Challenging the "Revolution":

An Analysis of Black Panther

A Thesis in Film Studies

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis intends to challenge popular readings which praise *Black Panther* for its celebration of various Black cultures and expose it as an indisputable product of dominant culture. As a result, the film reinforces white patriarchal capitalism, the dominant ideology which pervades not only our culture but movies.The first chapter in this body of work intends to explore what is meant by "ruling ideas", also known as "dominant ideology", and underscore, by analyzing film form, their existence in popular films such as *The Lion King* and later *Black Panther*.

The second chapter seeks to highlight how *Black Panther* engages with characters of the African diaspora and questions who is responsible for the global marginalization of Black people but is missing any explicit narrative threads on European imperialism or U.S. systematic racism. *Black Panther's* villainization of Erik Killmonger, and not these institutional forces, further exemplify how the film seeks to conform to dominant systems rather than challenge them.

The third and concluding chapter analyzes the style of *Black Panther* revealing how it possesses little variance from dominant cinema both in terms of form and content. The core ideas of these three chapters—which seek to expose *Black Panther's* adherence of white patriarchal capitalism, its limited exploration of the racist forces which oppress the Black world, and its adherence to the stylistic codes of mainstream cinema respectively—work in unison to debunk the notion of Black Panther being a "revolutionary and "alternative" project. The film cannot possess such a title because it upholds, rather than challenges, mainstream understandings of race, gender and class. *Moonlight* and *Belly* are later introduced as examples of alternative Black films which both challenge the system of white patriarchal capitalism and the dominant style of mainstream cinema.

Lastly, this thesis stresses the importance of questioning the "image" in cinema. Rather than focus on the aesthetics of what is being presented, as much of the academic literature and film criticism of *Black Panther* does, it's important to question how these images are presented to viewers through elements of film form.

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CHAPTER ONE

UNDERSTANDING HOW *BLACK PANTHER* REINFORCES 'DOMINANT IDEOLOGY'

When *Black Panther* was released to the world in February of 2018, film and cultural critics immediately hailed the project as a revolutionary, industry shattering, and (superhero) genre subverting cultural phenomenon. To list a few of its milestones: *Black Panther* was the first film of the superhero genre to feature an almost all Black cast, it saw the largest opening for a Black-American director (Ryan Coogler), grossed $1.3 billion at the worldwide box office became the 12th biggest feature release of all-time and is the most successful Black starred film ever (Bhayroo 2). *Black Panther* also presented images of Pan-Africanism, Black feminist iconography, and afrofuturism, a termed defined by Nama as an "intergalactic vision of blackness", in attempt to celebrate various realms of blackness unlike any film in recent memory (Nama 8). To many *Black Panther* was, and still is today, regarded as "more" than just a movie" largely based on how the film is an explicit representational alternative in a white dominated industry.

While it is fairly easy to praise the film for its celebration of blackness, this chapter will determine whether *Black Panther* is truly alternative, revolutionary or "against the grain" only if it critiques or questions, at least the theoretical film concept of dominant ideology. A close analysis of *Black Panther's* form and content—which means how a film is made and what it is about respectively— reveals the film maintains dominant perceptions of "poor" individuals, women and even race.To justify this claim a close analysis of Disney's *The Lion King* will be conducted as an entry point to understand how a popular film is capable of reproducing these

ruling ideas of dominant society. Though *Lion King* and *Black Panther* may hail from two different branches of cinema, being animated and live-action respectively, the two films are strikingly similar in the way they naturally idealize a wealthy monarchical class, patriarchal systems, hetersexuality and possess naratives which present those originating from economically disprivileged regions as militant villains. To further analyze how both films, to varying degrees, endorse these norms the concept of dominant ideology will first be defined and explored at length.

Understanding Dominant Ideology And Whiteness

The idea of a dominant ideology or "ruling ideas" is present within the works of Marx and Engles, Gramsci as well as Louis Althusser's essay on Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). Marx and Engels maintained in "The Ruling Class and Ruling Ideas" the class which had access to the means of production, the "bourgeoisie" and "capitalists" in their language, both produced and sustained the ruling ideas of a respective period. As they write, "the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force" (Engels & Marx 9). Similarly both Gramsci and Althusser, two 20th century philosophers, observed that it was in the best interest of the ruling class to preserve dominant ideals of a society—and hence the ideals of the dominant population. Gramasci noted ideological norms were maintained, disseminated to the public and were utilized to shape ideals through institutions such as the government, libraries and schools (Gramsci 16). Althusser noted the influential forces of such institutions, referring to them as educational and political ISAs, but also introduced the concept of cultural ISAs (press, radio, television, etc.) which also functioned as tools to shape public thought (Althusser 80).

Film may not have been explicitly mentioned as a cultural ISAs but film theorists and critics have proposed various ways in understanding cinema as an active tool in influencing the masses in the same manner past thinkers had imagined.

Discourse on dominant ideology in relation to cinema was popularized by French Marxist film theorists Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni of Cahiers du Cinema magazine. In their article "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism" they write, "[T]he majority of films, like the majority of books and magazines, are produced and distributed by the capitalist economic system and within the dominant ideology" and understand films as a mere commodity which "as a result of being a material product of the system, it [cinema] is also an ideological product of the system, which in France means capitalism" (Comolli & Narboni 480-481). They insist most films emerging from the capitalist system either consciously or unconsciously reproduce the dominant ideology through their texts. Other films may assume to challenge the dominant ideology but still unknowingly adopt its "language and imagery". They conclude no film, even art cinema, can fully critique the dominant ideology as films are commodities which indisputably perpetuate the capitalist mode of production (Comolli & Narboni 481). While it is understood that the dominant ideology is inescapable and champions capitalism, the explicit ideologies are vaguely defined and explored by Comolli and Narboni. However, their ideas of dominant ideology have since been expanded by various film theorists.

In "America on Film" Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin recontextualize dominant ideology within the United States. Their more explicit definition of the idea recognizes white patriarchal capitalism as the ideology which "permeates the way most Americans think about themselves and the world around them" and, "also permeates most American films" (9). White

patriarchal capitalism cements white people or *whiteness*, patriarchal systems and capitalism as society's rigid standards. Anything outside its boundaries—people of color, women and anti-capitalist, socialist ideas or any group or ideological thought process which contests white patriarchal capitalism—is thus "othered".

Richard Dyer expands on the notion of *whiteness* in his *Screen* article "White" theorizing the near ubiquitousness of White people in mass media and popular culture virtually erases whiteness as an ethnicity. Dyer writes, "Trying to think about the representation of whiteness as an ethnic category in mainstream film is difficult, partly because white power secures its dominance by seeming not to be anything in particular" (4). "White" films do not exist, Dyer argues, as they are simply understood as films. *The Godfather* is about Italian-Americans before it is about white people while the *Colour People* is noted as a Black film as opposed to "poor, US southern people" (46). In a more modern context, *Captain America* is understood simply as a superhero film whilst *Black Panther,* which exists in the same cinematic universe, is viewed as the "Black" Superhero film.

Similar to how *whiteness* is made *invisible*, race, class and traditional gender roles are presented as undetectable categories. It is said the dominant ideology of a society is operating correctly when the populace is not only incapable of determining its existence but receives its ideas as indisputable truths and not socially constructed categories (Benshoff & Griffin 9). In cinema these categories are translated into the popular narrative arcs of a typically male heroic lead, passive female character, heteresexual romances, traditional gender norms, and class notions which idealize and glamorize the upper middle class, consumerism, materialism and standardizes capitalism as the prime mode of social organization (Benshoff & Griffin

39).Unconsciously, and consciously, popular film is guilty of suggesting the ideas of white patriarchal capitalism are an immovable system we all should strive to work under. Just how Dyer maintains *whiteness* is only made visible when its existence is challenged, these categories are also made more detectable when their hegemony is in direct contestion. What the succeeding sections of this chapter aim to accomplish is not only to make the existence of a dominant ideology more salient but reveal its presence in *The Lion King* and *Black Panther.* A detailed analysis of elements of their film form (directing, sound, editing, cinematography, visual and literary design) will expose the reinforcement of dominant ideology within their narratives.

The Lion King

Despite its release over 25 years ago, *The Lion King* remains one of Disney's greatest financial successes. The film finished its theatrical run with a worldwide gross of $963 million (Verhoeven & Robinson). It remains Disney's sixth highest-grossing animated film to date and the eleventh highest-grossing animated film of all time. Its tale has hardly faded from the public eye since its release in 1994. A Broadway musical adaptation spawned from the film in 1997 and remains the third longest running show in the theatrical district's history (Scheps). In 2019, a quasi live-action reboot of the film was released and currently sits as the seventh highest-grossing film of all time, earning $1.6 billion at the global box office (Sim).

Across three different decades, this animated tale has reimagined itself across various media forms and has interacted with audiences around the world. Indisputably, *The Lion King* has served an immense role in introducing "Africa"— or the Western imagining of such—alongside a clear set of moral and ethical codes for younger audiences

(Gooding-Williams). The premise of the film is fairly simple. Simba, the film's main character, is born into a monarchical lineage and is promised by his father, Mufasa, that he will one day rule as king over the Savannah. Scar, Mufasa's older brother, is the film's one dimensional villain who, alongside his hyena army, orchestrates a scheme to claim the throne which results in the death of his brother. A young Simba is exiled from the land but returns to earn his rightful place as king and dethrones Scar restoring the peace and tranquility to The Savannah. The film's politics may be rendered invisible behind its G-rating, family-friendly animation style, whimsical narrative and wholesome music but it reinforces ruling ideals nonetheless (Ward, 2). To make the film's reproduction of dominant ideology more salient we have to question how it is our characters are represented, how do the filmmakers present the two strikingly different locales (the Savannah and Wasteland), how are the characters positioned in relation to each other and other animals, why are some character's linguistic capabilities so strikingly different from others and what is the meaning and intentions behind the villain's vividly darker fur?

Analyzing Locales And Character in *The Lion King*

The Lion King is very much a product of classical Hollywood narrative form. It succumbs to a clichéd and rigid good/evil binary, a linear narrative, and has a clear protagonist and antagonist— as seen in many Hollywood films (Benshoff & Griffin 27). Mufasa and Simba embody the archetypal hero type characters. They are the heart and moral compass of the story—Mufasa in particular as an adult male lion and together as the sole characters who propel the narrative. What is important to note are the cadence and speech patterns of these two characters. Mufasa is voiced by James Earl Jones, an actor made infamous for voicing *Star Wars'* Darth Vader and revered for his unique deep pitched voice. His character walks with grace

and speaks with elegance. Simba's voice carries a distinct level of friendliness as it's youthful, curious and wholesome. His harmless and innocent demeanor functioned as a tool for audiences to align and care for his experiences—and hence the gaze of the monarchy. These characters are further idealized through the visual aesthetics of the locale they occupy, or the Savannah.

All animals apart from Scar and the hyenas reside within The Savannah which is first introduced to viewers through the film's title song sequence "Circle of Life / Nants' Ingonyama". The song's first verse is entirely in Zulu, a South African language, while most of the main characters's names are in Kiswahili, a language spoken in various nations in East Africa. This meshing of two languages, which would not normally come into common interaction due to their geographical distance from one another, results in a flattening of the African continent's complexity and diversity. This simplified depiction of Africa, as Gooding-Williams notes, bears striking resemblance to German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's perception of the continent as an "unhistorical, [spiritually] undeveloped" land bare of "development or culture" (Hegel 117). Gooding-Williams asserts *The Lion King* maintains this colonial treatment of the continent writing:

> "The Lion King re-values Hegel's picture of Africa by offering an idealized version of the natural and historyless course of life which Hegel denigrates. Thus, where Hegel deplores the absence of the European's historical self-consciousness and the corresponding triumph of a natural and primitive mode of life, Disney envisions a natural paradise." (Gooding-Williams).

The Lion King embodies this *Hegelian* paradise as it is a careless amalgamation of both African and non-African cultures. Kiswahili, for example, serves as the root language for "Hakuna Matata ", a trademark phrase of the film which is not colloquially used in Swahili speaking nations. Timoon, the tri-state accented meerkat, Luau dances near the end of the film

and Rafiki practices martial arts on a herd of hyenas. The "natural paradise" Disney envisions, is

also one where the African political, economic and cultural bodies are erased, or rendered

"historyless", and molded into a world which feels far more similar to American society. The

song "Circle of Life" also reimagines this historyless Africa as a "natural paradise". Translated

from Zulu, the song lyrics are:

> *"Here comes a lion, father*
> *Oh yes it's a lion*
> *Here comes a lion, father*
> *Oh yes it's a lion*
> *A lion*
> *We're going to conquer*
> *A lion*
> *A lion and a leopard come to this open place"* (Shamsian).

This song suggests not just lions are the dominant species of the Savannah but normalizes

their dominance by comparing them to fathers. During the "Circle of Life" sequence the various

other animal species in the Savannah are voiceless and passive. They are submissive to the lions,

and in particular Simba who is hailed in front of the entire land at the top of a cliff. The ray of

light which perfectly beams down on Simba's body can be seen as a godlike glorification of

hetersexuality and the nuclear family as his parents both lay comfortably in the background

admiring their natural creation (Ward 7). A few minutes after this scene, the film also suggests

class structures are not only immovable but natural.

Mufasa tells Simba ``Everything the light touches is our kingdom" when looking across

The Savannah and delivers this line while the two are elevated on a cliff looking down at the

other animals of the plain. Mufasa defends the idea of a "natural order" arguing each animal has

a preordained position in the circle and calmly stresses that the lions just so happen to be at the

top of this cycle. This short anecdote about the circle of life and "natural order of things" seems to be normalizing the class dynamics of our own world. As the monarch of the land, Mufasa and his son are of higher-class status than the rest of the animals in the land. Their class standing is also graphically illustrated as they speak above the common animals from a towering position. Mufasa's assertion that there can be no supplanting of their rule due to the "circle" mirrors the class hierarchy present in modern-capitalist systems.

What should be noted are that the few life lessons featured in The *Lion King* always feature Mufasa and Simba speaking alone together. No one else in the Savannah has the privilege to hear their man-to-man (lion-to-lion) conversations making the viewer the sole party privy to these teachings. The lives and ideologies of other animals are pushed to the periphery and as the film rather centralize the high-class monarchical gaze of Mufasa and Simba. One could go as far to argue the film also pushes viewers to idealize royal rule whilst simultaneously reminding them this class position is virtually unattainable. This is reinforced in the composition of "The Circle of Life" sequence which frames viewers as if they are within the row of animals who bow to Simba being held up above them. Although we are positioned as a common animal in this scene, we never have the opportunity to learn about said animals' life, opinions or experiences. In a way the film suggests that this gaze and perspective isn't as essential or useful as the ruling class by neglecting it entirely. The only other character group and locale we are privileged to learn about are Scar and his hyena and who reside in what is known as the Wasteland.

Contrasting the Savannah, which is teeming with life and visually vibrant, the Wasteland is desolate, bare of any vegetation, and is scarred with dead animal carcuses. Gooding-Williams

articulates how the dark visual design of the Wasteland evokes stereotypical qualities of an urban

inner city. He writes:

> "The Lion King marks the elephant graveyard as an inner city in at least two ways. First, it uses Whoopi Goldberg's and Cheech Marin's voices to represent the speech of two of the three prominent hyena characters as black English and Latino slang respectively"

The hyena characters being referred to are Shenzi, Banzai, and Ed and are further

urbanized beyond Good-William's remarks. Shenzi does not only speak in "black English" but

her name further stereotypes the inner-city as a world of prostituion as it directly translates to

"whore" from Swahili. Banzai also shouts the most aggressive line in the film, "I'll kill you". His

violent actions and likeness to operate in a group with fellow hyenas is evocative of gang

behavior. Ed lastly, holds the least amount of linguistic competence in the film as he is shown

only to be capable of yelling, spitting, and chuckling sensely. His character traits can be read as

an insensitive representation of a neurodivergent individual. All three of these characters serve

to confine and limit definitions of "urban" spaces to a world of sex, gangs, violence, and the

mentally ill. Scar also possesses stark dissimilarities from animals in the Savannah and is

furthered "urbanized" and "othered" both in his speech and appearance.

Unlike his brother, Scar lurks and emerges from dark, shadowy caves whilst the other

lion's live and are predominantly framed in bright sunlit regions. While the other lion's speak in

a distinguishable American accent, Scar has a distinct British accent which has a very caculated

and mischeiveous tone.Scholars often suggest Scar's characters possess stereotypical gay clichés

through what Gooding-Williams cites as an "effeminate"cadence and behavior

(Gooding-Williams; Ward 5). He is also somewhat racialized as his dark fur is quite distinct

from the lighter yellow and orange fur of the other lions. Scar, along with the dark fur hyenas,

are hence "Black" in contrast to the lighter fur, and thus "White", lion protagonists. The *whiteness* of the lions is perhaps not immediately discernible as they are perceived by audiences who regularly do not understand being White as "category", as Dyer writes (4). Just as *whiteness* exists invisibly in the real world, the *whiteness* of the lions is hidden behind their seeming normalcy. Every space the lions occupy is casually understood within the boundaries of "normal"—in its whiteness, heteresexual relationships and patriarchal rule— but the film makes it a point to "other" spaces in which the protagonists do not occupy.

Mufasa tells Simba ``everything the light touches is our kingdom" but stresses the light does not touch "the place beyond our [their] borders" or what is known as the Wasteland. This line, coupled with the visual design of the Wasteland, functions to assure audiences that those who do not reside in the Savannah do not reside within the borders of normalcy. The "borders" Simba speaks of both spatially and symbolically seperate the White, hetersexual royals of the Savannah from the Black, Latino, gay, "whore", violent, and mentally disabled inhabitants of the Wasteland. *The Lion King* also illustrates an explicit approval of one group over the other through The Savanna's visual design during shifting rule changes.

When Scar and his hyenas seize the throne, the Savannah, which was once vibrant and full of life, now possesses a monotonous color scheme and is left in a permanent state of grey. This drastic change in the landscape suggests the film argues any system where the Savannah's "others" are in power, and hence "urban" people, will lead to vast societal decay. When Simba retakes the throne and displaces Scar, the film ensures to illustrate that the natural order has been restored as seen in the immediate return to the color and liveliness of the Savannah (Benshoff & Griffin 19).

Although subtle, analyzing these small nuances in the visual design demonstrate how committed *The Lion King* is in maintaining its rigid good/evil binary. Whether through using elements of film form or through explicit dialogue, the film never fails to argue how any action involving Scar, or his henchman, should be condemned and while any action from Simba and the resident's in the Savannah should be hailed. For example, Mufasa explains to a young Simba that death is inevitable and natural. Despite a violent death, Mufasa's spirit rests peacefully as he is shown communicating with his teenage son through a collection of stars. Alternatively, Simba thrusts Scar over a cliff and is attacked by his own enraged hyenas as they are engulfed in flames. While Mufasa's death is emblematic of power and eternal life, Scar and his henchmen see a hellish and permanent demise. Mufasa's death immortalizes the monarchical, patriarchal, heterosexual white, peaceful, surbia he represents. Contrastingly, Scar and the hyena's hellish demise permanetly denounces the homesexual, "Black" and Latino, urban realm they represent. Gooding-Williams; Ward 5).

Close readings interested in *The Lion King's* reproduction of these ruling ideas are quite pervasive within film studies literature but, more often than not, the casual viewer will dismiss the film as a simple children's story. Perhaps, this may be attributed to how similar *The Lion King* is to most films the average movie goer consumes. Female characters are belittled to love interests and mere vessels of reproduction. Patriarchal systems are normalized, the narrative predominately unfolds from a high class perspective and these characters are also held as the irrefutable standard. The film reinforces nearly every facet of dominant ideology discussed previously and, in doing so, resembles most narratives in popular film. For viewers who do not seek to challenge dominant ideology, or are not even conscious of its existence, *The Lion King's*

politics are practically invisible because it reinforces and resembles the systems they are not used to questioning. Contrastingly, the casual viewer may view a film like *Black Panther* as "revolutionary", political, and different, solely because its cast members are not white. A similar analytical treatment of *Black Panther's* form and content will reveal how it too is guilty of reinforcing the same dominant cultural ideals as *The Lion King*.

Black Panther

The plot of *Black Panther* is rather simple and possesses a significant amount of resemblance to *The Lion King.* An interfamilial conflict—as seen with Scar, Mufasa and Simba—unfolds between T'Chaka, T'Challa, N'Jobu and N'Jadaka (Erik Killmonger). The film opens with a monologue of N'Jobu speaking to his son Killmonger about their ancestral home of Wakanda. It isn't until after a series of graphics depicting the nation's history he shares with his son, and audiences, that we learn both characters were living in Oakland, California in the year 1992. N'Jobu was originally sent there as a Wakandan spy but chose to permanently stay after witnessing the impacts of systematic racism on the Black-American population and sought to help in their struggle for liberation. In order to achieve this goal, N'Jobu had helped Ulysee Klaue, a South-African black-market merchant and arms dealer, smuggle Vibranium out of Wakanda and into the hands of disempowered Black-American communities. After learning this through a Wakandan spy, Zuri, who falsely presented himself to N'Jobu as an ally in Oakland, T'Chaka sought to return his brother back home where he would face trial for his crimes. N'Jobu strongly opposed a reality where Wakanda thrived while the rest of the Black world struggled and, in frustration, attempted to murder Zuri in cold blood. T'Chaka prevented this and killed

N'Jobu, leaving his nephew, Erik Killmonger, as an orphaned son in Oakland and setting the story of the film into place.

These elements of plot and story seem to be the central interest amongst examinations of the film. Academics outside of the discipline of film studies often cite the narrative events of the film as a basis for their claims of *Black Panther*. Faithful, for example, lauds the unique ensemble of characters claiming how the film "depicts godlike characters embodying diverse forms of blackness"(2) who have "their own narratives, trials, flaws, conflicts and opportunities for growth"(3). Similarly, White praises the Wakandan residents as a great counter-image to dominant representations of Black people in cinema and claims the film "actively rejects the hegemony of whiteness" because it does not "utilize a narrative-absent racial consciousness" they argue is innate to superhero films(423). What is absent in these claims, however, is a significant analysis of *Black Panther's* form to justify their reasonings. How does the shot composition depict the characters as "godlike" therefore? How do elements of film form work to "actively reject the hegemony of whiteness" if they do so? Through a deeper analysis of form in *Black Panther* we'll come to understand the movie creates a rigid good/evil binary resembling the relationship between the Savannah and Wasteland in *The Lion King*. In *Black Panther*, this binary hails Wakanda(ns) and has little reverence for Oakland and its residents.

Analyzing Locales and Character In *Black Panther*

With an abundance of Vibranium, the most resilient element on Earth in the Marvel universe, Wakanda is a technological utopia. It has always remained a sovereign state and refuses to intervene in political affairs of other nations. Their lack of foreign intervention has not only kept them away from international conflicts but has also made Wakanda extremely

oblivious of the marginalization of Black and Brown people around the world. Despite the nation's neglect of the greater African diaspora, Wakanda is still revered as an isolated Black paradise by both its inhabitants and viewers. White writes how our journey into Wakanda " has been so evocative that to have been an existential moment, particular for some black viewers" as they are treated to the idea of what a Black world would look like if it were untouched by European imperialism (422). *Black Panther* is quite self aware of how impactful and empowering Wakanda is for Black, and specifically Black-American viewers, and presented the sovereign Black nation in an overtly proud manner. This infectious pride is illustrated through the non-diegetic score and visual design of scenes which take place in Wakanda.

Viewers' first introduction to Wakanda begins rather pensively. The eponymous title song by Senegalese musician Baaba Maal is played as hovercraft flies carrying three of our heroes (T'Challa, Nakia, and Akoye) over the country's expansive natural landscapes. In these moments, T'Challa is mourning the loss of his recently passed father. The scene cuts to the exterior of the hovercraft as it flies over a dense jungle, smashing through several layers of force fields which were revealed to be masking Wakanda in plain sight. Here, the score is composed of loud brass instruments which, as composer Ludwig Göransson notes, are meant to evoke a European monarchical quality. In these moments the score is loud and triumphant—a clear stylistic choice of the filmmakers' which attempts to illustrate the nation's grandeur and power. Alongside the score, the viewers are swept by the visual design of the first scenes in Wakanda's city.

As the brass roars in the background, huge wide shots encapsulate the futuristic skyline and technological advancement of Wakanda. These shots are resemblant to the first time

sweeping wide shots are used to introduce viewers to Hogwarts *in Harry Potter and The Philosopher's (Sorcerer's) Stone* or to monolithic structures such as the fictional kingdom of Minas Tirith in *Lord of The Rings: Return of the King* (Walters 1). Scenes in Wakanda, thus, possess a level of stylistic semblance to the conventional shot composition of fantasy film (Walters 125). Wakanda, just as with Hogwarts and Minas Tirith, is the fantasy world the filmmakers are attempting to dazzle the audience with. The directing style continuously seeks to impress the viewer with Wakanda throughout the first act.

After the arrival to Wakanda scene, Coogler ensures to depict the abundance of the rare natural resource of Vibranium, recognizes the advanced technology of Shuri's laboratory—which is far more complex than any present-day conceivable technology—and celebrates the unique Pan-African and Afro-Futurist attire of the Wakandans. These scenes serve to induce audiences, and again Black-American audiences, to be inspired by Black power and admire the beauty of the Black monarchical world T'Challa brings us into. With these intentions at evoking a Black fantasy world in mind, one should consider what world are the filmmakers trying to remove us from or pushing us to forget about? There is always a world adjacent to the fantasy within the genre. In *Harry Potter* that is the world of "the muggles" and perhaps our own world in *Lord of the Rings*. In *Black Panther* the world adjacent may be our world too, as the film does present itself as escapist entertainment, but it is also clearly Killmonger's "inner-city" world of Oakland.

It's quite challenging to write and analyze Oakland with the same complexity as Wakanda as there are only two unique locations of the city that are explored throughout the film's 2 hour and 15 minute runtime. The first is a makeshift basketball courtyard and the

second is N'Jobu's apartment. Unlike the sweeping wide shots of Wakanda, scenes in Oakland are only privileged to this localized perspective of a small neighborhood. The wide shots in Wakanda serve to highlight the nation's biodiversity and industrialization while the localized view of Oakland presents a depotolicitized and underdeveloped city—one which viewers understand as "poor" without any explanation as to why or how. Additionally the colour scheme of Oakland's shots are quite monotonous in comparison to the polychromatic and vibrant world of Wakanda. The stark differences in the visual design of Oakland suggests the film has no interest in exploring its "inner-city" as the real intrigue and fantasy exists in Wakanda. The spatially confined shots of Oakland not only peripheralized the city but functionally dismissed the "poor" and crime filled world in favor of the technologically advanced Black world of Wakanda which is explored with an incredibly diverse array of shots. Essentially the film idealizes both Wakanada and the monarchical, voluptuous and rich living over the impoverished "inner-city". As done in *The Lion King*, the film also idealizes the political initiatives of its ruling class, the Wakandans, and effectively silences any opposing forces which challenge the ideologies of this domination social group.

The four male ideological forces of *Black Panther*— N'Jobu, Killmonger T'Chaka and T'Challa—are shaped by the locales they occupy. N'Jobu's choice to reside in Oakland is a conscious decision made by the filmmakers. Not only is it the home of director Ryan Coogler, but it's where the Black Panther party had originated. His political belief system mirrors that of the Panthers who advocated for the social and economic emancipation of Black-Americans. On the other hand, T'Challa and his father's belief system is very much a product of Wakanda's isolation from the rest of the world. Both leaders believe their country should not invest its

interest in global affairs and should remain a mystery to the rest of the world. T'Challa's politics are quite passive, pensive and peaceful hardly considering any radical reform. In this sense Wakanda is quite conservative as it does not wish to see vast changes within its own society and wishes to preserve its historical tradition of being the world's best kept secret. The nation's non-interventionist politics, and the death of his father, are what pushed Killmonger to adopt a radical worldview which wished to see Wakanda disseminate its advanced technology and weapons to Black communities across the world as a tool to liberate themselves. Although the film allows for each of these perspectives to coexist within its narrative, it's fully adamant in cementing the peaceful political actions of Wakanda over Killmonger's more militant sentiments. This is best supported in the camera work when Killmogner seizes the throne.

In the scene where Killmonger defeats T'Challa in combat the score is distinct from the royal and prideful brass notes we hear when first entering Wakanda. Instead, the brass instruments are prolonged and accompanied with a continuous bang of a drum. Here the non-diegetic sound is used to further distinguish Killmonger's actions as a work of antagonism. Visually, the film depicts its disapproval of Killmonger as king when he first enters the throne room. The camera completes a 360° flip which is the film's way of suggesting that the political sphere of Wakanda will be completely destabilized under his rule. Although he explicitly advocates for the killing of the world's colonizing class and dominant population, Killmonger arguably presents a valid initiative which seeks, at its core, to liberate the global Black community which has undergone centuries of marginalization. Yet, this perspective is permanently silenced in the film when Killmonger voluntarily kills himself after removing a blade from his abdomen during his final fight with T'Challa.

It's commonly said T'Challa incorporates and respects Killmogner's initiative when he visits Oakland at the conclusion of the film (Faithful 427). T'Challa decides to buy the surrounding properties of his cousin's old neighborhood and spearheads Wakanda's first International Outreach Center. One should pose serious questions to this initiative. Will money change the reality which sees Black people be "overly policed and incarcerated" as N'Jobu stresses in the film's opening? Will racial profiling cease or will dominant culture immediately halt the negative images of people of colour which have plagued U.S. society? And will there be an equal playing field for Black people who wish to obtain an education or a job? Culture critic James Wilt refers to T'Challa's actions as "Obama-esque neoliberal philanthropy" in his article "How Black Panther liberalizes black resistance for white comfort". Wilt argues rather than work against or even seek to challenge the institutionalized racism Killmonger fought so vehemently against, Wakanda chooses to negotiate with the system.

Killmonger's conquest, despite how violent, sought to implement drastic changes by explicitly challenging the forces of institutional racism. Permanently ending his narrative by killing him off not only denounces this initiative but ensures audiences T'Challa's peaceful, diplomatic, and harmless actions are the more morally sound course of action. While words of liberation and armed resistance may have been shared in its middle parts, the final narrative moment in *Black Panther* nixes these ideas, cementing investment in capital and philanthropic ventures as the best modes of ameliorating inner-city lifeThe question then becomes how can we wholly categorize a film as a counter-hegemonic if it explicitly denounces a more revolutionary thought process in favor of a more socially acceptable initiative which in no way seeks to challenge the forces of imperialism and capitalism?

Black Panther and its Reinforcement of Dominant Ideology

The film which critics and scholars alike hailed as being revolutionary in actuality created a dangerous bianaristic claim that there exists an ideal Black world and people, Wakanda, and a clearly inferior one, Oakland and its residents. When Faithful asserted *Black Panther* "depicts godlike characters embodying diverse forms of blackness" it's apparent these "godlike characters" are not the people of Oakland, who are provided virtually no voice outside of Killmonger and N'Jobu, but the monarchical class of Wakanda.The film is praised for its empowering Black imagery, but when questioning how this imagery is presented to viewers, and in correlation to other "forms of blackness" it is quite salient *Black Panthe*r seeks to engage with the ruling idea of class dynamics which cement a wealthier lifestyle as more "idealistic"or something the populace should strive for. While academics like Faithful may claim *Black Panther* is an induspitable piece of pro-Black culture, the form of the film, just as in *The Lion King*, is utilized to uphold the dominant systems our society has in place. This expands beyond capitalism and popular notions of the "ideal" class, but also how dominant culture perceives gender and even race.

The Black images of *Black Panther* seem to be the film's most seductive tool. Faithful, for example, notes the empowering scene where Okoye—the leader of the "Dora Milaje", an all female military force—is" crouched on top of a moving car with a red flowing dress" as "stops a fleeing vehicle with a single spear throw" and argues her "physical prowess is an expression of her mental precision". But when we question how not only Okoye, but the entire force of the Dora Milaje are positioned alongside their male counterparts, it's apparent their society is quite

patriarchal. Apart from Okoye, none of the Dora are named and they are always positioned in the background behind the ruling men. While they may be fierce warriors, unlike any seen in film, their limited framing and collective identity renders them as stereotypically passive female characters—quite identical to the female lions in *Lion King* who watch the narrative unfold from the background. What needs to be questioned whenever an image is deemed as empowering then, are not the aesthetics of the image itself but how the images are presented to us using elements of film form. When we pay closer attention even to the narrative elements of *Black Panthe*r, it's apparent the film utilizes most of the strong characteristics of its female characters as a means to better the male leads.

The other "strong" female characters beside Okoye are Nakia, T'Challa's sister Shuri and his mother Ramonda. All of these women are shown to possess a particularly unique skill or character quality but their most resourceful moments result in the betterment of T'Challa to some degree. Some Dora die in the final battle against Killmonger to ensure T'Challa regains the throne never to be acknowledged by the film. Nakia is an incredible agent, fighter and spy but her most resourceful moment occurs when she covertly steals the last heart shaped herb—a plant Killmonger was in the midst of burning which is the source of the Black Panther's strength (Faithful 7). Shuri is the film's technological genius but the best she can do during Killmonger's revolution is obtain a spare Black Panther suit for her brother to fight in the film's climax. She does take on Killmonger alone but ends up being the damsel in distress moments before her brother saves her. Romanda, lastly, is hardly characterized and is solely defined by her widowed status and as the mother to T'Challa (Faithful 7).While we may be coerced into the imagined Black fantasy of Wakanda, the utopia's gender dynamics are not far removed from our own in

that women still operate under a patriarchal system where men rule as leaders. Lastly, we are not only provided dominant notions of gender in the film but an overlooked ruling perception of race and cultural identity.

Black Panther in no regard suggests Black people are inferior to any race but the film's adoption of more mainstream understanding of race and culture stem from its overly simplified representation of African cultures. White notes the merging of cultural groups from various African nations such as "Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana, Lesotho, Namibia, and South Africa" (424). An entirely new language is concocted from mixing Xhosa, Swahili and English phrases together (Khan 101).Consequently, what was an attempt to celebrate Blackness resulted in a watered-down "Africa" through a Wakanda which sees a hodgepodge of cultural groups, tribes, and languages. Khan stresses how the film's attempt at Pan-Africanist imagery is problematic, writing how "it overlooks the complete diversity of African cultures and experiences, providing an easy-to-ingest African aesthetic to White audiences" (101). The real cultures represented in *Black Panther* are never distinguished, and are in fact fictionalized by its tribal communities (Merchant, Border, River, Mining, and Jabari), which reduces the entire continent to the nonspecific "country" it's commonly narrowed to by The West (Faithful 6; Shohat & Stam 1). While it is not as careless, as in *The Lion King*, the amalgamation of various unique cultures results in a similar compression of the continent's diversity. Black characters, thus, are still presented as a monolith meant to stand in as a voice for the entire race and are not provided with the careful distinction of different cultural realms White people are popularly handled with—as stressed with how *Godfather* is about Italians rather than the monolithic category of White people.

The film which was lauded for its celebration of blackness, and clear attempt at doing so, in reality preserved the ruling ideas of a bourgeois class by standardizing gender hierarchies, perpetuating images of a wealthy lifestyle as quintessential and limiting the perspectives of marginal Black communities both American and Africann. To counter White's claim, which asserts *Black Panther* "actively rejects the hegemony of whiteness" by implementing a "racial consciousness" absent from the superhero genre, the film actually conforms to this hegemony by presenting an acceptable film for White audiences and the casual film goer who aren't pushed to think about race or racism in a complex way—this idea will be explored in more depth in the succeeding chapter . At its ideological core, *Black Panthe*r, thus possesses no difference from the popular Hollywood film. It ensures audiences the idea of a "radical" Black liberation movement is not only wrong but that the global Black world has transcended this thought-process. Interestingly the film's central question, which is concerned with who is responsible for the global marginalization of Black people, assures the dominant population the answer does not lie in various centuries of European imperialist rule but in a Black on Black conflict. By removing ny critical narratives of colonialism, *Black Panther* perpetuates a false and comforting notion that we live in a post-racial society and also presents a very troubled depiction of the African and African diasporic groups represented in the film as a result.

CHAPTER TWO

EXPLORING THE AFRICAN DIASPORA IN *BLACK PANTHER*

Without explicitly uttering the word "diaspora" *Black Panther* does engage, although quite broadly and unknowingly, with the troubled consciousness of the African diaspora solely through Erik Killmonger. To understand how the film attempts to explore the diasporic experience, it's imperative to fully unravel what is meant by the African diaspora and how it is this transnational "group" came into fruition.

While the word "diaspora, essentially meaning "dispersal" in Greek, can be easily defined as the displacement or migration of a particular demographic from their original geographic home (Patterson & Kelley 14), a concrete term of "African diaspora" has been deeply questioned amongst famous Black scholars; particular those whose work is featured in this chapter such as Marcus Garvey, Alain Locke and Stuart Hall. Unlike other migrants who leave their country of origin willingly, the creation of the African diaspora was a result of the transatlantic slave trade's dispersal of African people across the Americas and to some parts of Europe (Patterson & Kelley 14). A significant portion of Black people in the Caribbean, Latin America, and North America reside in these regions of the world today as a consequence of their ancestor's forced migration. Many texts of the Black thinkers visited throughout the writing of this chapter proposed how do you define and unify a "group" of people who are now dispersed across several nation-states, have long been removed from their ancestor's cultural practices and traditions, have adopted the cultures of the homes their ancestors were displaced to, and, in some

cases, are not conscious of a larger Black community outside their own national boundaries?

Further, how can you make a unifying definition of people who have, since leaving the shores of

the West African coast, tirelessly forged a cultural identity in their *new worlds* which is unique

and entirely different to those also created by other *new* Black cultural groups that are migrating

in a contemporary context? Diasporic literature recognizes the concept of being "Black" and the

understanding of being part of the African diaspora varies from country to country. What

seemingly unites the meaning of African diaspora is not a defining cultural characteristic or

tradition therefore, but a shared historical and psycho-spiritual experience.

The fragmented psyche of the African diaspora is brilliantly summarized by Patterson

and Kelly in their profound text "Unfinished Migration.". They define the diasporic experiences

as a:

> "...dispersal from a homeland, often by violent forces, the making of a memory and a
> vision of that homeland, marginalization in the new location, a commitment to the
> maintenance/restoration of the homeland, and desire for return and a continuing
> relationship and identity with the homeland that shapes the consciousness and solidarity
> of the group." (Patterson & Kelley 15)

Black Panther, as a film stemming from diasporic creativity and brimming with

Pan-Africanist inspirations, should possess a level of interest in the various components of this

consciousness Patterson and Kelly address. Sadly, the filmmaker's attempts to create a

celebratory Black film demonstrates little awareness of the diaspora at a psychological, spiritual

and historical level. While several elements of the diasporic consciousness are addressed, mainly

through Killmonger, the film neglects the existence of "violent forces" which are the workings of

European imperalism, the transatlantic slave trade and this "marginalization in the new location"

which is, in the context of *Black Panther's* narrative, strucural racism in the U.S. Without any narrative threads which critique or acknowledge these forces, the film succumbs to dominant imaginings of the "Black World" which simply views its inhabitants as poor, impotent, angry and radical without considerations as to how or why.

Understanding *Black Panther's* Troubled Imagining of the African Diaspora

Again, although *Black Panther* features no explicit exploration of the "diaspora", Killmonger's diasporic identity can be recognized in the instances he visits the ancestral plane, a spiritual realm where newly inducted Black Panthers can communicate with their entire ancestry. Prior to this spiritual journey, viewers witness T'Challa travel to the ancestral plane twice. The first is after he is crowned as Wakananda's new king and the second is after he criticizes his recently deceased father for leaving an orphaned Killmonger behind in Oakland. Killmonger, in the scene after dethroning T'Challa, initiates the audience's third time into the ancestral plane. He doesn't enter Wakanda's spiritual world but instead revisits his Oakland apartment and is solely greeted by his father, N'Jobu. Within the politics of *Black Panther*, Killmonger's spiritual alienation can be read as a consequence of his father's betrayal of Wakanda. The geographic location of his death has no correlation with where his spiritual self lies. T'Chaka was murdered in Austria yet his spirit resides in Wakanda for example. Symbolically, however, Killmonger's spiritual displacement is representative of the African diaspora's severed relationship with the motherland (Africa).

Despite his upheaval of Wakanda's political sphere, Killmonger shares how he simply wished to watch the sunsets his father claimed were the most beautiful in the world. In his final

breaths, Killmonger even references his want of returning to his ancestral homeland as a "fairytale". This personal fantasy engages with the aforementioned diasporic elements of "a memory and a vision of that homeland" and "desire for return" (Patterson & Kelley 15). His greatest aspirations are to reshape Wakanda's political structure, which speaks to "the maintenance/restoration of the homeland" (Patterson & Kelley 15). An absent component in his consciousness, however, is the displacement from Wakanda by a "violent" force. To members of the African diaspora present in his community, this force would be the workings of the transatlantic slave trade which resulted in their "dispersal" from the "homeland'. Even as a Wakandan-American whose father willingly migrated and was not dispersed to America, Killmonger was subject to and witnessed a "violent" force in the form of systemic racism.

Subtle dialogue in *Black Panther* reveals Killmonger's mother was incarcerated and died in prison. As an orphaned child in inner-city Oakland, where the film notes crime and poverty were rampant, Killmonger and his surrounding communities were, like many other African diaspora communities, marginalized "in the new location [America]" (Patterson & Kelley 15). He alludes to the global marginalization of Black people when reminding the Wakandans "There's about 2 billion people all over the world that look like us but their lives are a lot harder". These "violent" forces and sources of marginalization are only implicitly referenced in minor plot details. However, the "violent" force which the film argues separates and spiritually displaces Killmonger from his homeland is Wakanda itself — or the death of his father at the hands of T'Chaka more specifically— as opposed to the impacts of U.S. systematic oppression/racism which marginalized himself, his mother and the Oakland community he was

deeply immersed in. The film consistently overlooks and maintains an uncritical gaze of American racism and its violent history.

N'Jobu mentions how Black-Americans are "over policed and incarcerated" and live in communities "flooded with weapons" but the film never answers or even questions why. The systematic discrimination of a second New Jim Crow era of mass incarceration that Killmonger, Oakland and the entire Black-American community endure is completely ignored. As Michelle Alexander explores in her book, *The New Jim Crow*, Black-Americans aren't merely "overly policed and incarcerated" without reasoning. She observes rising crime and incarceration as a consequence of poor educational resources, the lack of quality education as a consequence of poverty, and poverty as a consequence of legalized discriminatory policies (3). It's more than likely the "overly policed" exist as a consequence of the dominant images of Black people which frequently portray them as violent, criminalistic, urban, etcetera. To be Black in America is suspicious in itself and warrants over policing therefore. This succinct examination of U.S. structural racism's negative implications of Black communities and the Black image in no way fully captures how deeply rooted it is in American society, but it's telling of just how much *Black Panther* ignores by candidly expressing how Black communities are "flooded with weapons" without providing any historical or social contextual reasoning. *Black Panther* similarly elides any significant discourse on the effects of European imperialism in Africa.

The word "colonizer" is only uttered twice in the film. Once when T'Challa's sister Shuri jokingly refers to the film's sole White-American character, Everett Ross, and briefly during a monologue Killmonger delivers detailing how he is going to adopt the "colonizer's" strategies against them. In the film's climactic last battle, T'Challa does implicitly refer to colonization

when shouting at Killmonger, "You want to see us become just like the people you hate so much? Divide and conquer the land as they did?". This safe use of "they" hardly challenges the viewer to think of European colonial forces and their "Scramble for Africa" in a complex way — if said viewer is even conscious of either of them. European superpowers did not simply "divide and conquer the land" but were keen on coercing the entire structures of tribal communities into political and economic models similar to Europe's from the point of contact on the continent. The partition of Africa into territories, which would soon evolve into nation-states, resulted in the extraction of the continent's natural resources, the exploitation and economic disempowerment of Black Africans, a complete remodeling of the continent's modes of production, the destruction of entire ecosystems due to colonial expansion, and, in some cases, mass genocide. The film is far less interested in making any clear condemning stances against these devastating imperial actions and prefers to comfort audiences with a reassuring image of whiteness through CIA agent Everett Ross.

In the film review "Come Get Your Life, Come Get Your Death", Max S. Gordon argues Evertt Ross was a character created purely for the White American gaze to align with—and to secure White-American audiences at the box office (Gordon). Ross never says anything too offensive, he's off to the film's periphery but is still a present force in climatic scenes. Ross does the infamous Wakandan arm cross to prevent a plane of Vibranium weapons from leaving the country, effectively killing Wakandan soldiers (Gordon). He progresses from not knowing anything about Wakanda, into the White-savior stereotype who helps save the day and even practices a cultural gesture. He can further be argued as a character which allows White-American audiences to feel as though they too can be part of Wakanda, as if they are

included in the fictional return "home" which enticed Black audiences (Williams 28). Further

developing Gordon's claims, Ross, as the sole White-American character in the film, exists to

reassure White-American audiences of their absence and little consequence in the ideological

disputes in the film. Although the CIA is known to have conducted several operations which

destabilized several communities within the Global South, *Black Panther* paints Ross and his

agency as "the good guys" and finds its White villain in Klaue.

Klaue is featured briefly in *Black Panther*. Some time in the 1990s he broke Wakanda's

impenetrable borders killing civilians in an attempt to smuggle out Vibranium. Klaue also refers

to the Wakanda people as "savages" when claiming they don't deserve to have access to such

rich minerals. Even as the "bad" White character, Klaue is never as awful as the film's final

"bad" Black character, Killmonger. Lebron notes how *Black Panther* perpetuates the idea of

"acceptable" Blacks versus "evil" Blacks by allowing Killmonger to remain as the central villain.

He writes:

"...we are given a movie about black empowerment where the only redeemed blacks are
African nobles. They safeguard virtue and goodness against the threat not of white Americans or
Europeans, but a Black-American man, the most dangerous person in the world" (Lebron).

If *Black Panther* had the language to express the shattered consciousness of the African

diaspora— the marginalization in the *new* world, the lack of a definitive cultural identity, the

longing for the ancestral home, the want to restore this homeland, and the many other

psychological components discussed—then perhaps Killmonger's political motives would have

been explicitly defined as a cause of his cultural and spiritual estrangement. Instead his

ambitions are portrayed in a series of unexplained violent, radical, psychotic, egotistical,

misogynistic, and hyper-masculine outbursts, as shown when he poisons a museum tour guide,

kills his girlfriend in cold blood, kills Zuri, and slits the throat of a Dora Milaje and is shown

visibly enjoying the act (Williams 29). Gordon argues "the movie invites us to feel contempt for

him [Killmonger], and maintains a common theme in popular American culture: the

demonization of the working-class and poor". It does so by presenting his "working-class and

poor"upbringing, which can be better worded as an underprivileged life, not as elements which

mobilized his "anger" and political ideology but as the forces which further demonizes him as

the "bad" Black character (Gordon).

What the film attempted to label as villainous actions were, in reality, an radical and

childishly innocent desire to return to Wakanda. Killmonger's return was both ignited by his

want to liberate the international Black community through Wakandan technology and, as he

says in his last moments, to fulfill a childhood dream of returning to his father's homeland. This

longing for the ancestral home is not unique to Killmonger but is an integral component of the

diasporic imagination, as seen in Patterson & Kelly's noting of "a desire to return home" (Hall

232; Paterson & Kelly 15). To better understand *Black Panther* as a diasporic product, it's

imperative to explore the history of this imagination and how the film perpetuates a troubled

"Back-to-Africa" narrative.

How *Black Panther* Perpetuates a Troubling Diasporic Fantasy

Views of Africa as a place of "return" and as the future *home* had pervaded the

African-American consciousness, and the entire Black world within the Americas, from the

moment slave ships docked across Atlantic colonies (Clegg; Cromwell Hill & Killson 3). Interest

in the ancestral home had been widely expressed in African-American literature and scholarship

throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. However this interest was not always considerate of the African population residing within Africa. In declaring a need to return to Africa, there often emerged a clear hierarchical positioning of Black-American thinkers over African people.

Most famously, the "Back-to-Africa' movement sparked by Marcus Garvey and the American Colonization Society (ACS) sought to resituate freed slaves to Liberia as opposed to awaiting liberation in America (Clegg). Liberia was founded in 1822 by the ACS as a haven where Black-Americans could possess the economic and political sovereignty of which they were deprived in The U.S. (MacDougall & Gordon 89). Contrary to their aspirations, many of the Black-Americans who immigrated to Liberia mirrored the mindset and actions of the colonizers. Native Africans were denied political rights and were coerced into the subordinate position in a master and slave relationship, with Black-Americans playing the part of master. Liberians were economically deprived, taxed, enslaved, and forced to labor in fields and rubber plantations which had originally belonged to their people for centuries (MacDougall & Gordon 89).The troubling ethnic hierarchy present in Liberia was also quite ubiquitous amongst texts of several "Back-to-Africa" Black-American scholars who sought to coerce rather than include African ethnic groups into their ideologies.

Adelaide Cromwell Hill and Martin Kilson's "Apropos of Africa" compiles a few dozen collective works dating as far back as the 18th century which explore views of Africa from several famous Black-American thinkers. The editors note these texts are not a holistic representation of Black-American discourse on Africa at the time of their respective writing. What they attempt to demonstrate through these texts is the shortsighted, attempted, yet ultimately failed Pan-African visions consistent throughout the entries featured. What perhaps

best encapsulates the popular sentiments amongst these scholars is Alain Locke's own "Apropos of Africa" the book's title references.

Originally published in 1924, *Apropos* underscores the rising interests in Africa amongst Black-Americans at the time of his writing. Alain presents himself as a dissident of groups wishing to "civilize" Africa but suggests the "enlightened' African class needs to remove their cultural bias if a liberated Black world is to be made possible (Locke 352). His idealization of a Black utopia needs to see the unification of both Black worlds as "America offers the African his greatest educational opportunity" and "[A]frica offers the Afro-American his greatest economic opportunity" (Locke 352). This vision erects a clear undermining of African intelligence and a mindset which solely views Africa as an opportunity to expand Black-American owned capital .Locke was not unique in his views as many of his contemporaries similarly regarded Africa purely with commercial motives in mind (Clegg). In the eyes of Locke and these thinkers Africa was to be the "future home" only if the continent and its people were to provide Black-Americans something back in exchange (Locke 35). Marcus Garvey and Locke demanded Africa also need to "civilize" itself, modernize its economic structures and political bodies to suit the needs of the Black-American (Clegg). This absence of an African voice and this vision of "an Africa for Africans" is an inherently colonial mode of thinking. While the filmmakers of *Black Panther* did not adopt nearly as imperialistic a mindset, the production of their film did, as these Black-Americans had, limit the participation of an African voice in their work.

The music, dance, tradition, and artwork of African creatives were incorporated into *Black Panther.* Yet, audiences were not privy to their direct artistic creations as the film's American and Black-American director, writers, cinematographers, set designers, costume, make

up, sound, and visual effects teams—some of which worked closely with African artists—sought to reimagine the continent, its stories, customs and traditions and art for the film's Western audience. As a result, we don't receive an authentic representation of Africa but one which mediates and distorts the African voice for the Western eye. *Black Panther* can be labeled as a "Back-to-Africa" film as it not only fails to incorporate an African voice in a distinguished behind camera position but promotes a utopian return to Africa narrative in its concoction of Wakanda similar to how the ACS pushed for a relocation to Liberia. Without the agency to construct their own image in the film, the Dahomey, Zulu, Xhosa people—amongst dozens of represented ethnic groups—are subject to a cinematic colonization comparable to the master-slave relationship African-American settlers forced onto native Liberians. Neither colonized party had the political or economic agency to contest the motives of their respective Black-American "colonizers". Both the Black-American settlement of Liberia and *Black Panther* failed in creating a unified Black world as well. The former in its hypocritical enslavement of African natives and the latter in its failure to provide an unmediated African voice creative control. A film which unites the Black world would be less on par with the "Back-to-Africa" movement, and perhaps engage with the ideas Stuart Hall brings forth in his eye opening work "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" which pushes his readers to recognize the harsh realities of global colonialism and racism outside their respective home country.

Hall's essay critiques the rose tinted gaze of an untouched and utopic Africa awaiting the displaced member of the African diaspora. He speaks directly to the rising post-colonial, cultural revolutionists which emerged across the Caribbean's Black and indegenious communities in the 1970s (Hall 231). Hall notes how these groups were growing into a new diasporic consciousness;

one which, after the end of slavery and colonialization, grew to redefine the forged category of "Black" for themselves and grew more cognizant of thier African pasts. These groups too sought a "return" but Hall reminds them in his piece:

> "The original 'Africa' is no longer there. It too has been transformed. History is, in that sense, irreversible. We must not collude with the West which, precisely, normalizes and appropriates Africa by freezing it into some timeless zone of the primitive, unchanging past" (231)

He stresses once more to his imagined Caribbean reader, "To this 'Africa', which is a necessary part of the Caribbean imaginary, we can't literally go home again" (232). His words are applicable not only to the Caribbean consciousness but to the entire African diaspora. He reminds them the entire continent of Africa has also been terraformed by the same colonial subjugation and exploitation as the Caribbean and all of the Americas for that matter. Hall does not suggest to neglect their lost brothers and sisters in the homeland but challenges them to drop the detrimental Western view which imagines the continent as a timeless, historyless world—similar to the Hegelian image of the continent explored in the previous chapter—and respectfully acknowledges the harsh realities of their Black comrades across the Atlantic. Lastly, he prompts the reader to actively challenge the representations of Black people created with a "European presence" in the visual arts, including cinema. He defines these "dominant regimes of representation" as:

> "...the colonial discourse, the literatures of adventure and exploration, the romance of the exotic, the ethnographic and travelling eye, the tropical languages of tourism, travel brochure and Hollywood and the violent, pornographic images of *ganja* and urban violence" (233).

While *Black Panther* does not engage with all these regimes, it does incorporate the regime of "travel brochure" and "Hollywood" in its blending of various African cultures and languages. But the film also speaks to the regimes of "adventure" and "the romance of the exotic" through the utopic and romanticized image of Wakanda. It's not the existence of the Black sovereign nation which doesn't challenge what Hall notes as the "imperalising eye", the force behind these dominant representations, but the absence of a narrative which reminds the viewer "the original 'Africa' is no longer there" (Hall 231). By centralizing only one Black world, Wakanda, *Black Panther* engages with the mythic, harmful, and Western imagining of the continent Hall stresses we, the African diaspora, must forgo. The film's adoption of this Western gaze results in various issues which further misrepresent and create a divisive, rather than a unifying image, of the African diaspora.

Firstly, by failing to present an alternative Black world, African or American, with as much complexity as Wakanda, *Black Panther* suggests the currently situated world of the Black viewer is inferior to the fictitious country. Yet, it does not stress how its supposed "inferiority" is not one-dimensional, as explored in the localized exploration of Oakland, but a multi-faceted issue with several intersectioning oppressive forces. Across the Black diasporic world these forces are legal, day-to-day interactions or remnants of the permanently damaging effects of slavery and imperialism. Secondly, the issue with instilling a "Back-to-Africa" image and, again, simplifying the Black world outside of Wakanda, ignores the current reality of a politically and economically destabilized Africa. Not only is the non-African Black viewer seduced by the images of Wakanda but the African viewer feels their respective country's historical context and cultural identity has been reduced and romanticized for the non-African Black eye. In a sense,

this yearning to cling onto a mythic image of Africa makes *Black Panther* somewhat of a

cinematic Liberia in that it promotes a mythic image of an untouched, precolonial Africa

patiently awaiting the arrival of the forcibly displaced Black-American.

The "revolutionary" film the African diaspora deserves is not one which omits substantial

critical discourse on imperialism or capitalism— two forces which racialized our ancestors who

originally self-identified through tribal and cultural identity and not through the socially

constructed identity of race. The "revolutionary" film we deserve, further, is not one which

peripheralizes certain Black communities and centralizes others. Nor does this "revolutionary"

film "other" poor Black people and construct binaristic claims idealizing richer. The

"revolutionary" film we deserve will not claim to celebrate Black people but permanently silence

specific realms of Blackness and limit the voices of diverse forms of Blackness behind the

camera. The "revolutionary" film we all deserve will unite what Hall refers to as the "Black

Triangle"—an abstract geographical triangle which points to the Blacks scattered in North

America, South America, Africa and expands to Europe (223)—and challenge the "imperalising

eye" by not conforming to language of its representations. This imagined "revolutionary" film is

not at all *Black Panther*.

The "revolutionary" film we received was one where the filmmakers negotiated with the

cinematic imperial force of Marvel-Disney and viewed "Africa" and "Africans", similar to

Locke, as a mere business venture. The false "revolutionary" film we received was one which

blamed, when asked who is responsible for the global marginalization of the Black people,

another victimized Black person and not the irrefutable response of centuries of European

imperialism and capitalism. There is no internal narrative revolution in *Black Panther* as it fails

to holistically represent and incorporate the voices of "the Black Triangle" and instead makes them contest each other. It rather speak on behalf of these groups and continues the prime function of mainstream cinema by comforting the gaze of dominant groups. The "revolution" is even absent in its stylistic qualities which also conform to the codes of dominant cinema.

CHAPTER 3

**EXPOSING THE FALSE CINEMATIC REVOLUTION AND INTRODUCING BLACK
ALTERNATIVE CINEMA**

The soundtrack that accompanies the first full-length trailer for *Black Panther* samples a line from a Gil Scott-Heron spoken word which famously declares, "the revolution will not be televised". Scott-Heron's words decry corporate mass media, profit-driven industries and capitalism as a whole. But unlike Scottt-Heron's stylistically and politically radical work, *Black Panthe*r lacks strong revolutionary politics and also adheres to the stylistic codes of classical Hollywood cinema.

To conclude this critical analysis of *Black Panther*, the central ideas of this section maintain the film cannot be regarded fully as a revolutionary project if it possesses little variance from popular film, and especially the dominant cinematic force of Hollywood, in terms of form and content. Later sections of this chapter will introduce two other works of contemporary Black cinema, *Moonlight* (Barry Jenkins, 2016) and *Belly* (Hype Williams, 1998), to exemplify how these projects explicitly question and denounce dominant ideology and are also deviants from the stylistic codes of popular film. Concluding statements of this chapter will push to understand film representation of race and racial identity beyond a surface-level engrossment with skin colour and rather an analysis of how marginalized groups are being represented on screen. Before turning to these alternative works of Black cinema, the idea of *Black Panthe*r being "revolutionary" will be debunked further by demonstrating how it is an example of "first cinema, or the hegemonic force of Hollywood, rather than a departure from this tradition

Understanding Hollywood Style and 'First' Cinema

As early, silent film began its transition from non-fiction to storytelling or narrative film, filmmakers began to question how their narratives could be easily interpreted by audiences (Bordwell & Thompson 102). Over time stylistic conventions of camera work, editing, narrative, lighting, sound and acting were established into what is commonly known as "classical Hollywood cinema" or "classical Hollywood style" (Bordwell & Thompson 103; Benshoff & Griffin 26). Most Hollywood films abide, for example, to the rules of continuity editing which, as Bordwell and Thompson simply define it, is used "to allow space, time and action to flow over a series of shots"(236). In most Hollywood films, stylistic devices are to never eclipse the narrative, and should remain invisible to ensure full immersion of the viewer in the story. The classical Hollywood narrative, in turn, has certain core conventions: the existence of a single protagonist (typically male), whose conflict is narrated through a "cause-effect" chain; a central conflict potentially sparked by an antagonist, a potential love interest, and a linear narrative which is concluded with a sense of closure or a "happy ending" for audiences (Alford 150; Benshoff & Griffin 27; Bordwell & Thompson 103; Shohat & Stam 201).

At its core, classical Hollywood cinema intends to present itself as simple escapist entertainment to viewers, hardly challenging them to think about the diegetic world politically or in relation to their own (Benshoff & Griffin 26). Although the landscape of cinema continues to change, with the addition of new technologies and filming styles, these formal devices have remained a constant stylistic norm even in popular Hollywood films of today. While these styles and production codes of Hollywood were reinforced across the five major studios of the 20th

century (RKO Pictures, Paramount Pictures, Warner Bros., Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, and 20th Century Fox), the overwhelming studio force of Walt-Disney Studios is now the leading power in this role.

The contemporary landscape of U.S. cinema has shifted away from its oligopolistic roots and is far more viciously monopolistic than it was in the 20th century. In 2019 Disney's total domestic box office accounted for about 33% of the market share from only 13 theatrically released films (The-Numbers). In comparison, Warner Bros. held the second highest market share of that year at about 14% and had 43 theatrical releases (The-Numbers). Disney's dominance over the film industry has both reasserted the conventions of Hollywood cinema, as all major studios do, but also reinvented its production processes and ways of generating profits.

Most films emerging from the modern American era still adhere to the aforementioned narrative and stylistic conventions. Yet the rise in popularity of movie franchises as seen with Universal's *Fast & Furious*, Legendary's *Monsterverse*, Warner Bros'. *DC Extended Universe*, and even the CW Network's *Arrowverse*, to name a few, reflects the industry's subtle attempt at replicating Disney's production model of shared universes—or when an episodic like narrative is created amongst multiple films produced under one studio—as seen in the Disney's successful theatrical releases of 23, and counting, Marvel films, Star Wars reboots and live-action remakes of old animated intellectual property (Aitichison; Dazed; Kearse; Stephen Follows). This level of influence, one which is capable of dictating the new production styles in the industry, is precisely what positions Disney into the hegemonic film category known as "first cinema", a model which is economically dominant in relation to the artisan and independent world of "second cinema" as well as the political aesthetics of "third cinema."

The segmentation of world cinema into first, second and third categories was conceived by Argentine filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino in their published work "Towards A Third Cinema". In this essay, they explain and criticize "first cinema" as a commercial model which reduces the film to a mere commodity, made to be bought by exhibitors and sold to audiences (Getino & Solanas 119; Comolli & Narboni 479). The artistic quality of first cinema is of little value as its only merit of success is box office receipts. (Bohas 31). "Second cinema" may not fully rebuke this profit-driven model but nonetheless possesses a higher level of artistic independence than first cinema. In this model, also known as "art cinema" or "auteurist cinema", the directors are granted a level of artistic freedom over a project which is commonly stripped away from filmmakers emerging from the studio system of first cinema (Getino & Solanas 120). Succeeding these two models is the revolutionary, anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist category of "third cinema".

It's questionable if third cinema is as relevant in the present as it was when Getino and Solans wrote in their late 1960s context. Third cinema of their time was heavily tied to global "third world" liberation and militant movements which not only rejected the system of capitalism and forces of imperialism, but also consciously abandoned the stylistic conventions of dominant cinema (Getino & Solanas 121). This model is depleting within the modern cinema landscape as first cinema, Hollywood films and the overbearingly monopolistic studio powers which produce them dominate the global film industry. Capitalism has now solidified itself as the global economic standard preventing the idea of any alternatives, whether expressed ideologically or artistically, from thriving and reaching the masses without barriers. Revolutionary or third cinema no longer has the space to thrive in a profit-driven film market forcing its definition, as

well as the other two tiers of cinema, to evolve. This prompted Michael Chanan's naming of "The Changing Geography of Third Cinema" a paper which engages with Getino and Solanas' infamous work and redefined their boundaries of third cinema beyond the third world (378).

The new categories of film, as Chanan writes, is a matter of the interests to which the films answer. Any film interested in "transnational capital", albeit a spectacle film or even amateur cinema, resides within the boundaries of first cinema. Second cinema has been reimaged from being purely artistic to being "often nihilist, pessimist, mystifactory" outlook (Chanan 379). Chanan imagines third cinema, lastly, as a category which longer has to be bound to "third world" liberation groups but as " a cinema of decolonization" one which is "anti-mythic, anti-racist, anti-bourgeois, and popular" (Chanan 379). If *Black Panther* were truly revolutionary, therefore, it would engage with these reimagined categorical functions of third cinema or perhaps even the narrative and stylistic variance of second cinema. Although its filmmakers and aficionados may imagine it resides within one of these categories, the idea of the film being "revolutionary" is seriously compromised by its $200 million budget and $1 billion wordlwide box office gross. Beyond its explicit interest in "transnational capital", The Walt Disney Company's commodification of *Black Panther's* afrofuturist iconography in addition to its monopolistic market share, and even in its endorsement of markets within the narrative undeniably places the film within the hegemonic category of first cinema.

Black Panther Commodified and Black Alternative Cinema

Bhayroo may not explicitly categorize *Black Panther* as "first cinema", but his article "Wakanda Rising" is keen on exposing the film as "a commodity that sustains the system that

produced it" (1). Beyond the theater or at home viewing, fans can continue to immerse

themselves in the world of *Black Panther* by buying "masks, action figures and collectables" as

well as "Marvel-related clothes, accessories, toys, home décor, videos and comics" (Bhayroo

14). Bhayroo notes how fully costumed *Black Panther* characters also appeared in a 2018 Super

Bowl Lexus car commercial a few weeks prior to the film's release (14). *Black Panther,*

therefore, was an attempt at celebrating blackness just as much as it was striving to perpetuate

and normalize consumerism and materialism. Despite these claims, a continuous thread within

"Wakanda Rising" argues the presence of afrofuturist imagery in *Black Panther* makes it an

"imperfect" counter hegemonic narrative. As Bhayroo writes:

> "Disney is marketing the character and the film Black Panther as a commodity but is also paradoxically marketing the accompanying narratives of Afrofuturism. The narratives of Afrofuturism are embedded in the film, in the themes of resistance and struggle against forces of dominance and exploitation". (Bhayroo 15)

Yet, as elaborated in the previous chapter, *Black Panther* does not possess any fleshed

out or complex narrative threads on the forces of "dominance and exploitation". Colonial history

in Africa is subdued and peripheralized, as are the impacts of systematic racism in America. The

only openly resistant character in the film is Erik Killmonger who is permanently silenced after

being killed in the film's climactic battle. *Black Panther* reinforces the "system" beyond

commodifications Bhayroo notes, but also by adopting the stylistic codes of Hollywood cinema.

Certainly the Afrocentric costumes and empowering Black characters of *Black Panther*

deviate from the Eurocentric images which populate mainstream cinema, but the film's

adherence to Hollywood style is present in its form. Its narrative unfolds almost entirely in a

linear fashion. The film implements continuity editing to combine its shots into sequences and

sequences into scenes. There is a clear main character, antagonist—both of which engage with

"good" and "evil" binaries inherent to the Hollywood narratives—and the film ends with a sense of closure eliminating any room for audience interpretation. The adoption of an "invisible" style is used to ensure full audience immersion and further construct the escapist reality it seeks to maintain. If audiences are coerced to view the film as mere escapist entertainment, they aren't induced to think about the diegetic world in relation to their own world either. The film's adherence to Hollywood style is not wholly the fault of its filmmakers but quite simply its inability to combat the conditions of the system it emerges from.

While the story may eclipse style in Hollywood cinema, box office receipts and businesses eclipses all (Bohas 25; Bhayroo 6; Shohat & Stam 7). The largest Black film ever made, therefore, would not have attempted to be too much of a stylistic deviation from the norm and risk compromising its now widely celebrated $1 global billion box office revenue. Arguably, if the filmmakers of *Black Panther* risked creating a film which was too stylistically unique from the dominant cinema, and flopped at the box office as a result, the chances of another Black film at *Black Panther's* scale being greenlit would be incredibly slim.

While *Black Panther* may have been a victim of the Hollywood production model, one which limits as much artistic freedom as possible, the filmmaker's voices were not entirely silenced in its creation. Much of the film's artistic expression is present in the costume design of Ruth E. Carter, art and production design which consciously sought to evoke images of Pan-Africanism and celebrate art of the Black world on a global platform. More precisely, one could argue the filmmakers of *Black Panther* were not outwardly seeking to "sustain the system" but were more so coerced into adopting its language, style and imagery in order to appease Disney's demands and provide the average film-goer with the homogenized content they're so

used to watching.

All contemporary films have to negotiate with the codes of dominant film form to thrive in the industry which is dictated by the box office. Even artisan and more independent projects such as *Moonlight* and *Belly*, two films which could be categorized as second cinema and consciously reject the styles and ideas *Black Panther* reinforces, also adopt the codes of mainstream film to varying degrees

Moonlight

Barry Jenkins' *Moonlight* chronicles the coming of age of Chiron, a young African American boy growing up in the inner city of Miami through three distinct chapters (Little, Chiron, and Black) as he struggles with his personal and sexual identity. *Moonlight* distinguishes itself from dominant cinema firstly in its low-budget production process. Unlike *Black Panther's* studio funded production of $200 million, *Moonlight* was made for an estimated low sum of $4 million in a joint partnership with Plan B Entertainment and A24 studio; the film was the latter studio's first ever production. Rising independent studio A24 is notorious for greenlighting low budget, artisan "slice-of-life" films for niche audiences which, of course, seek profitable box office returns to remain afloat but still have noted and shown their clear intention of preserving artistic expression in an era of escapist blockbusters. On the other hand, Disney-Marvel's high propensity for producing reboots, sequels and live action remakes of previously profitable intellectual properties is an indicator of the studio's little investment in original storytelling and pure interest in box office receipts. With its independent production background, Jenkins and the filmmakers of *Moonlight* were provided far more artistic leniency in terms of film form seen in dominant Hollywood cinema as well.

Moonlight's form creates a conscious alternative to stylistic conventions present in *Black Panther* which intend to immerse audiences through standard continuity editing. In *Black Panther* dialogue and character interactions are cut through standard shot-reverse-shot, invisible or continuity editing. This editing style effectively immerses audiences into the diegesis but also positions them as spectators who passively watch the film's events unfold. Contrastingly, Jenkins hardly relies on shot-reverse-shots and keeps edits to a minimum in *Moonlight*, instead choosing to have the camera capture exchanges in dialogue and events in long-takes that give us an intimate view of the black inner city and its inhabitants. The film's very first scene, where drug dealer Juan is introduced, illustrates the effects of its unique cinematographic style.

When Juan parks in front of the static camera and exits his car in the opening seconds of *Moonlight*, the standard Hollywood film would have cut at some point in-between his opening of the car and exiting of the vehicle. Instead the camera remains static, tracks Juan as he exits his vehicle and follows closely behind him as he makes his way across the street to a drug dealing partner.As the two of them attempt to keep a drug addict out of their conversation, the camera spirals around their exchanges of dialogue constantly reframing all three of them in view. This long-take effectively positions viewers as if they are walking to the block in inner city Miami and engaging with Juan's partner. Audiences are situated as if they are a fourth person in the scene as opposed to a passive spectator conventional shot-reverse-shot editing would have allowed. Consequently, rather than position the audience's relationship as a passive observer, Jenkins and cinematographer James Laxton situate viewers as a participant in the setting. As a result, the audience is being fully immersed within the physical environments as well as subjective worlds of people who society typically labels as criminals or "bad". The same groups

which are "othered" and implicitly silenced in *Black Panther* and *Lion King*, are empathized

with through cinematography in *Moonlight*. Lighting, sound and editing are also used in

unconventional ways to allow for an emotional connection with the characters in *Moonlight.*

  In a scene where Chiron is being yelled at by his crack-addicted mother, Paula, sound and

lighting are manipulated to externalize both characters' internal emotions. Shot-reverse-shot is

adopted, but the disjointed sound mixing in the scene deconstructs the standard use of this

editing style in order to convey the characters' subjective experiences. Both characters stand

facing each other but never share a frame. Paula's yells are muted and instead the classical music

from the non-diegetic score is played over her screams. A strong and surreal harsh red light is

emitted behind her illustrating her rage. The shots of Paula are taken at incredibly low angles

emulating the height and perspective of a kid Chiron. This entire sequence serves to not only

align us as Chiron but also situate the viewer in the uneasy state of living in an abusive

household. Several other scenes manipulate sound and editing to position us in various

characters' headspace.

  In another scene where Paula looks directly into the camera speaking to Chiron, the audio

is completely disjointed from the video. Here viewers are thrusted into the headspace of a

woman suffering from withdrawal but also introduced to the perspective of a fearful and

hopeless Chiron. These are a few of a dozen moments where cinematography, directing,

lighting, audio and editing are used to show viewers how it feels to live under the characters'

circumstances as opposed to telling them about these circumstances. These moments aren't only

deviants from the established stylistic codes of mainstream cinema, but vast departures in how

dominant cinema represents the Black working class as well.

By contrast, in *Black Panther* Oakland is presented with a monotonous tone and localized to a basketball court and apartment building. Similarly The Wasteland, the suggested "urban" world of *Lion King*, is devoid of life and depicted with a dark color scheme. These two Disney owned projects were interested in idealizing Wakanda and The Savannah over their bleak "inner-city" locales, while *Moonlight* is entirely situated in a working-class unnamed Miami community. The absence of an alternate locale to explore demonstrates the film's active rejection of the "good" and "evil" binary these two mainstream Disney films adopt. Jenkins' Miami has no interest in an "outside" or idealized world and even challenges the dreadful colors and low-lighting popular films often use to depict the inner-city with by using an incredibly polychromatic colour scheme. Hence, aesthetically, *Moonlight* suggests there isn't anything inherently "bad" with Chiron's lower-income community. Through this bright visual design, the characters in *Moonlight* are not immediately understood as "bad" either but more so as a product of their social circumstances.

The events which occur in Chiron's life throughout *Moonlight* are essentially the narrative details *Black Panther* obscured when handling Erik Killmonger's character. *Moonlight* shows how a young, innocent boy can transform into an adolescent filled with rage after years of enduring a hyper-masculine society and an abusive household. Chiron becomes the "thug", or "Black" as the third and final chapter is called, as a consequence of his neglected lower-income community which simply couldn't provide him with the necessary tools to pursue a different life. When a younger Chiron asks Juan "do you sell drugs?" for example, Juan looks to the floor struggling to say "yes". His character's actions are typically looked down upon in society as "criminal", but in *Moonlight* he is humanized, allowed a level of subjectivity and empathized

with. Juan isn't simply noted as "bad" for being a drug dealer but depicted as an ambiguous character whose actions are justified by his social circumstances. Unlike Killmonger, Chiron isn't simply angry for the sake of being angry but shown to be a product of these social circumstances as well. This active rejection of the binaristic categories of "good" and "evil" is precisely what makes *Moonlight* such an alternative to dominant or First Cinema. Its content also challenges the racial politics of mainstream cinema.

The stylistic conventions of Hollywood film, as mentioned, can be used as a tool to maintain and perpetuate the ruling ideas of a white-dominated society. In *Black Panther* and *Lion King,* film form is used to highlight and idealize a monarchical class above all else through the Wakandans and lions respectively. Oakland residents are not individualized and the city is presented identically across three decades, with young kids playing basketball in a courtyard. The insinuated inner-city of The Wasteland is simply depicted as a locale where the villians emerge. Jenkins' Miami, however, is presented with the spatial diversity of Wakanda and The Savannah. By doing so the film rejects the flattened depictions Black and inner-city communities are limited to in mainstream film. *Black Panthe*r and *Lion King* demonize and flatten these communities, whereas *Moonlight* humanizes them. This multi-faceted and humanized exploration of an underclass directly challenges the bourgeois class that mainstream films, such as the two Disney films analyzed, are so adamant in presenting as ideal. Dominant ideals of sexuality and gender are also consciously challenged in *Moonlight*.

The film features a complex commentary on gender and sexuality, demonstrating how these two categories are socially constructed through Chiron's story . In *Black Panther* heternormative relationships are normalized as is the patriarchal society where female warriors,

despite how empowering their images are, fight for men. In *Lion King* these relationships and

systems are also normalized and homosexuality, as insinauted throw Scar's character, is othered.

Moonlight, on the other hand, concludes its narrative with Chiron finally celebrating his

homosexual identity. Despite the active rejections of dominant ideology, *Moonlight* still exists

within the esteemed category of second cinema or art film. One which still is produced and

disseminated in a capitalist industry, even though it may question the ideals of that very society,

but is appreciated by a high-class art world. In her analysis of *Moonlight*, Gates writes:

> Moonlight was a critical darling, but more than that, Moonlight was a resoundingly
> serious film, as evidenced by its acclaim at such prestigious (i.e., white) events as
> the Telluride Film Festival and the Academy Awards. (41)

Although it may not negotiate with the dominant stylistic forms of Hollywood cinema,

Gates argues *Moonlight* negotiates with the dominant culture through its run of predominantly

white film festivals and award ceremonies. Gates, thus, introduces Hype Williams' late-90s

project *Belly*, as a film which challenges the stylistic codes of mainstream films and was both

rejected and neglected by the dominant (white) film culture she highlights *Moonlight* engages

with.

Belly

Belly is a gangster film about the underground world of crime and drugs in New York

City. This now cult project was directed by Hype Williams, who solely had experience helming

music videos, and starred rappers DMX and Nas. Unlike the uber-successful and acclaimed

Black Panther and *Moonlight, Belly* was both a commercial and critical bomb. *Moonlight* was

made for about $1 million more than Williams' project, but grossed a whopping $65 million

worldwide in comparison to *Belly's* $9 million worldwide gross (Box-Office Mojo). Gates

argues the dissimilar critical receptions of both films, is credited to the different worlds of

cinema they engage with. *Moonlight* was validated, as she writes, through its "appreciation by

predominantly white critics and highbrow institutions" while *Belly* was predominantly praised by

casual Black American film-goers (Gates 41). Still, *Belly* challenges dominant representations of

Black inner-city communities similar to *Moonlight*, but diverges from Jenkins' film by

challenging the conventional or more accepted means of making a film by featuring non-actors

and a director who did not receive formal education at a film school. Regardless of its

unorthodox production and poor critical reception, Belly challenges the dominant images of

poverty, Black people and lower-income communities with the same level of complexity as

Moonlight. A few standout scenes demonstrate how Williams' film attempts to be

counter-hegemonic.

    Belly opens with a heavy stylized montage of our main characters entering a strip club.

The club music is substituted for an acoustic version of "Back to Life" by Soul II Soul as DMX

and Nas walk through the neon tinted locale. The whites in their eyes are accentuated as they

walk through the club and occasionally take notice of the half naked female strippers. The

montage includes short splices of bodyguards, clubbers, stacks of cash, and concludes with the

main characters acquiring a stash of weapons in a bathroom and killing the club owners. They

run away with their money and the story of the film is kicked into place. This scene seemingly

sets the tone of *Belly* which continuously features degrading images of the female body for the

male gaze, praises money in music-video esque shots of money stacks and features several

scenes which glorify violent actions. Given the pervasiveness of these images it's quite easy to

dismiss *Belly* as a film with images which challenges dominant ideology. However, the film's third act not only consciously denounces these images but also features an explicit narrative thread mainly featuring DMX which exposes the criminal justice system's internal corruption.

DMX's character Buns is shown throughout the course of the film as descending deeper into the crime world, and his actions eventually result in his imprisonment. The scene succeeding Buns' spontaneous release features an uncut wide shot of him and a hooded, older White man playing basketball on opposite sides of the court. The man approaches Buns, reveals himself as an FBI agent and presents him with a "choice" to obtain freedom. In the scene's first edit, another long-take captures Buns and the agent sitting together at a bench near the basketball courts. The agent informs Buns he must kill a man who goes by the name of "The Minister" on New Year's Eve or else face life in prison. The following and final scene featuring the operative continues to present the operative as a mysterious figure.

When Buns is shown riding in a vehicle with the operative moments before his murder attempt the agent remains submerged in the darkness for the duration of the shot. His figure remains hidden even when the red of a stop light engulfs his face—a lighting choice which externalizes his, and the FBI's, corrupt intentions. This defacement of the operative for the duration of his screen time is the film's way of illustrating how he isn't an individual but representative of the collective body of the FBI. *Belly* effectively voices its disapproving stance on the FBI through the wide-shots and low-lighting which not only conceal the operative's identity but also are stylistic tools which illustrate the organization's internal corruption. Further, this narrative tract serves to expose the FBI as a menacing and coercive body which destabilizes Black people and communities—a depiction quite defiant of the harmless images of the bureau

that popular film and television perpetuate. The film's very last sequence successfully denounces this government body as well as the avariciousness, criminal actions, violence and the mistreatment of women our characters were seen endorsing throughout the narrative.

When Buns confronts The Minister at his "World's Day of Reckoning" gathering, the event is revealed to be a harmless and religious celebration of a new year and new millenia. One of the speakers preceding The Minister is simply attempting to spread love and peace to an auditorium filled with Black people. During his speech, Buns makes it to a room where The Minister has been supposedly expecting his arrival. Most of the space is engulfed in dark lighting and only illuminated through a few small incandescent lamps. Just as Buns reveals his intentions, The Minister descends into a monologue questioning Buns' motivations and the state of Black America. To quote the most notable portion of his words:

> The truth is, we all play a grave role...in our own destruction. Your money. Your lifestyles. The things that people value and covet so dearly...are the bait that lures them out of the light. Through the love of others...I have power. The truth gives me this. Those that fear me send you here, here to murder all that I say. They use what you fear against you. Your fear of death, your fear of imprisonment. (Genius)

His monologue is captured in a montage intercutting between closeups of his face, Buns anxiously holding a gun, previous scenes of the film and unseen footage of silhouetted Black people. Instead of leaving the violent and greedy actions to be interpreted by the audience, the film's reinsertion of previously used shots is the film's way of actively condemning the characters' actions.The use of unused shots featuring the defaced Black youth are seemingly a stand in for Black viewers. The Minister's words, hence, function as a life lesson for Buns but also break the fourth-wall as they are attempting to reach the mind of the audience. The use of "your money", "your lifestyle" is a denouncement of Buns' actions but also our/the audience's

money and lifestyles. The "those" in "Those that fear me...They use what you fear against you. Your fear of death, your fear of imprisonment" are addressing the FBI and possibly the U.S. government as a whole. The Minister, and the film therefore, are actively criticizing these institutions and revealing how they are corrupting the inner consciousness of Black people and are instrumental in the deconstruction of Black neighborhoods and killings of Black thinkers. Finally, a series of fast cuts depicting the degrading images of women across the film are said over the words, "Help me to stop the slaughter of our children. Help me to put an end to the disrespect...and the dishonor of our most valuable resource: the black women". These last words of the monologue are consciously denouncing these images of women, in particular black women, and pushing the characters and audiences to think of women in a respectful manner. It is in this last scene where *Belly* reveals the counter-hegemonic intentions which were absent in *Black Panther*.

The dark images of the FBI in *Belly* directly opposes the harmless and even campy representation of the CIA in *Black Panthe*r. In the former film, the agency is exposed for its negative impact on Black communities while *Black Panther* engages with more familiar representations of these government bodies by presenting the CIA as holistic, resourceful, friendly and helpful. *Black Panther* is disinterested with Oakland and presents a watered-down exploration of racism in America while *Belly* navigates the inner-city in a harsh, realistic and honest manner—hence the name *Belly* which refers to its deep exploration of inner-city life. *Black Panther* simply presents Oakland as poor and Killmonger as angry while *Belly* shows the root of poverty, corruption and anger. Lastly, money and capital are idealized through T'Challa's outreach program whilst The Minister in *Belly* is attempting to shift public aspirations of wealth

and voluptuous living in favor of "thoughtfulness and spirituality" as he says. Money may have benefited Oakland, but so might have a spiritual exchange with the residents who are culturally and spiritually severed from Africa. By questioning the value of money, its material value that is, *Belly* challenges the profit-driven system of capitalism *Black Panther* subtly upholds in its conclusion. Williams' film is more so the "revolutionary" project *Black Panther* sought and failed to be. When considering box office returns, then, why is it that more people seem to buy into the "revolution" of *Black Panther* more than *Belly* or even the art-house revolution of *Moonlight*?

CONCLUSION: LEARNING TO QUESTION THE IMAGE

It's clear that all four films analyzed in this thesis (*The Lion King, Black Panther, Moonlight* and *Belly*) had aspirations of representing Black people and issues of racism to varying degrees. While the *Lion King* presented an idea of Africa that was a careless amalgamation of various African cultures, the other three films all attempted to celebrate or represent Black people, or people of African descent, in a unique or non-mainstream way. Clearly this is present in *Black Panther* through its Pan-Africanist iconography, in the artistic exploration of Black inner-city life in *Moonlight*, and in the unorthodox filmmaking style and descendant of the crime-world in *Belly*. Where these three films diverge from each other is in how they represent their protagonists and the spaces they occupy, but seemingly popular criticism of these projects, and mainstream film criticism today, seems to focus less on the "how" and tend to praise the fact that the image exists in the first place.

Black Panther is a prime example of this hyperbolization of the Black image in the media

(Gates 43) . Most hail the film simply for its visual representation of Pan-African aesthetics and how seemingly variant it is from blockbusters and superhero movies because it's all, or nearly, Black-produced. But as this thesis has attempted to show, Coogler's film is hardly different from mainstream film in terms of both content and form. Its story, as highlighted in the first chapter, is strikingly similar to *The Lion King*'s as it follows a young king (Simba and T'Challa) who fights a difficult path to leadership after the death of his father (Mufasa and T'Chaka) and struggles with the ideologies of his uncle and or cousin (Scar and N'Jobu/N'Jadaka).

Viewers' and critics' fascination with the image renders them oblivious to the reality that they've seen *Black Panther* 22 times before in the other Marvel Cinematic entries. Culture critic Harri Sergeant effortlessly breaks down the formula Marvel uses for all of its films, *Black Panther* included. 1) There is a powerful item (Vibranium), 2) "the first battle" (T'Challa vs M'Baku), 3) "inner turmoil" (The familial conflict between T'Challa and Killmonger), 4) "the seccond battle" (T'Challa vs Killmogner), 5) "the final showdown" (T'Challa vs Killmonger part 2) and 6) "cameo performances, plugs, post-credits (*Black Panthe*r ends with a "plug" to the next Marvel movie "Infinity War") (Sargeant). The consumer's inability to see *Black Panther* as a recycled narrative perhaps lies in the workings of a movie industry under capitalism. Just as capitalism is said to offer consumers an illusion of choice, the capitalistic industry of Hollywood offers film-goers an illusion of actually unique stories. What is important to consider, especially to those who are adamant in championing Black stories, is to not get caught up in the image but to constantly question the politics behind the image.

Stam and Shohat perhaps devise the most profound way of questioning representations of marginalized groups in media beyond surface level interest with the image in their work

"Unthinking Eurocentrism". In relation to the image they question:

> "Who is speaking through a film? Who is imagined as listening? Who is actually listening? Who is looking? And what social desires are mobilized by the film?" (205)

Moreover, they continuously question the representation of the image through elements of film form by asking,

> "How much space do they occupy in the shot? Are they seen in close-ups or only in distant long shots? How often do they appear compared with the Euro-American characters and for how long? Are they active, desiring characters or decorative groups? Do the eyeline matches identify us with one gaze rather than another?" (208).

To build off their thoughts in relation to Black characters one could consider, as this paper has, the following questions. How are black characters represented in relation to one another in the film? How are the spaces they occupy represented in relation to each other? Are we privy to their headspace or subjectivity? Do we align with certain Black characters over others? Are there "good" and "bad" Black characters, and if so, what is at stake in the film's production of this binary? These are the questions which result in us becoming infatuated with Killmonger's *blackness* and prevent us from understanding the problematic aspects of his representation. These are the questions which prompt us to not dismiss a character for being a thug, but actually question if this character is being presented with a level of multi-dimensionality absent from stereotypical representation, as seen with Chiron and the characters of *Belly*. Questioning the politics underlying the image challenges the rising notion of representation for the sake of representing. What good is 12%— the percentage of Blacks in America— of Hollywood characters being Black if they are all represented like Killmonger and Oakland in *Black Panther* as subordinate to T'Challa and Wakanda?

This thesis is in no way suggesting films of first cinema are worse than the art house or unorthodox films of *Moonlight* and *Belly* which negotiate with the categories of second and possibly even third cinema. These categories were introduced to determine whether the films analyzed reinforced dominant styles of filmmaking along with reinforcing the "ruling ideas" explored in the first chapter. Discerning if the films adhered to both, neither, or only one of the dominant forces (ideological and cinematic) was integral to answering the more profound questions of the image explored above. When Shohat and Stam ask, for example, "what social desires are mobilized by the film?", we can answer in the case of *Black Panther*, that it is a product of dominant ideology and dominant cinema, and that the film mobilizes the desire of high-class living and a wealthy Black world as opposed to a poor and inner-city Black world as analyzed through its form and content. But not all films of first cinema necessarily mobilize these desires. Various Hollywood films are able to use the industry as a platform for alternative stories, as in the case of Jordan Peele's *Get Out* which is an honest examination of our so-called post-racial society. Thus, it's far less about the tier of cinema a film hails from and more so about the way in which it adheres to or challenges the conventions, stylistic or ideological, of mainstream film.

Lastly, this thesis is not interested in classifying capitalist films as "bad" and anti-capitalist films as "good". Doing so would have been hypocritical as it succumbs to the various binaries critiqued in these very pages. However radical it may have posed, the intentions of this work were not to spread anti-capitalist sentiment, although present, but more so to push the standard understanding of cinema into a more complex direction. With these few dozen pages in mind, this thesis wishes that the next time you visit the cinema or watch a movie at

home you continue to enjoy yourself but understand the diegetic world presented to you not as abstract but as tools which reproduce, to varying degrees, ruling ideas and perceptions of specific systems and social groups respectively. This work desires you to continue your love for watching film and is excited for those who possibly embark in a newfound appreciation for cinema and film form. If it is within your best intentions to become a scholar of cinema or even use the art-form as a tool to learn about the experience of a group you wish to become an ally of or learn more of a specific culture, which the best films are capable of doing, this thesis hopes you manage to escape into those new worlds but with the growing ability to consciously question the images of the groups in question, as flattering and enticing as it may be, and question what/who is being presented in front of you and how. With this in mind, I am confident that you will use your skills in analyzing cinema and translate them to the real world where you can continue to challenge and question the systems we have in place for the betterment of an individual, community and culture you care deeply for.

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