Dialectics of tradition and memory in Black Panther

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Abstract

This is one of a series of film reviews of *Black Panther* (2018), directed by Ryan Coogler.

Keywords

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Black Panther tells the story of T'Challa (Chadwick Boseman), the crown prince of Wakanda who must take the throne after his father T'Chaka's death (in *Captain America: Civil War*). T'Challa has already been wearing the mantle of the Black Panther: his superhuman capacity is provided by a combination of shamanic ritual (ingesting the heart-shaped herb) and technology (his vibranium suit). The Black Panther's work in the world is made possible by these two forces. T'Challa's ascendency as monarch is interrupted by the arrival of Erik Stevens (Michael B. Jordan) – AKA Killmonger, AKA N'Jadaka, son of N'Jobu. Killmonger is T'Challa's cousin, and also the film's main villain.

The film opens with an animated sequence: N'Jobu tells his young son the story of Wakanda, a place that to the child sounds like a myth, a "fairy tale." N'Jobu explains how the five tribes of Wakanda fought amongst each other until they were united under the Black

Panther, whose power was bestowed by the goddess Bast via a warrior-shaman. In the next scene, we see Erik playing basketball in an Oakland parking lot, circa 1992, while upstairs in their apartment, N'Jobu is about to have a confrontation with T'Chaka. That encounter leaves Erik fatherless, alone, and traumatized, growing up in poverty with only the myth of Wakanda to sustain him.

A core element of the superhero film genre, and especially of the Marvel Cinematic Universe films, is the rather Hegelian dialectical movement between superhero and villain. Every superhero film plays with this relation in one way or another – the negation of the negation, and then an evitable synthesis in which the hero, now changed in some deep way by the encounter, prevails. *Black Panther* is no exception to this model, but the dialectic here operates in a different and complex way, in part because of its unprecedented intersectionality with other dialectical expressions of gender, race, class, and tradition. In the proliferation of think pieces responding to the film, several writers have suggested that Erik Killmonger is a sympathetic villain, or even its tragic hero. For these viewers, T'Challa is an unsatisfactory hero. His commitment to liberal elitism and protectionist politics shapes his diametrical opposition to Killmonger, who sees himself as a revolutionary savior of the people. While their opposition is obviously political, it is also shaped by tradition and its loss.

T'Challa's world is structured from birth by access to Wakandan tradition. There are required actions – rituals that must be performed, ancestors respected, beliefs and practices maintained. As the new king, he understands that this is the way he must lead; this is why, for example, we see him wearing sandals on his first day as king, to the chagrin of his stylish and irreverently modern sister Shuri. T'Challa's initiation ritual on Challenge Day includes a visit to the ancestral plane where he can access his own memories and, it seems, the collective memory

of his Panther ancestors. Killmonger, in contrast, grows up without this access to memory or to tradition. His father, his only connection to Wakanda, is dead. He has no one to initiate him into rituals, no ancestors to call upon – no one, it seems, but the American military, who initiate him into the murderous tradition of American imperialism. As a child of diaspora, he has no access to the collective memory of Wakanda. He finds a kinship in this respect with others "that look like us"—Black diaspora people around the world who are also dislocated from memory and from power.

Killmonger's mission as an adult is to find a way to Wakanda, though his objectives once there are confused—he wants to claim his birthright and rule over it, but he also wants to use its power to bring down white supremacy around the world. His arrival in Wakanda is a literal disruption of tradition: he murders the shaman (Zuri/Uncle James), and he burns the garden of the heart-shaped herb. These are acts of irrevocable violence to tradition. Killmonger makes abundantly clear that he will destroy anyone who gets in his way (including his own lover), but this does not come without cost. As we see when he confronts T'Challa, those killings have become a kind of ritual for him; he has fashioned a tradition for himself. Each time he kills, he records it on his body with a scar. While it's easy to see him as a ruthless killer, this ritual of remembering each life he takes seems important; he carries that burden on his body, and the scars are a reminder of what it has cost him. His body is memory. T'Challa's body, healed miraculously each time it is injured through the power of the heart-shaped herb and vibranium-science, remains unscarred by the moral weight of his actions.

In their climactic fight scene, T'Challa stabs Killmonger. Later, telling T'Challa that he will do what his ancestors did and choose death over chains, he pulls out the spearhead, precipitating his own death. In making this choice, he allows T'Challa to remain metaphorically

unscarred. The dialectical negation is left un-negated. In the film's denouement, T'Challa admits that perhaps Wakanda could stand to be more open and liberal, though his strategy is to share Wakanda with the world, rather than the other way around. This is meant to be the dialectic's synthesis as per the superhero film model, but the argument remains crucially unresolved. Will Wakanda's traditions and rituals, its monarchy, its insular elitism, remain? To turn away from Hegel to a more Adornian reading of the film, I think that the incomplete dialectic between hero and villain, and indeed between tradition and iconoclasm, is what makes this film so compelling.

In this regard, I suggest that an interesting third term in the argument might be found in the character of M'Baku (Winston Duke). In the comics, M'Baku is a villain ('Man-Ape'). In the film he is an antagonist but not necessarily a villain. He is king of the Jabari, the only tribe of Wakanda that does not follow Bast (instead, intriguingly they pray to Hanuman). They pride themselves on the things they fashion out of wood and bone rather than vibranium, and they resent the wealth and elitism of the Wakandan monarchy. While Wakanda prides itself on memory, the Jabari are its own forgotten people.

M'Baku challenges T'Challa to ritual combat at the beginning of the film on Challenge Day. He taunts Shuri, "a child" who disrespects tradition, and criticizes Wakandan reliance on technology. When he knocks T'Challa down, he shouts at him: "Where is your god now?" But since he respects tradition, he is an honorable opponent who yields when he must and can be trusted to keep his word. M'Baku is an interesting foil to both T'Challa and Killmonger. He is arguably more traditional than T'Challa, but he is also more truly revolutionary than Killmonger: he actually leads a revolt against the Wakandan monarch first, with the support of the people. When that same king later asks him for the aid of his army, he refuses, saying that he will not give up his people's lives for T'Challa's fight and his Wakandan nationalism.

But M'Baku and the Jabari nonetheless arrive on the battlefield at the film's climax. The conflict at this point is defined by gender. The Dora Milaje guard, all women, have turned against Killmonger and are fighting him.[1] W'Kabi, once T'Challa's friend, leads an army of men in support of Killmonger. In different ways, all of them have had an agonizing choice between 'tradition' and their own vision of Wakanda's place in the world. M'Baku arrives to fight alongside the Dora Milaje and brings with him an army that includes both men and women. In the denouement, we also see that he has joined T'Challa's council. A character entrenched in 'tradition' here shows himself willing to challenge or disrupt it for the sake of the people. Thus, while the T'Challa-Killmonger dialectic is unresolved, M'Baku interrupts it by challenging other characters' conceptions of tradition, honor, and revolution.

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[1] Though I do not have space to address it here, it is worth noting that another, related dialectical movement takes place between Okoye, the upholder of tradition who wants to be loyal to the throne, Shuri the irreverent young scientist, and the spy Nakia – women who are grappling with tradition and change.