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Black Panther: African Responsibility, Diasporic Yearning,
One Confession, Three Spoilers (maybe more) and

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So much quasi-hysterical hype! Does the film live up to all the brouhaha?

We all know that Hollywood movies set in Africa most often feature white characters with African landscapes, animals and people as mere backdrop to the real action: whatever the white people are doing. Usually, the African

backdrop is ahistorical and totally devoid of political and socio-cultural context. Black characters are at best one-dimensional sidekicks but most often nameless victims of incomprehensible violence - Don't worry, though, the white people will rescue them from all of that. The white savior is a trope we have seen and seen and seen another hundred times in various avatars (including in the movie, Avatar. Good news, Africans, now China is getting into the game with the film, Wolf Warrior II, in which a Chinese guy saves Africans).

So is that why black people around the world are soooooooo excited, thrilled, delighted, over the moon about Black Panther which turns several of these conventions on their head?   Are black people so hungry for this film because we live in a world in which presidents of powerful countries – and not just any old president but a president who is a very stable genius - can describe the entire continent of Africa as a "sh*thole"?

Spoiler: Black Panther starts with an all too real contemporary political reality, referencing the Chibok girls kidnapped in 2014 by Boko Haram in Nigeria. In the film, these girls are rescued by the black heroes who swoop down in their fancy spaceships. In real life, 2018, as the film is playing in theatres around the world, Boko Haram has struck again, abducting 110 schoolgirls in northern Nigeria. I will leave it to Nigerian colleagues to comment on the pro's and con's of the choice to start the film in a real African country even though the majority of the action subsequently takes place in fictional Wakanda with side trips to the US, South Korea, Austria etc.

The fictional African country of Wakanda is - spoiler alert – most decidedly not a "sh*thole" nor a "Third World" country of farmers eking out an existence on recalcitrant soil. No, that's just the cover story or in this case, cover soil. If you fly through some sort of portal in one of the Star Wars-type Wakandan spaceships, you will find yourself in the high-tech, uber-modern but brightly hued utopia of the real Wakanda, uncolonized, unbowed, unbroken and unknown to the world outside.

Is that why the film is so adored by black people, young and old, because of the idea that there is this hidden technotopia where we have conquered science in ways that white countries cannot even imagine?

So popular is this film that I was advised before leaving for the theatre that I was in no way, form or fashion to criticize it afterwards lest I offend. Additionally, I was told to change out of my gym clothes (I was tired and not in the mood to dress up) because we had to go to the theatre in brightly-colored fashions and dramatic jewellery a la fictional Wakanda (This comrade from Kenya did not get the memo and has produced this searing critique, most of which I secretly agree with but shhhh...don't tell anyone!) With so many restrictions on my right to express my opinion and my

fashion choices, I was hardly in the mood to go to the film at all...

 ...So, here's my confession, there are several reasons I am not the best person to write a film review in general and of this film in particular. Most movies bore me because they're too predictable and about twenty minutes in I desperately want to escape. Worse, a few days before going, I found out that actress Danai Gurira was starring in the film. Many years ago, we were at the same junior school in Zimbabwe when she was known as Didi. I don't like to watch movies with people whom I know from real life so during the film I kept getting the sense I was watching a school play (although one with a massive budget). I went along, despite all these caveats, because I was curious to see if the audience in a black-majority country (albeit in a deluxe theatre in a white-majority mall) would respond to the movie as ecstatically as audiences had been in western countries.

The audience was excited to see the film but then again, it was a theatre that served wine, so you know...I was happy to see Didi and the other women characters looking so fabulous, fierce and fit as fearsome female warriors who are also feminists. Dark-skinned beauty was fully on display and this is always important but twenty minutes in, it had already become clear that this was another epic fundamentally about heterosexual men – fathers and sons, uncles and cousins. The female characters were unusually powerful and independent (kudos!) but the male intrigue of – spoiler alert: patriarchal kings physically wrestling for the crown - was the film's nerve center. But yebo, a Hollywood movie set in Africa with black characters and a mostly black cast...so we should still uncritically celebrate that, right?

Even if we take off our 3-D glasses and put them back on again, Black Panther is not really a mould-breaking, progressive movie. It's a movie that puts black characters in roles that white characters have long dominated but it's pretty old school dynamics overall. It was notable that there were only really two white characters. Movie audiences have reportedly roared with delight when one of them is addressed as "Colonizer" but yet, that same character – a white American man who is a CIA agent – is portrayed as innocuous, even lovable, and definitely always on the right side. A very bizarre portrayal of the CIA.
It is in moments like these that Black Panther's dedication to pure fantasy becomes clear. In the real world, CIA agents are constantly meddling in African countries with just as much gusto as the Russians interfere in the American elections.

The other white man was the baddie, a white South African who someone told me was played by an Irish guy. Well done, Irishman, you aced the accent! The white South African bad guy though was just as irredeemably clichéd as the black American character, they both fit every worst stereotype. Erik Killmonger expressed himself in overwrought Ebonics so assiduously it seemed the filmmaker was afraid we wouldn't get that he was an American from the

"ghetto." And I will never understand why all the actors, Africans and non-Africans alike, decided to speak in "African" accents that were so inauthentic and regionally nondescript. The only one that was believable was a character who adopted a Nigerian accent (but apparently the actor is actually Trinidadian – well done, dude!). Interesting that the film used the beautiful isiXhosa language as the Wakandan language instead of the usual Swahili or made-up gibberish. Now, Xhosa is not an easy language to pronounce if you're not a native speaker so I will leave it to my South African colleagues to comment on how well the actors did or didn't do.

Ultimately, the fundamental question posed by Black Panther speaks to an age-old dilemma: the relationship between Africa and its diaspora. What should it be? What does Africa owe its diaspora? Should African countries, presuming they could, give aid to African descenadants in the US, Brazil, Saudi Arabia, wherever those of African blood are battling against racism and oppression? Should Africa welcome home its diaspora and embrace them with open arms? What does the diaspora owe the "motherland"?   Countee Cullen's famous poem, Heritage, from the 1920s, poses the question:

One three centuries removed
From the scenes his fathers loved,
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
What is Africa to me?

It's a question the diaspora has been asking for a long time but in Black Panther, Africa is also forced to ask what responsibility she has for the diaspora. The film has been convincingly described as a love letter to the African diaspora and especially those in North America. It explores the relationship between Africa and the (American) diaspora through the complex character of Erik Killmonger - spoiler alert - a lost son of Wakanda, whose aforementioned, indefatigable Ebonics sometimes obscures the point that he originated in the "ghetto" but then grew up in the US military where he acquired his murderous habits and perhaps, his desire for imperial hegemony.

Africa as the mythological, magically-powerful homeland is an oft-repeated trope in creative work produced in the diaspora because diasporic yearning for a redemptive land that can teach those white-majority countries that Africa is really an amazing place is so strong. It is stunning that over so many decades, as the world changes and the plight of black people supposedly improves, that the diasporic yearning for an Africa that can rescue them from all the negative stereotypes that paint blacks as inferior still beats so forcefully that it can produce Black Panther.

In 1902, shortly after the first conference on Pan-Africanism, Pauline E. Hopkins' Of One Blood appeared in serial form in the Colored American Magazine. In 2001, almost a hundred years later, Tananarive Due published

The Living Blood, a story strikingly similar to Hopkins' supernatural tale in which African American characters return to a magical Africa replete with secret "Ethiopian" cities and immortal Africans carrying on an ancient, glorious civilization. Hopkins had made a conscious effort to employ the techniques of mass market fiction so that her attempt to "assert a Pan-African history" would reach as many readers as possible. Similarly, Due's novel is more in tune with "popular" tastes than literary fiction but more importantly, does the century that lies between them - the century not only of Pan-Africanism but the Harlem Renaissance, the négritude movement, the anticolonial struggles, the civil rights movement and the anti-apartheid struggle - result in a transformation in the diasporic yearning for a redemptive Africa?

Black Panther, almost two decades later, still joins this long tradition of imagining an Africa that doesn't exist. Maybe that's why Reginald McKnight's dystopic short story, Palm Wine, remains one of my favorite short stories of all time. It tells the story of Bertrand, an African American anthropologist who is in Senegal collecting proverbs in order to finish his dissertation which he fails to do, partly because he has to reckon with a genuine African reality - politically, historically and socio-culturally complex, nuanced, granulated.

But then again, Black Panther is a fantasy film based on a comic book so how should we evaluate it? It imagines an Africa that has long won the Modernity Game, leaving all other contenders behind. I have written elsewhere about why even agreeing to play this Game – we have the most superior technology, we have the highest skyscrapers, we have the most modern infrastructure – is already a defeat. Why play a Game whose rules were made by someone else? The Modernity Game originated in the West and employs Western values and standards to determine who is winning and who is losing.

Does the film live up to the hype? You judge for yourself, why don't you, but choose the values and standards by which you judge it very carefully.

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