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ARTICLE



## 'Did He Freeze?': Afrofuturism, Africana Womanism, and Black Panther's Portrayal of the Women of Wakanda

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### ABSTRACT

Some have viewed the internationally acclaimed blockbuster hit, the *Black Panther* film, as feminist; meanwhile, others have highlighted its aspects of African culture focusing on its traditional elements and Afrofuturistic aspects. One of the main characters, Actress Lupita Nyong'o, who played Nakia said that *Black Panther* signifies a balanced representation of women and men, and she later alluded to feminism as she explained the balanced idyllic gender representation between the sexes. This study found that the roles of the leading women characters in this Afrofuturistic film—the top characters were derived from the IMDB's list—represented Africana womanism. The women at the heart of this study are warriors including Nakia, a War Dog of Wakanda; Okoye, the first lieutenant of the *Dora Milaje* and Ayo, a member; Princess Shuri, the head of Wakanda's technological division; the Queen Mother of Wakanda, Ramonda, who was King T'Challa and Princess Shuri's mother; and the *Merchant Tribe Elder* and the *Mining Tribe Elder* of the *Wakandan Tribal Council*. The egalitarian relationship between the women and the men in the film, and the representation of the women, showed a revisioning of African history in the recreation of an Afrofuturistic present. Thereby, the women's portrayal emerged from the wider egalitarian Wakandan society, which depicted a mythological African utopian nation, and yet, simultaneously reignited an African historical reality.

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The superhero science fiction film, *Black Panther*, which was directed by Ryan Coogler, grossed over a billion dollars globally and has been described by some as feminist (Harris, 2018; Spencer, 2018), while others focus on its Afrofuturistic components, considering it to include a hodgepodge of traditional African cultural elements (Sere et al., 2020). A New York Times article suggested that the film portrayed 'a futuristic African alternate reality – made up of diverse tribes and untouched by colonizers' (Ryzik, 2018) – ultimately showing an African utopia, also known by its racially-specific reference, a Blacktopia. Sere et al. (2020) described the African imagery in the film including a 'representation of African civilization through a symbol of vibranium, cultural ritual, [and] traditional costume.' Meanwhile, others concentrated on the representation of women. Harris (2018) said, '[T] his comic book movie might dare to become arguably the most feminist example of its

kind to date.' *Black Panther* Actress Lupita Nyong'o said that *Black Panther* signifies a balanced representation of women and men, and she later alluded to feminism as she explained the balanced idyllic gender representation between the sexes:

[Women are] allowed to realize their full potential alongside the men; and the men are not threatened by the power of the women, that the powers are complementary ... So it's a real lesson for the real world. The feminist struggle is not to strip men of their power, it's a struggle for equality. (ABC News, 2018)

Spencer (2018) said in her popular *Medium* article called, *Black Feminist Meditations on the Women of Wakanda*, 'I asked myself how could a Black feminist lens enrich the vibrant conversations about the political meaning and historical resonance of this film?'

*Black Panther* has had such a wide-spreading reach – earning almost one and a half billion dollars internationally (The Walt Disney Company, 2018) – that it has become crucial to understand its ideology. Furthermore, *Black Panther* has been described as a celebration of Black culture (Johnson, 2018), making it highly important to assess the various aspects of this film.

### **Africana womanism and the women of Wakanda**

This analysis incorporated Africana womanism as a framework for understanding the film's portrayal of women. Womanism was first used by Alice Walker (Glass, 2017), and it was theorized by Clenora Hudson-Weems. It was utilized as the ideal gendered approach to studying the representation of African women in *Wakanda*, rather than Intersectionality. Intersectionality stresses the importance of recognizing the interplay of race, class, and gender on women's lives, yet Africana womanism does not center in on socioeconomic class and instead considers the predominating influence of traditional African culture on Black women's behavior, making it ideally suitable for this study. The women under investigation comprise of the top characters in the film, and since they are the leaders of *Wakanda* and are either royalty themselves or are dealing directly with royalty, socioeconomic class is not a distinguishing factor in determining the differences or similarities in their portrayal – in fact, all these women are the elite of *Wakanda*. Further, Africana womanism was utilized because of its grounding in Africana culture, and because of its delineation of an egalitarian relationship between African women and men, making it well suited for this Afrofuturistic film. Further, this film's incorporation of black actresses and actors from all throughout Africa and the African diaspora, exposes its Pan-African orientation, or its centeredness in Africa along with its imbedded message for African unity.

Africana womanism is an Afrocentric theory that enables the researcher to investigate women of African descent from an African cultural standpoint instead of a European one. According to Sofola (2020), 'As a race, the most painful part of our experience with the Western world is the "dewomanization" of women of African descent.' She continues, 'Africana Womanism strongly makes the point that the Eurocentric definition of woman is alien and destructive to the woman of African heritage' (p. xii). Although, in an Afrofuturistic nation, the women adhere to positive traditional African values. Hudson-Weems described how Africana womanism is different from all the other attempts at theorizing women's experiences:

*Africana Womanism* is an ideology created and designed for all women of African descent. It is grounded in African culture, and therefore, it necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs, and desires of Africana women . . . The conclusion is that *Africana Womanism* and its agenda are unique and separate from both White feminism and Black feminism, and moreover, to the extent of naming in particular, *Africana Womanism* differs from African feminism. (Hudson-Weems, 2020, p. 15)

Africana womanism's descriptors were used as a guide in critiquing *Black Panther's* portrayal of the African women of Wakanda. Hudson-Weems described an Africana womanist as having eighteen positive descriptors based on African culture: she is a self-namer, a self-definer, family-centered, genuine in sisterhood, strong, in concert with men in the struggle, whole, authentic, a flexible role player, respected, recognized, spiritual, male compatible, respectful of elders, adaptable, ambitious, mothering, and nurturing (Hudson-Weems, 2020) – all of which are positive aspects, easily ideologized in an Afrofuturistic society. Therefore, this research conducted on the *Black Panther* film was completed with these outlining principles used as a guideline.

The women's roles in *Black Panther* were not in competition with men's roles. Even though the top two leading roles were played by men: the late American Actor Chadwick Boseman starred as King T'Challa and the Black Panther, and the American Actor Michael B. Jordan starred as his cousin and antagonist, Eric Killmonger – the women were all represented as the trusted leaders of Wakanda; they were the king's confidants and his wise and savvy advisors. These women – who lived in a patrilineal society – had strong and noble roles that were centered around T'Challa, who inherited the throne, becoming the *Black Panther* after his father, King T'Chaka (played by the South African Actor Bonisile John Kani) passed away after a detonated bomb attack at the Vienna International Centre. The Kenyan-Mexican Actress Nyong'o, who portrayed Nakia, a *War Dog* for Wakanda (a member of Wakanda's central intelligence), had a passion for community service. Nakia was King T'Challa's ex-girlfriend, and she helped him to realize the importance of engaging in community service and using their strong international position in the world to provide aid to the more vulnerable countries. Danai Gurira, the Zimbabwean-American actress who calls herself a "Zimerican," played the role of a *Dora Milaje* general in King T'Challa's all-women security unit. Florence Kasumba, a German actress born in Kampala, Uganda, played Ayo, who was also a member of the *Dora Milaje*. They helped him to win the battle for the throne as the head of the armed forces of Wakanda. The Guyanese-born British Actress Letitia Wright portrayed Princess Shuri, King T'Challa's junior sister, who was the head of Wakanda's innovative technical program. The American Actress Angela Bassett portrayed the Queen Mother of Wakanda role; she was King T'Challa's mother, constantly supporting him as he transitioned from being the prince to the king of Wakanda. The late American Actress Dorothy Steel, at 92 years old, played the role of the *Merchant Tribe Elder* and the South African Actress Connie Chiume played the *Mining Tribe Elder*, they both were advisors to King T'Challa. Most of these main characters aided T'Challa in regaining the throne from his cousin, Killmonger. Killmonger began using Wakanda's vibranium to create weapons and wage war on the world's oppressors, in order to liberate Africans around the world, but T'Challa was against using Wakanda's natural minerals for violent purposes. Not only were the aforementioned women in a

close relationship with the main male character, King T'Challa, who would oftentimes transform into the Black Panther, but they significantly aided in advancing the film's storyline.

This analysis sought answers for the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the portrayal of the top women characters in the film?

RQ2: How does the top women characters' representation relate to traditional African cultural and historical realities?

RQ3: How does the African representation of the top women characters relate to Afrofuturism?

Black women have been traditionally misrepresented in Western media. They have been stereotypically portrayed as a mammy, jezebel, welfare queen, and sapphire or the angry black woman archetype (Gilman, 2014; Brown Givens & Monahan, 2005; West, 1995). Further, Givens and Monahan (2005) found that these mediated portrayals negatively impact people's real-life perceptions of African American women.

Black Panther not only portrayed Black women differently through the showcase of traditional African customs, but it has refashioned African traditions, creating a utopian world where an African country is successfully managed independently, and has neither been influenced by the West nor colonized by a Western nation. Although, by the movie's end, King T'Challa would learn through Nakia's persuasion, that it was not sufficient to be independently successful, but that Wakanda must use its resources to provide support to other countries in need.

## Literature review

Afrofuturism strategically places people of African descent in a post-human world, becoming reimagined as 'trans-human anamorphosis, cyberspace, and digital souls' – essentially renegotiating and reconfiguring racial power (Kim, 2017). Mark Dery (1994), creator of the term Afrofuturism said, 'Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?' Derrick Bell expounded on Dery's concept by connecting science fiction to critical theory, essentially using science fiction while searching for social justice; Afrofuturism is also incorporated into film, art, music, literature, and scholarship.

Afrofuturism includes the merging of the past, present, and future. According to Yaszek (2013, p. 2), Afrofuturism is 'not just to remember the bad past, but to use stories about the past and the present to reclaim the history of the future.' Eshun (2003, p. 290) said that these histories of the future are being taken over globally by a new space that he refers to as 'the future industries.' Afrofuturism becomes an empowering epistemology because the world then transforms into a raceless society, thereby eradicating the deterministic outcomes of race, as opposed to the incorporation of an overarching allegiance to a Eurocentric worldview through assimilation.

The European dominance on the construction of knowledge has led to many misconceptions and misunderstandings about African people's lifestyle, since Africa is traditionally shown in American films with contempt. So whoever controls the means of communication can construct a reality that others adhere to. Yaszek said that the mainstream media treats Afrodiasporic people as though they are either the unlucky offspring of slaves or Africans who have been the victims of colonization:

What you tend to see in the mainstream media, again and again and again, is the sense that blackness is a catastrophe. Black spaces are zones of absolute dystopias where either capitalism hasn't had a chance to intervene yet or where capitalism has failed. We see this again and again in the news: black cities are always depicted in dystopic ways. Africa is a gigantic continent, with lots of different ecosystems and cultures and nations and people and events and histories, and yet it's always treated somehow as the place of dystopia, plagued by drought, AIDS, and famine, and we rarely hear positive things about progress in Africa unless it is in terms of capitalist intervention. (Yaszek, 2013, p. 3)

In fact, African people in general along with African women's presence in the film industry are lacking. The USC Annenberg's Institute for Diversity and Empowerment at Annenberg released a report called, 'Media, Diversity, and Social Change Initiative,' which showed their findings for research conducted on media stories, including 109 motion pictures and 305 series productions for cable, broadcast, and a digital series (Smith et al., 2016). These stories were released by major media conglomerates, including NBC Universal-Comcast Corporation, 21st Century Fox, The Walt Disney Company, CBS, Sony, Viacom, Time Warner, Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon. The researchers found that a gender-balanced representation was only shown in 8% of all the films investigated; and further, women only had 29% of the speaking roles in films and were just 26.5% likely to be a lead character. They also found that women were more likely to wear sexy or revealing clothing, shown in nudity, or referenced as being physically attractive in films. Behind the scenes, women only represented 3% of film directors and 29% of writers across media. The findings are even more bleak when one factors in race; 87% of film directors are white (and mostly men) and people of African descent are not represented:

No platform presents a profile of race/ethnicity that matches proportional representation in the U.S. Over 50% of stories featured no Asian speaking characters, and 22% featured no Black or African American characters. The complete absence of individuals from these backgrounds is a symptom of a diversity strategy that relies on tokenistic inclusion rather than integration. (Smith et al., 2016, p. 16)

## Methodology

This qualitative research study includes the Africana womanism methodology. Since this movie had such a profound impact on popular culture, this research was conducted in order to understand its true representation of African women.

The sample size for this research was drawn from the IMDB online database (IMDB (Internet Movie Database), 2018). Their 'top cast' listing for the Black Panther included seven women and census sampling was applied; although, one actress was excluded from this analysis and another was added. The Brazilian and Jamaican Actress Nabiyah Be (the daughter of Jimmy Cliff, the legendary Jamaican recording artist), who starred as Linda, was eliminated from this assessment because she was not a woman from Wakanda, and

instead portrayed an American. Her role centered around aiding Killmonger in stealing a vibranium artifact from the Museum of Great Britain. In addition, since the *Merchant Tribe Elder* was a part of the top cast list, her counterpart, the *Mining Tribe Elder* was added to the list. This resulted in a sample size of seven women, including the following: 1) Nakia, a War Dog of Wakanda; 2) Okoye, the first lieutenant of the *Dora Milaje*; 3) Ayo, a member of the *Dora Milaje*; 4) Princess Shuri, the head of Wakanda's technological division; 5) the Queen Mother of Wakanda, Ramonda, as well as King T'Challa and Princess Shuri's mother; 6) the woman known as the *Merchant Tribe Elder* of the *Wakandan Tribal Council*; and 7) the woman known as the *Mining Tribe Elder* of the council.

The researcher independently decoded the information. The coder watched this film six additional times from the original screening, in order to conduct this research study. The first two times she jotted down notes. She then listed all of the eighteen categories of Africana womanism on the second row of a spreadsheet. After the researchers third and fourth time watching the film, she placed key portrayals onto the spreadsheet. The relevant scenarios were displayed as codes, and assessed on the characteristics outlined in Africana womanism, which is reflective of eighteen positive qualities of African women. Then she watched the movie two more times to ensure that all relevant scenarios were included.

## Results

The women of Wakanda showed Africana womanism by consistently displaying most of its key descriptors. These women were wholeheartedly self-namers, self-definers, family-centered, in concert with men in struggle, strong, whole, ambitious, flexible role players, authentic, respected, recognized, spiritual, nurturing, ambitious, and adaptable. These well-rounded women were confident and passionate about the work they performed. They projected a communal orientation, while simultaneously showing their independence. They also showed additional qualities of being witty, savvy, loyal, and brave. These qualities, including the Africana womanism descriptors, will be elaborated on as each of the top women characters in the movie are discussed.

These women did not show any of the stereotypical portrayals of Black women in Western media, including the mammy, jezebel, welfare queen, and sapphire archetype. Although, these roles are attributed to African American characters, and yet the women of Wakanda were represented as African women.

### The Wakandan Tribal Council members

The *Wakandan Tribal Council* positions consisted of elders whose main duty was to advise the king, so these elders had leadership roles and were always in consultation with King T'Challa. The *Wakandan Tribal Council* comprised of four members, two men and two women, and included the following people: Dorothy May Steel from Flint, Michigan, USA, who represented the *Merchant Tribe Elder*; Connie Chiume from Benoni, South Africa, starred as the *Mining Tribe Elder*; Issaach De Bankolé, born in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, portrayed the leader of the *River Tribe*; and Danny Sapani, of Ghanaian descent and born in Hackney, London, played the role of the *Border Tribe Elder*. All of the elder tribal leaders had to give their permission in a formal public coronation ceremony at Warrior



Falls before T'Challa could be granted the kingship. Showing a comradery among the ethnic groups, in this Afrofuturistic film where tribalism in its derogatory sense does not prevail, each one uniformly stated that T'Challa's anticipated role as Wakanda's new king 'will go unchallenged' (Coogler, 2018). Afterwards, the *Jabari Tribe*, consisting of those who removed themselves from the mainstream Wakandan society, challenged T'Challa's ascent to the throne, but later in the film they would aid him in regaining it.

All members of the tribal council were at liberty to have their own unique style that was representative of their specific ethnic group – this showed an acceptance of other people's cultural traditions. The *Merchant Tribe Elder* stemmed from the Sahara's Tuareg people, and this group was responsible for Wakanda's trade in crafts, including art, clothing, and artifacts (Chutel & Kazeem, 2018). The women of the *Tribal Council* were dressed in oversized Fulani gold hoop earrings, and had traditional African hairstyles, including the loc style of the OvaHimba ethnic group in Namibia. The *Mining Tribe Elder's* red-ochred locs, with puffs at the ends, complemented her colorful red and orange clothing patterns and her adornment of matching jewelry—the bright red color was inspired by the Maasai ethnic group of Kenya and Tanzania. The *River Tribe Elder* wore a lip plate, which is an item embraced by the Mursi, Chai, and Tirma women of Ethiopia (Chutel & Kazeem, 2018).

The *Merchant Tribe Elder* showed courage in speaking truth to power when she said to King T'Challa at a *Tribal Council* meeting in the Citadel, the palace that the royalty who are members of the *Golden Tribe*, inhabit, 'Wakanda doesn't need another warrior right now, we need a king' (Coogler, 2018). She made this assertive statement after listening to King T'Challa's plan to visit South Korea in pursuit of the arms dealer Ulysses Klaue, who had stolen some of Wakanda's vibranium. The *Mining Tribe Elder* also showed bravery when she was the first of the elders to laugh at Killmonger, after he initially announced his intention to challenge King T'Challa for the throne.

The existence of the *Wakandan Tribal Council* reflects African societies historically while addressing the deference that Africans have for elders. Africans traditionally live in communal societies; the elders from those communities are seen as the ones who have wisdom, which can only be gained from the aging process (Khapoya, 1998). Councils of elders have been widely used throughout Africa as a source for conflict resolution; these councils have existed in countries like Botswana, South Africa, Uganda, Ethiopia, and Kenya (Kariuki, 2015). The elders are viewed as the transmitters of African cultural practices, and they are also seen as the ones who can preserve the peace in a society (Michel et al., 2019). When the elders die, Africans traditionally believe that the spirits of these deceased become actively engaged in their communities (Khapoya, 1998) – so in the African worldview one never loses power, instead one gains power through the aging process, and this deference follows the person into death. Death is simply just another stage of life (Ekore & Lanre-Abass, 2016). So the *Wakandan Tribal Council* has its basis in African historical traditions.

Overall, the Africana womanism themes are apparent from the portrayal of the elder women of the Wakanda Tribal Council. The *Merchant Tribe Elder* and the *Mining Tribe Elder* showed the following qualities: 1) self-namer and self-definer, including their willingness to embrace their own ethnic group's traditional culture; 2) 'in concert with the male in struggle,' as they worked in alliance with the elder men from different ethnic groups as well as King T'Challa; 3) strength and authenticity, in their willingness to challenge the two



main characters, King T'Challa and Killmonger; and 4) they were recognized and respected for their role in the community. The gender-balanced Tribal Council's involvement in such important matters showed an equality between the sexes in Wakanda, a respect for elders, and a comradery among the ethnic groups.

### The *Dora Milaje*, Wakanda's woman warriors

King T'Challa had an all-women guard of fierce warriors protecting him on a daily basis called the *Dora Milaje*, some of which included his first lieutenant, Okoye, and a general member, Ayo. Christopher Priest introduced this group into the Black Panther comic strip after becoming the head writer in 1998. These women were an 'amazon-type' who displayed excellent abilities in using swords to fight, and their tall spears and red armor were based on the Maasai ethnic group (Chutel & Kazeem, 2018, February 19). These women wore rings around their neck and arms, like the married Ndebele women of South Africa who are known for their copper or brass rings. The Ndebele wear rings to show their faithfulness to their husband, after the building of their home. The *Dora Milaje* were not only portrayed as being physically strong but also mentally strong, since they were independent thinkers.

One scene showed modern items associated with women's oppression, as empowering. While King T'Challa, Nakia, and Okoye went to a club together in North Korea to investigate a security issue, Okoye was repulsed by a wig she was wearing. Although, in order to overpower their opposition, Ulysses Klaue and his entourage, she used her wig and her high heel as a weapon in a club fight. Therefore, this showed that Okoye is a self-definer and would not become a victim of the objects used for the so-called beautification of women.

Okoye and Ayo showed strength and bravery when they went against the orders of Killmonger after he was declared the king of Wakanda. Killmonger decided to attack T'Challa again, when the true king of Wakanda, T'Challa, reappeared after Killmonger threw him over a mountain cliff. Okoye said to Killmonger, 'You, your heart is so full of hatred, you are not fit to be a king' (Coogler, 2018). When she drew her weapon on him, every member of the *Dora Milaje*, including Ayo, went against Killmonger, and as the *Black Panther* he fought the four of them. This scene exemplified this all-women military unit's sisterhood, flexibility, and adaptableness, because when Okoye went against Killmonger, the other members immediately followed. The *Dora Milaje* was always in concert with the African man in his struggle, specifically King T'Challa, since they continued operating as his security, even after his throne was taken from him.

Another scene also signified the independent thinking of Okoye. She confronted her husband W'Kabi, portrayed by the British actor Daniel Kaluuya, who was head of security for Wakanda's *Border Tribe* and also was T'Challa's best friend. W'Kabi betrayed T'Challa by fighting on behalf of King Killmonger after T'Challa seemingly reappeared from the dead. In Wakanda's *Battle of Mount Bashenga*, Okoye confronted W'Kabi with her weapon, since he was fighting against the former king, T'Challa. W'Kabi pierced into her eyes and said, 'Would you kill me my love?' Okoye responded by aiming her spear at him and said, 'For Wakanda, without question' (Coogler, 2018). This scene signified her loyalty to Wakanda, which is a highly respectable quality to project.

One of the latter scenes showed the power of the *Dora Milaje*, especially Okoye, when she placed herself in between a fast-charging rhinoceros that was racing towards Winston Duke. Duke is an actor born in Trinidad and Tobago, who played M'Baku, the head of the *Jabari Tribe*, which was based on the *Dogon ethnic group of Mali and the Karo ethnic group of Ethiopia*. M'Baku once challenged T'Challa's rule, but now he was fighting on his behalf. As the rhinoceros charged towards Okoye, it suddenly stopped right in front of her; instead of trampling over her, it licked her cheek. This scene indicated the high level of respect shown to this military unit, even by the animals of Wakanda, adhering to African womanism's respected and recognized characteristic. The *Dora Milaje* is not just a fictitious group in the Afrofuturistic Wakanda, but they are also part of a historical African reality.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth century, there existed an elite group of women soldiers in West Africa, which other Africans called 'Ahosi,' meaning 'king's wives' or 'Mino,' meaning 'our mothers'; Europeans referred to this group as the 'Dahomey Amazons,' who were members of the Fon ethnic group (Coleman, 2018; UNESCO, 2014). Although, women from conquered group would also become soldiers of this unit to evade becoming a prisoner of war. These women in the Kingdom of Dahomey, located in what is now the Republic of Benin, protected the king and devoted their life to weapons training and fighting wars. They were fierce women soldiers committed to a life of celibacy. These soldiers were comprised in different units, at one time consisting of 4,000 people, and each group had their own dances, battle songs, flag and uniforms (UNESCO, 2014). According to UNESCO, these soldiers fought many important battles:

Women soldiers distinguished themselves on many occasions in the history of the Kingdom of Dahomey, particularly in the battles of Savi (1727), Abeokouta (1851 and 1864) and Ketu (1886), as well as during the two wars against the French, until the fall of Abomey in 1892. This final battle resulted in the dissolution of their army. (UNESCO, 2014, p. 7)

An unfortunate aspect led to the rise and eventual decline of the Kingdom of Dahomey: its involvement in the slave trade. It was an elaborate system of trading African prisoners gained through wars or raids, in exchange for European goods, like firearms, knives, bayonets, spirits, and fabrics; due to their involvement in slavery, the Kingdom reached considerable levels of wealth (UNESCO, 2014). Although, there was no connection between the women warriors in Black Panther and slavery, in this Afrofuturistic society. In fact, slavery was never directly mentioned, and was alluded to just once when T'Challa asked Killmonger if he would like them to save his life. Killmonger said right before dying, 'Bury me in the ocean, with my ancestors that jumped from the ships, because they knew death was better than bondage' (Coogler, 2018).

The Black Panther used the Afrofuturistic concept of an African king with an all-women security team of warriors, to highlight a real aspect of African history. These women warriors exemplified African womanism's descriptors and were self-definers, genuine in sisterhood, strong, in concert with men in the struggle, authentic, flexible role players, respected, recognized, adaptable, and ambitious.

## Princess Shuri, head of Wakanda's technological division

Princess Shuri, T'Challa's junior sister, was not only the princess of Wakanda but was the head of the Wakandan Design Group, and was a technological genius of an Afrofuturistic society. Princess Shuri oversaw Wakanda's defenses, weaponry, transportation and communications systems. In Wakanda, a place that had never been colonized, women were shown to have as much knowledge and confidence as men. Princess Shuri designed an artificial intelligence system called the *Griot*, sound absorbent sneakers made with nanotechnology, remote access *Kimoyo Beads* that controlled her lab console, *Vibranium Gauntlets* that fired shots that could knock people into the air, and she upgraded the *Panther Habits* which redistributes energy, like bullets. As Princess Shuri told T'Challa, 'How many times do I have to teach you, just because something works does not mean that it can't be improved' (Coogler, 2018). She showed that she was just as smart as her brother, and they had a mutually respectful relationship.

Princess Shuri had a personality with grit, which is unlike the traditional Western portrayal of women. Traditionally, American films show women as patriarchal society victims (Cadilhe, 2020, p. 146; Maity, 2014, p. 28); however, Princess Shuri excelled in Wakandan society, she rehabilitated people and could even resuscitate them from an unresponsive state. When her expertise was sought after in helping the American CIA operative Everett Ross, played by Martin Freeman, after he became injured while trying to save Nakia from getting shot, Princess Shuri casually said, 'another broken white boy to fix' (Coogler, 2018). She alluded of the Africana womanism descriptors of being strong, a self-definer, flexible, adaptable, ambitious, respected, and recognized.

Princess Shuri also showed her willingness to defend herself as a combatant who is proficient with spears, while showing support to the lead male character, King T'Challa. In the beginning of the movie after he arrived from a mission, she was shown giving her brother an obscene gesture as he joked about her clothes. Although, when T'Challa asked for help on a mission, she used her innovative technological systems and assisted him with enthusiasm and bravery. Shuri told T'Challa, 'The Black Panther lives. And when he fights for the fate of Wakanda, I will be right there beside him' (Coogler, 2018). After Killmonger became the King of Wakanda, she told him very boldly while they were fighting, 'You'll never be a true king' (Coogler, 2018). T'Challa rescued her from Killmonger's wrath. This showed the Africana womanism traits of being family centered, since Princess Shuri showed that she was still loyal to her brother even after he was defeated in the fight for the throne.

Ultimately, Princess Shuri's role provided a connection between being a smart young woman and being cool, because she frequently made jokes and had a good time, while working as a master scientist and engineer on groundbreaking new technology. During the coronation ceremony she made a public announcement after Zuri, played by the American Actor Forest Whitaker, who was her father's trusted advisor, asked if anyone of royal blood would contest T'Challa's reign as the next King of Wakanda. As Princess Shuri raised her hand, the ceremony attendees gasped. She then said in amusement, 'This corset is really uncomfortable, so could we all just wrap it up and go home' (Coogler, 2018). Another scene showed King T'Challa in Princess Shuri's lab. When he tested her Panther Habits—a fully protective body suit that incorporated innovative technology like kinetic energy—for the second time by kicking it, she recorded him and laughed as he was

thrusted onto the floor. King T'Challa abruptly said, 'Delete that footage' (Coogler, 2018). She made an outspoken comment, after it was announced to M'Baku that T'Challa was 'murdered,' M'Baku said that he was defeated more-so than murdered. Princess Shuri responded, 'do not rub our noses in it' (Coogler, 2018). These scenes showed that Princess Shuri was not only a technological genius, but she had a playful and humorous side, which made her portrayal reflective of the Africana womanism descriptors of being whole, ambitious, authentic, a nurturer, and a self-defining figure.

### The Queen Mother of Wakanda

The Queen Mother of Wakanda respected the traditions of Wakanda and was the bedrock of her family after the death of her husband, King T'Chaka.

Queen Mother Ramonda was immersed in the African traditions of Wakanda. She wore a Zulu-style hat or headdress that was inspired by Winnie Mandela, a South African activist of Xhosa descent (Allure, 2018). All of the women of Wakanda had natural hairstyles, including the queen, whose hair was in the form of downy white natural 'locs' (the colonized term for dreadlocks; Thames Copeland, 2021).

Queen Mother Ramonda's esteemed position was apparent, and she was respected by others. She was protected by the *Dora Milaje*. Nakia did a slight curtsy to her as a show of respect for her and the royal family. Without even glancing in her direction, when Princess Shuri made an obscene gesture directed towards T'Challa, the queen mother sternly called her name and she responded with, 'Sorry mother.'

Queen Mother Ramonda was savvy and she supported her children throughout the film. After T'Chaka was killed, she caressed her son, T'Challa, and asked him how he was doing. Next, when M'Baku challenged T'Challa for the throne with a physical fight to the death, his mother screamed out to him, 'show him who you are!' when it appeared he was losing (Coogler, 2018). He instantly gained momentum and defeated the Great Gorilla M'Baku. Towards the film's end she spearheaded a spiritual ritual involving the heart-shaped herb, and helped in saving her son's life. She called upon the ancestors for healing. Eventually, T'Challa arose; he gasped for air as he came out of his coma and asked for a blanket. The queen adhered to the Africana womanism descriptors: she was family centered, spiritual, strong, respected, and recognized.

The queen mother is a recognized traditional role in parts of Africa, and the position is still prevalent today. The queen mother holds a leadership role in a community and operates in duality with the chiefs (Stoeltje, 2021). The queen mother role in Ghana is traditionally based on matrilineal descent of royal lineage. For instance, queen mothers and chiefs exist among the Akan ethnic group; they reside over the towns and villages. Further, the Asantehene, the Asante king, and the Asantehemaa, the Asante queen, rule over the entire Asante ethnic group.

Queen Ramonda was a representation of Africana womanism. She showed the Africana womanism traits of being in concert with men in the struggle, authentic, flexible, spiritual, adaptable, mothering, and nurturing.

## Nakia, a War Dog of Wakanda

The Wakandan women had dominant roles in their society, while simultaneously supporting their male counterparts. Nakia was a Wakandan War Dog and T'Challa's ex-girlfriend. Even though they were no longer together, they were still friends and played supportive and nurturing roles in one another's life.

The movie opened showing a woman, Nakia's prowess and power over a man, T'Challa. As she was secretly transported in the back of a truck in Nigeria, in an effort of preventing the trafficking of women and girls. Okoye had previously warned T'Challa about his apt towards freezing upon encountering Nakia, so before they left to locate her, she told him, 'Just don't freeze when you see her' (Coogler, 2018). As the Black Panther, his response was, 'I never freeze,' but he later stood frozen and mesmerized when he saw her in Nigeria – although he was saved by Okoye who threw a spear into a person who was trying to kill him, while he stood frozen (Coogler, 2018). Nakia was also physically powerful and helped T'Challa fight the human traffickers. She showed her bravery while in the midst of a dangerous situation when she said to T'Challa, 'Why are you here? You ruined my mission' (Coogler, 2018).

Nakia exhibited a pinnacle example of African womanism's woman in concert with men in the struggle descriptor, after initiating a plan to save Wakanda from Killmonger's rule, which ultimately led to saving T'Challa's life. The Wakandans believed that T'Challa was dead after Killmonger won the fight for the throne and threw him over the Warrior Falls cliff. Although, Nakia had devised a plan to visit M'Baku, to ask for his assistance in regaining control of Wakanda. She brought Queen Ramonda; Princess Shuri; and Ross, the American CIA agent into the mountains with her. When they arrived, they learned that a fisherman had found T'Challa, who was in a coma. They gave T'Challa a heart-shaped herb, from which the Black Panther's strength derives, and eventually he came out of his coma. Before leaving, T'Challa asked M'Baku to help him in his fight for the throne of Wakanda; he refused, but eventually changed his mind.

Nakia was a warrior who also participated in African cultural traditions. During the coronation ceremony dance scene, drums were heard in the distance. A session of wooden rafts were moving down a river, with a black panther sculpture on top of each one, representing the *Panther Goddess Bast*. T'Challa spoke of this Goddess (which was derived from Bastet, an Egyptian Goddess shown as a cat and a lioness) and another one in Captain America: Civil War when he said, "In my culture, death is not the end. It's more of a stepping off point. You reach out with both hands and Bast and Sekhmet, they lead you into a green veld where, you can run forever" (Russo & Russo, 2016). These rafts held people from each group. The *Dora Milaje* were collectively dancing with their spears, Princess Shuri and her mother lead in the traditional dances of the *Golden Tribe* on another raft, and Nakia took the lead in the dances among the *River Tribe*, and its people were adorned in green African patterned clothing. The *River Tribe* was based on the Suri and Mursi ethnic groups of Ethiopia. Nakia was dancing with a circular weapon in each hand. Her face was painted to represent her ethnic group and cowrie shells were a part of her ethnic attire.

Nakia constantly showed care and concern for T'Challa. Nakia showed family centeredness as she brought T'Challa's family together, playing a seminal role in saving his life. She eased T'Challa's pain by giving him advice after he had difficulties accepting that his

father, T'Chaka, killed his uncle, N'Jobu, played by the American Actor Sterling K. Brown. Nakia said, 'You can't let your father's mistakes define who you are, you get to decide what kind of king you are going to be' (Coogler, 2018). This comment showed that Nakia represented Africana womanism's traits of being a self-definer, a flexible role player, and a nurturer, while also honoring her cultural traditions.

In a later scene, as King T'Challa and Nakia were talking in an urban center, she spoke about how she wanted to live her life dream of helping others. King T'Challa asked her to stay and Nakia said, 'I came to support you and to honor your father, but I can't stay. I just have my calling out there. I've seen too many in need just to turn a blind eye. I can't be happy here knowing there are people out there who have nothing' (Coogler, 2018). She urged him that Wakanda could assist other countries by providing technology, aid, and refuge. He responded jokingly, 'If you weren't so stubborn, you would make a great queen,' and Nakia said, 'I would make a great queen because I am so stubborn – if that is what I wanted' (Coogler, 2018). In this scene, when Nakia rejected the traditional Western notions of what a woman should be and indicated that she could not sacrifice her dream (of helping others) to be with T'Challa, she displayed Africana womanism's qualities of being a self-namer, self-definer, strong, whole, authentic, and ambitious.

Nakia told T'Challa, 'Wakanda is strong enough to help others and protect ourselves at the same time' (Coogler, 2018). Nakia said that if other countries could do it then they could do it, but he was reluctant and wanted to maintain a form of isolationism, believing that exposing Wakanda to the world would recede their way of life. At the end of the movie, King T'Challa was positively influenced by Nakia, as she spearheaded the successful effort to place him back on the throne, and as he started to participate in community service overseas.

Nakia had a warrior spirit, unlike the traditional western depiction of women, including the stereotypical portrayal of Black women, but like the *Dora Milaje*, and in the tradition of other notable African women. She resembled those African warrior queens of an African past, like Queen Nzinga from Ndongo (Angola); Queen Ndeté Yalla from Senegal; Sarraounia Mangou from Niger; Queen Mother Yaa Asantewa from Ghana; as well as Kimpa Vita a prophet from Kongo (the former Kingdom of Kongo's present location is the Democratic Republic of Congo and Angola); and anti-apartheid activists, like Charlotte Maxeke and Winnie Mandela from South Africa, along with other women who fought on behalf of African people from their own respective African country (UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), 2015).

Nakia was a representation of Africana womanism. The womanism themes included the following: 1) self-namer and self-definer, due to her self-definition and encouraging T'Challa to define himself too; 2) in concert with men in the struggle, a nurturer, and being family oriented, as she continued to build her alliance with King T'Challa, his mother Romana, and his sister Princess Zuri; and 3) her aptitude for being strong, authentic, flexible, and adaptable, by leading the effort in saving Wakanda.

## Discussion

Wakanda is a patrilineal society that showed an egalitarian relationship between the sexes. The top women characters greatly contributed to T'Challa's outcomes, or to the future of Wakanda, including his mother, the Queen Mother Ramonda, whose

encouragement fueled him in winning his original fight for the throne; his younger sister, Princess Shuri, whose technological inventions helped him to defeat his enemies; his first lieutenant, Okoye and security member, Ayo, who guarded his life; the members of the *Wakandan Tribal Council*, the *Merchant Tribe Elder* and the *Mining Tribe Elder* who advised him; and his ex-girlfriend, Nakia, the former War Dog who initiated the rescue effort that lead to the Black Panther's resurgence in the film. 'And as you can see, I am not dead,' shouted T'Challa (Coogler, 2018). He said this phrase after appearing for the first time from a presumed death, as he fought to regain the throne from Killmonger.

The questions guiding this research were ascertained to gain an understanding of the portrayal of the women in the film, and their relationship to traditional African cultural values and Afrofuturism. Connections were made between Africana womanism's descriptors and the qualities of the top women characters in the film. The results found that this film portrayed an egalitarian and non-competitive relationship between the sexes, which is a display of traditional African culture.

In the *Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* text, Oyewumi (1997) mentioned that the term 'woman' was a term imposed onto African societies. He suggested that African societies, unlike the European ones, have never based one's position in life on body anatomy. Historical assessments of the sexes determined that gender roles in Africa were more flexible, egalitarian, and complementary (Anyidoho, 2020). Even when investigating a traditional African language, such as Yoruba, there is an absence of gendered languages as well as any form of sex autonomy related information (Oyewumi, 1997). In fact, as it relates to African languages, the *Jabari Tribe* spoke Yoruba, while all the other ethnic groups spoke Xhosa. Although, European men, based on their historical situation and into modernity, have consistently subjugated white women. Further, during the colonization of Africa, Europeans invented the term 'women' in Africa, for the subjugation of African women (Oyewumi, 1997; Steady, 2005).

Agbaje (2020) mentioned how gender roles, identification, and stratification were imports of colonialism. European anthropological scholarship promoted acculturation theories, Social Darwinism, and structural/functionalism, which were used as proof that African culture was so-called inferior. Meanwhile, as Oyewumi (1997) said, '[Women] were dominated, exploited, and inferiorized as Africans together with African men and then separately inferiorized and marginalized as African women' (p. 122). For instance, women were excluded from the 'colonial public sphere'; they did not receive as much education as boys; the women chiefs were not recognized, unlike the men chiefs who were recognized and given more power; citizenry was only recognized for women through their husbands (Oyewumi, 1997, p. 123). More specifically, among the Yoruba, 'females became subordinated as soon as they were made up into women – an embodied and homogenized category – by definition they became invisible' (Steady, 2005, p. 153). It is only until this European effort in separating the private and public spheres into 'gendered spheres' that men have had the advantage in the public sphere; before colonization, African societies were not stratified according to body type (Steady, 2005; Sudarkasa, 1987; Nzegwu, 2001). Finally, European missionaries with school systems in Africa began to impose this worldview onto Africans (Steady, 2005).

The Black Panther's portrayal of African women involved in various aspects of life, did not only depict a mythological African utopia, but it reignited an African historical reality. Women were involved in politics, the military, the spiritual realm, and science and



technology. This film also showed the importance that African women placed on their family and wider community. So prior to the colonialization of Africa, women assumed political roles and served as advisors and elders of equal standing to men, and even the African spirits, whether they were male or female, were of a similar status (Steady, 2005). Therefore, it is not unusual that the Wakandas believed in Goddesses.

European evolutionists of the nineteenth century created theories concerning family kinship patterns that placed communal African egalitarian gender patterns at the bottom of the social ladder and individualistic Eurocentric patriarchal gender patterns at its top. According to Amadiume (2005, p. 84), 'they postulated a progression from barbarism and savagery in primitive sexual promiscuity, to matrilineal descent, to matriarchy ... and, finally, to masculine imperialism and patriarchy, monogamy and the nuclear family.' Further, Diop mentioned in, 'Pre-colonial Black Africa,' that Africa was the matriarchal and agricultural South, Europe was the patriarchal North, the Mediterranean basin was where matriarchy came before patriarchy, and Western Asia was classified as the 'zone of confluence' (Diop, 1989). Further, some societies were simultaneously male and female oriented or had a female line of descent and focus. For instance, the Ashanti's of Ghana have a matrilineal and a matriarchal system, the Uduk of Sudan and Ethiopia have a matrifocal and patrilineal organization (Amadiume, 2005); and the Nigerian Igbo of Nnobi and the Igbos in general, have a matriarchal system; and Amadiume (1987) argued that mostly all African groups have a basis in a matriarchal system – making women rights not a foreign concept in Africa, since African kinship patterns were historically egalitarian.

Consequently, the Black Panther used an African historical reality in the creation of an Afrofuturistic utopia; although, a casual observer might assume that the film is simply a feminist portrayal of the top women characters. In actuality, the Black Panther is more accurately described as a showcase of traditional African gender relations, which is represented in African womanism. The portrayal of the top women characters in the Black Panther represented women from an African historical reality, including, as mentioned earlier: the portrayal of the *Dora Milaje* which reflected the women warriors of the Kingdom of Dahomey; the portrayal of the elder women in *Wakandan Tribal Council* that represented African's traditional council of elders system; the representation of a queen mother which suited a historical reality of African queen mothers; the representation of Nakia, a War Dog of Wakanda, who had an African warrior spirit like many other women in African history who succeeded leadership roles in their country; and the representation of Princess Shuri who showed bravery, quick wit, and an outspoken nature at a young age, like many other African woman of our past.

## Conclusion

'Did he freeze?' Princess Shuri eagerly asked Okoye. She was referring to T'Challa's initial reaction when he saw Nakia. 'Like an antelope in headlights,' Okoye said with a grin and blinked her eye. Princess Shuri laughed. T'Challa, who was standing beside them with his mouth open wide during their conversation, said to Okoye in a tone that spoke to his embarrassment, 'Are you finished?' This lighthearted scene is a vivid representation of the film's non-conformity to stereotypical gender roles, and in this instance the gender roles were reversed. Nakia was not looking for a prince charming to 'sweep her off her feet'

(Maity, 2014, p. 30), but instead a man was now the one who was standing in awe of a woman. This scene showed the capacity of a woman – who was not dressed scantily clad but was wearing modest clothing – to overpower a man by her presence alone.

Africana womanism accurately describes the qualities of the women in Wakanda, which were realistic portrayals of the traditional African relations between the sexes. The leading women characters complemented their male counterparts and consistently showed that it was appropriate and even celebrated for them to have the following characteristics: to be self-namers, self-definers, family-centered, in concert with the men in the struggle, strong, whole, a flexible role player, authentic, respected, recognized, spiritual, ambitious, nurturing, and adaptable. The women of Wakanda had a communal orientation while simultaneously showing their independence. They also displayed traits outside the scope of Africana womanism, including bravery, loyalty, wittiness, savvy, an adherence to African cultural and historical traditions and a non-adherence to traditional Western female stereotypes, including those strictly imposed on Black women.

This film's equitable relationship between the sexes did not exist in isolation, but emerged from an isolationist egalitarian African nation, which was able to maintain its traditional African values in a modern and technologically advanced society (emerging from the mining of their rare vibranium metal, to which they had full control). Therefore, in the Black Panther, egalitarian relationships existed between the sexes in Wakanda, among the different ethnic groups, between the young and the elderly, and there was no sign of racism or the inferior thinking that stems from it – so equality was a societal norm in Wakanda. Moreover, any situations that could likely lead to discrimination, were mended or resolved.

T'Challa told his deceased father about his decision to allow Killmonger to be raised in America after killing his father, that he was 'a monster of our own making' and he continued by saying, 'I must right these wrongs' (Coogler, 2018). Thus, friction existed between the African character, T'Challa, and the African American character who was his cousin, Killmonger – representative of the real and lingering conflict between the two groups. Thus, this antagonism spanned back at least one generation in the film, and began with the rift between his father and uncle. Although, by the movie's end, T'Challa invested in three buildings in an African American community in Oakland, California. This was his effort in opening a community center, called the *Wakandan International Outreach Centre*, at the site where his father killed his uncle and where Killmonger was raised. He announced that two women (Princess Shuri and Nakia) would be in charge of this new initiative. This move reflected a new way of life for the Wakandans, and further, it represented a mending of the relationship between Africans and African Americans, showing movement towards African unity. This initiative adhered to the desires of Killmonger and his father, N'Jobu, for Africans to work together on behalf of their own liberation, and it showed that ultimately their efforts would not be in vain.

'We must find a way to look after one another as if we were one single tribe,' King T'Challa (Coogler, 2018) said earlier, during his speech at the United Nations. King T'Challa made a personal declaration to use Wakanda's resources to aid countries in need. On a micro level, this comment spoke to the Black Panther's inclusion of actresses and actors from all throughout Africa and its diaspora, stressing a Pan-African vision in its production

and ideology. Ultimately, on a macro level, this movie allowed its viewers to visualize a utopian society where female oppression does not exist, equality is the norm, and efforts are in effect to help others in need.

This Afrofuturistic, *Black Panther* film not only showed what African countries can become, but it also showed what Africa was already in the recreation of its history on behalf of its own future. It showed the possibilities for revisioning traditional African cultural systems in an Afrofuturistic reality, one that merges the past, present, and the future, in the creation of an ideal and truly democratic present.

In conclusion, the most popularized phrase from the film is 'Wakanda forever,' (and it is the namesake of its sequel). It operates in conjunction with the crossing of one's arms in front of the chest, and it seeps of meaning. This greeting becomes more than just a sign of Wakandan patriotism dating back to the ancient Egyptian tombs that showed the deceased pharaohs' arms crossed. It becomes more than a catchy phrase that moviegoers delightfully repeat. The "Wakanda forever" greeting has become symbolic of human beings' desire to live in a society where every person matters, where gender and racial oppression and stereotypes are nonexistent, and where differences among others are welcomed, recognized, and celebrated— if all of this is possible in an Afrofuturistic society, then perhaps one day it can actualize in the real world too.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

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