, a mode in which the past, the present, and the future coexist, one interrogating the other such that the future is able to imagine a different past for itself. In this world, the consequential future is only one minute away. But should it not be worrisome, Akinwole asks, that Wakanda has no philosopher poet, that there is no disinterested "public intellectual" close to the halls of power, and that the ultimate directives on the proper uses of the country's most important resource are issued by the ruler? Akinwole suspects that Wakanda might be on the path toward a condition of state failure about

https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2020.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

which the film's most aware viewer could not but be familiar. Perhaps the different presence of the stranger, native and extraterritorial, deserves more room to flower in order that the looming decline can be averted.

Each article brings attention to the film's irresistible beauty, especially its dexterous mythography, mythopoesis, and iconography. All the authors are equally attracted to the film's savvy mediation of the forces pressing upon contemporary global relations among peoples, countries, and cultures: diaspora, futurism, modernities, and the difficult calculus of mutual recognition. In different degrees of emphasis, each article attempts to clarify the film's handling of the conflicts of dominion—individual and collective—and how these relate to the exercise of freedom. Although it was never colonized, Wakanda's fate is inextricable from powerful currents of global relations and power-filled institutions whose rationalities were consecrated within slavery and colonization. For catching these enabling contradictions so arrestingly, *Black Panther*'s narrative sweetness bred the worldwide fever that attended its reception.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2020.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press