

# Commodified Afrofuturism in Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther*

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**Abstract:** In this capitalist age, Cinema has become thoroughly commodified. With an aim of catering to a larger audience, films often commodify elements from different part of the society to show the underprivileged and marginalized communities breaking out of shackles. Through such narratives involving subversion, as much as they inspire such underprivileged communities in the society, the films simultaneously show precisely what is not real. Such is the case through its depiction of commodified Afrofuturism denoting a technologically advanced fictional African country of Wakanda in Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther*. The film subverts the notion of Black African communities lagging behind in terms of technological developments through its Afrofuturistic portrayal of Wakanda. Under the inspiring narrative of a futuristic powerful nation existing in Africa within the fictional world, the deeper narrative of *Black Panther* can also point out how far the African countries have to come to become as powerful as Wakanda outside the fictional world created by the makers. It is imperative to address the issue of subverting racial representation in the film through the gimmick of Afrofuturism to sell it to a wider audience. Hence, the extent of commodification of Afrofuturism in the film is a pertinent subject of investigation..

**Keywords:** Afrofuturism, Commodification, Deconstruction, Race, Marginalized

We should recognize the Blackophobia that lies behind much Blackophilia, and that both may be representative of the continuing ideological and cultural power of White supremacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. (Yousman 371)

In this age of unbridled capitalism, the world of cinema has often resorted to commodifying cultural and social elements functioning within the make-believe world of films. A common trope in modern cinema, involving such social elements, is the subversion<sup>1</sup> of social order to show the

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<sup>1</sup> "...a process by which the values and principles of a system in place are contradicted or reversed in an attempt to transform the established social order and its structures of power, authority, hierarchy, and social norms." (qtd, in Ramirez 77)

underprivileged and marginalized communities breaking out of the shackles. The subversion creates a momentary inversion of the social order that often attracts the underprivileged community (whose ascension or upheaval is at the centre of the film) to flock to the theatres. The racial representation of black people is one such commodified element in the west as “Hollywood recognizes that blackness as a commodity can be exploited to bring in the bucks” (hooks, *Reel* 73). Through such narratives involving subversion, as much as they inspire such underprivileged communities in the society, the films simultaneously show precisely what is *not* real. By pulling the marginalized people to the centre in a make-believe *reel* world, in one sense, such films silently point out that those people are far from the centre in the *real* world. In such manner, the surface narrative of the film, concerning the subversion, is at war with itself when the deeper and silent narratives are brought to the forefront. Such is the case through its depiction of commodified Afrofuturism denoting a technologically advanced fictional African country of Wakanda in Ryan Coogler’s *Black Panther*.

The film depicts Wakanda as a fictional African country hidden from the world with the help of technology to keep its wealth and resources (primarily the fictional element of Vibranium) intact and away from the grasp of others. The film subverts the notion of Black African communities lagging behind in terms of technological developments through its Afrofuturistic portrayal of Wakanda. Moreover, it shows Wakanda as one of the most powerful nations of the world in terms of resources, warfare and knowledge. In reality, with statistics suggesting that 67 percent or an estimated 871 million people in Africa do not have access to internet – it is evident that the scenario of most African countries is much different from Wakanda (Munga). This echoes bell hooks’ (2009) notion of how “the “idea” of a “black film” has been appropriated as a way to market films that are basically written and produced by white people as though they in fact represent and offer us—“authentic” blackness” (65). Thus, such films market the *unreal* as *authentic* on-screen. The marginalized group, such as African-Americans accept such representation of Blackness or Black Culture as they put more value into the existence of their representation rather than how they are represented. On this issue, hooks writes,

Concurrently, marginalized groups, deemed Other, who have been ignored, rendered invisible, can be seduced by the emphasis on Otherness, by its commodification, because it offers the promise of recognition and reconciliation. (*Black* 26)

Hence, under the inspiring narrative of a futuristic powerful nation existing in Africa within the fictional world, the deeper narrative of *Black Panther*

can also point out how far the African countries have to come to become as powerful as Wakanda outside the fictional world created by the makers. As deconstructive reading “uncovers the unconscious rather than the conscious dimension of the text” (Barry 68), it can bring out the unconscious layers of the film which can lead to the analysis of the subversion of the racial representation under a new light. It can also allow a closer inspection of cultural elements, under the umbrella of Afrofuturism, which are commodified in *Black Panther*.

### Literature Review

After the release of *Black Panther* in 2018, a strong and positive narrative grew around the film's contribution towards upholding African American culture and Black race representation on screen. Articles and essays with inspiring headlines such as – “*Black Panther* is a milestone in African Americans' search for home”, “Why *Black Panther* is a Defining Moment for Black America”, “*Black Panther* is a gorgeous, ground-breaking celebration of black culture”, “*Black Panther* Shatters Stereotypes and Promotes Science” – were published by leading American news outlets, namely *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times* etc. In fact, the last article mentioned in the preceding line was published on *Share America* which is “the U.S. Department of State's platform for sharing compelling stories and images about American society, culture, and life, and about the principles that underlie our nation's foreign policy and engagement with the world” (Share America). Thus, *Black Panther* was soon regarded as a film that told a culturally relevant story on global scale about African-American's identity and black people as a whole. The film left a gigantic cultural footprint around its release as it was regarded as “a love letter to black culture” (Johnson). Similarly, in the preface of *Afrofuturism in Black Panther Gender, Identity, and the Re-Making of Blackness*, Zeinabu Davis writes,

Its [*Black Panther*] impacts on American cinema and more importantly Black culture worldwide are phenomenal. The film has jump-started. . . discussions of Afrofuturism as a conceptual matrix for both celebrating and interrogating world-African popular culture. Culturally, the film moves us to a beautiful complex simmering gumbo of ideas and ideals around Black identity and representation . . . (ix)

In such manner, a loud and strong voice echoed to reverberate the positive impact the film had on the globe through its presentation of Black culture.

However, amidst such adulations, a closer scrutiny of the film and its making can reveal completely different voices coming out of it.

In her article “Vibing with Blackness: Critical Considerations of *Black Panther* and Exceptional Black Positionings”, Marco chiefly focuses on how the film portrays black identity as exceptional in the context of popular culture. By combining theories and ideas related to diaspora studies, Afrofeminism, and Afrofuturism, she critically explores how the film represents African people and their triumphs as exceptional ideas in Western culture. Marco argues that by celebrating African triumph as exceptional, films from the West such as *Black Panther*, actually indicates the Africans as the Other and forces the traditional belief of “the West as center” on the viewers (1). However, the article only briefly touches upon and explores the aspect of commodified Afrofuturism as one of the tools through which black people are essentially represented as exceptional. Marco writes,

In the context of popular and widely commoditized Afrofuturist films, *Black Panther* essentially made this genre one which is recognized in the popular imagination, not only in discourses of those who engage with the genre. *Black Panther*’s success however, can be read and questioned in a number of ways. (3)

Thus, even though Marco acknowledges commodified Afrofuturism as a precursor to raise questions about *Black Panther*’s success, she never proceeds to explore the issue her article. Nonetheless, her acknowledgement of the fact that the exploitative use of commodified Afrofuturism in the film can propel anyone to question its success, in turn, validates the objective of this paper.

As the title suggests, Copeland’s article, “‘Did He Freeze?’: Afrofuturism, Africana Womanism, and *Black Panther*’s Portrayal of the Women of Wakanda”, attempts to conduct a feminist exploration of the representation of women in *Black Panther* within an Afrofuturistic setting. However, before proceeding to her pertinent feminist discussion, she echoes the notion of how the film is essentially showing “an African utopia, also known by its racially-specific reference, a Blacktopia” (1). This notion is much aligned with this paper’s initial argument that by showing a utopian Afrofuturistic version of Africa in *reel* world, *Black Panther* shows how far it is from that version in *real* world. Copeland also states that under the Afrofuturistic components, the film actually proceeds to portray “a hodgepodge of traditional African cultural elements” (1). However, the article does not include any discussion on whether this particular portrayal is commodified or whether it is as a

gimmick for wider circulation of the film among diverse audience for higher earnings in the global box office.

The film earned more than 1.3 billion dollars in the global box office (Hughes). The black director, predominantly black cast and crew generated much appeal among the film community. Neal Curtis writes, “As a film with a Black director, a Black creative team and predominantly Black cast it was a significant step forward in a White dominated industry” (299). Even though the film, made by a predominantly black creative team, had such box office success by telling a story built on black culture, identity and triumph, it was produced by a group of all white producers. The producer Kevin Feige and co-producer David J. Grant are white. Among five executive producers credited in the film, only Nate Moore is of African-American descent. Thus, a silent narrative of how ‘white producers made a lot of money by telling an inspiring story about black people’ gets smothered under the loud narrative of black-themed storytelling and subverted racial representation of Africans and their culture. It is imperative to address the issue of subverting racial representation in the film through the gimmick of Afrofuturism to sell it to a wider audience. Hence, the extent of commodification of Afrofuturism in the film is a pertinent subject of investigation. As more layers of glossed over meanings and plural voices are uncovered by peeling of the surface narrative through deconstructive analysis of the film, the deeper we can dig into commodified version of Afrofuturism. The aim of this paper is to deconstruct the idea of Afrofuturism embedded in *Black Panther* to unveil its commodified nature in relation to African and Black culture and identity-

### **Theoretical Foundation**

The concepts of Afrofuturism, Deconstruction and Commodification constitute the theoretical foundation of this paper. The term Afrofuturism is presently labelled as “multimodal” due to its overarching nature (Marco 3). Mark Dery is credited with coining the term in his essay “Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose” published in 1994. In the essay, Dery defined Afrofuturism in the following way, Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth century technoculture—and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future might, for want of a better term, be called “Afrofuturism”. (180)

Thus, Dery’s definition of the term is centred on science fiction and emphasized the core connection between technology and African-American

themes. However, at the same time, his definition weaves a political narrative working around the term. Yaszek recognizes that apart from associating Afrofuturism with science fiction, Dery identified it as “a larger aesthetic mode that encompasses a diverse range of artists working in different genres and media who are united in their shared interest in projecting black futures derived from Afrodiasporic experiences” (42).

Later, through the works of researchers and scholars such as Tricia Rose, Kodwo Eshun, Greg Tate in late 1990s, Afrofuturism assumed the status of an interdisciplinary term. Hence, Marco highlights Eshun’s essay “Further on Afrofuturism” to write that by nature Afrofuturism has become “interdisciplinary and [it] encompasses a host of different positions and conceptual threads” (3). To illustrate how Afrofuturism works as an umbrella term covering a wide range of arts concerning Black culture, Taylor Crumpton defines it as “a fluid ideology shaped by generations of artists, musicians, scholars, and activists whose aim is to reconstruct ‘Blackness’ in the culture” (2020). Nevertheless, it must be noted that a large part discourse on Afrofuturism rides on ‘possibility’ and ‘imagination. Hence, it is loosely explained as “a way of imagining possible futures through a black cultural lens” (qtd. in Broyld 129) or it is seen as a mode of “freethinking that focuses on what is possible without constraints” (White and Ritzenhoff 4).

A subversive political implication in favour of black people runs through the term Afrofuturism (Cathcart 227). It is becoming more apparent and easily accessible in this digital age. Gipson writes, “In the 2010s, with digital technologies, numerous people are identifying as Afrofuturists and are using Afrofuturist ideas and concepts to educate, share stories, fight oppression, and help build communities in need” (84). In addition, the political implication does not solely focus on the future of black people, rather, it extends a bridge from their past towards an imagined future full of possibilities. Thus, Yaszek writes, Afrofuturism has evolved into a coherent mode not only aesthetically but also in terms of its political mission. In its broadest dimensions Afrofuturism is an extension of the historical recovery projects that black Atlantic intellectuals have engaged in for well over 200 years. . . .Afrofuturism holds the potential to bring the Afrodiasporic experience to life in new ways. (47)

In one way, this acknowledgement of the past is glossed over by *Black Panther* as the fictional Wakanda is depicted as an African country which was never colonized. More reflection on this issue is lodged in discussion section of the paper.

Afrofuturism extends its wings to converge with the field of feminism as well. The study of Afrofuturistic feminism is generally associated with the label of 'divine feminism'<sup>2</sup>. Strong, Chaplin and Greenidge write, "Afrofuturism, specifically the divine feminism, allows us to center Black women in the study of Black experience and challenge Western misconceptions and stereotypes about Black women" (204). In such manner, Afrofuturistic vision, concerning African women, positions them outside the stereotypical boundary imposed on them by Western media as well. In fact, this particular avenue is explored in *Black Panther* primarily through the depiction of Dora Milaje, an all-female warrior group for the protection of Wakandan kings. However, the purpose of exploring such an avenue and other avenues associated with Afrofuturism in *Black Panther* are the subjects of deconstructive study to uncover the commodified version of Afrofuturism itself.

Deconstruction was introduced as a tool for literary analysis during the advent of post-structuralism. The term was popularized by French philosopher Jacques Derrida. However, it was erroneously known as "the first version of poststructuralism to reach the United States" (Bertens 104). However, in a letter to a Japanese Professor, Derrida isolated deconstruction from post-structuralism (Derrida, "Letter" 2-3). During late 20th century critics formulated deconstruction as an applicable method by compiling the deconstructive moves Derrida had illustrated in his writings and lecture. Norris proceeds to summarize Derrida's deconstructive moves as,

The vigilant seeking-out of those 'aporias', blindspots or moments of self-contradiction where a text involuntarily betrays the tension between rhetoric and logic, between what it manifestly means to say and what it is nonetheless constrained to mean. To 'deconstruct' a piece of writing is therefore to operate a kind of strategic reversal, seizing on precisely those unregarded details (casual metaphors, footnotes, incidental turns of argument) which are always, and necessarily, passed over by interpreters of a more orthodox persuasion. (19)

Norris' idea originates from the fact that any text can create doubt for what meanings it is supposed to convey by pointing out the conscious entrapment

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<sup>2</sup> "the idea that women themselves have complete agency over both their lives and choices that they make..." (Strong et al. 203)

of the intended meaning within a boundary imposed on by authors of the text.

M.A.R. Habib explains deconstruction as “a way of challenging interpretations of texts based upon conventional notions of the stability of the human self, the external world, and of language and meaning” (649). As the aforementioned extracts imply, deconstructive analysis considers any text itself to have both a conscious and an unconscious part. Hence, Peter Barry states, “deconstructive reading uncovers the unconscious rather than the conscious dimension of the text, all the things which its overt textuality glosses over or fails to recognise” (68). Derrida himself made a similar remark in his ground-breaking book *Of Grammatology* by stating that deconstructive reading “attempts to make the not-seen accessible to sight” (163). Terry Eagleton defines deconstruction as “reading the text against itself, with the purpose of knowing the text as it cannot know itself” (qtd. in Barry 77). Moreover, the consideration of context to create multiplicity of meaning is another notion posited by Derrida in relation to deconstruction. He suggests that as “a meaning can never be completely fixed or determined” (Ijsseling 96), it is as much dependent on “context of production” as it is on “context of reception” (Bennington and Derrida 86). In this way, deconstructive analysis of *Black Panther* in different context can allow the film to be dissected in such a manner that will bring the apparently unseen and hidden narrative lying under the surface narrative of glorifying African culture and championing the fictional commodified triumph of black people on-screen.

Commodification of oriental cultures and their elements in media have been a common effort on part of the dominant culture in 21st century. Highlighting such commodification and its success, hooks writes, The commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling. Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture. (*Black* 21)

The white-dominated western film industry within this mainstream culture is a victim of such commodification of the ‘Other’ culture as well. From hooks’ remark, it is understandable that African culture, roots and history can be a convenient source of elements that can be commodified on the silver screen.



Within such falsified racial representation of Black culture marketed as a commodity, the real Black culture gets lost. It is replaced by a carefully constructed version envisioned by the Orientals. Leonard and King writes, "The process of commodification is not simply about selling an essentialized Black culture, but rather a particular construction of Blackness that has proven beneficial to White[s]" (10). Thus, behind the capitalist gain made through the commodification of Black culture, the dominant white force weaves their own narrative about the Blacks. As a result, the gain is not only financial but it has a deeper impact on the identity of black people. Their representation, however positive and progressive it may be, is a production of the dominant white force. The commodified version of the oriental culture is accepted by the others as a "promise of recognition and reconciliation" (hooks, *Black* 26.)

### **Methodology**

This research has been conducted by adopting qualitative approach to study Afrofuturism in *Black Panther*. The design of this research is non-experimental. The collection and analyses of data have been done by following content analysis method. The primary source of data in this research is Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther*. For literature review, relevant articles, books, journals, online sources and film reviews have been analysed as secondary sources of data in this research.

### **Discussion**

In this section, with the assistance of theoretical foundation lodged earlier in the paper, the researchers aim to deconstruct the relevant elements associated with Afrofuturism in Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther*. *Black Panther* is a superhero film based on the Marvel Comics characters. A brief overview of the film's plot is given before its deconstructive reading. In the film, Wakanda is a fictional country whose international front is an agrarian third world country from Africa. Under this disguise, it is a technologically superior nation with the aid of mining an element named Vibranium. Years ago, a tribal warrior ingested a "heart-shaped herb" influenced by Vibranium to attain superhuman abilities. He became known as the superhero Black Panther and his followers formed the nation Wakanda. Gradually different kings assumed the mantle of Black Panther by eating the herb. To save

themselves from being exploited by outer world, Wakandans isolated themselves with a false front.

In 1992, the King of Wakanda T'Chaka, and the current Black Panther, visits his brother N'Jobu working as a spy in USA. N'Jobu is caught and killed in self-defense by the King as he had betrayed Wakanda by smuggling weapons in black market. N'Jobu's son is left behind in USA as T'Chaka keeps N'Jobu's death a secret. In 2016, after the death of T'Chaka, his son T'Challa becomes the King and Black Panther. However, N'Jobu's son grows up to be Killmonger working in US Navy Seal. He kills a smuggler name Ulysses Klaue, who deals Wakandan weapon in black market, and brings his body back to Wakanda to stake his claim as future King. He challenges and defeats T'Challa to become the new King and Black Panther. Killmonger wants to supply weapons to black people around the world to fight against oppression. Later, T'Challa and his allies fight back to thwart Killmonger's plan and reclaim the throne.

The purpose behind this deconstructive reading of the film is to discover the commodified version of Afrofuturism featured in the film. The background score and musical cues, costumes and colours are discussed along with the deconstructive analysis of the film's narrative, lines and the actions of the characters.

### **Emphasizing the Reel – not the Real**

KLAUE: What do you actually know about Wakanda? ROSS: Shepherds. Textiles. Cool outfits. KLAUE: It's all a front. Explorers searched for it for centuries. ElDorado: The Golden City. They thought they could find it in South America, but it was in Africa the whole time. (*Black Panther*, 00:56:04-23)

ROSS: That's a nice fairy tale but Wakanda is a third world country... (00:56:52-55)

The aforementioned conversation takes place after CIA Agent Ross captures Ulysses Klaue for smuggling Wakandan weapons. The reason behind opening the discussion section with this conversation lies the fact that it has a deep implication on placing the reel-life Wakanda away from the real-life African countries. The futuristic Wakanda is placed as a mythical city akin to El Dorado. In turns, it re-establishes black people of Wakanda as myth.

Through the deconstruction of this conversation, it can be associated with real-life black people configured as myths as Sun Ra (2017) states, “How do you know I’m real? I’m not real. I come to you as myth, because that’s what black people are—myths” (qtd. in Marco 1). Moreover, after Klaue claims Wakanda to be the golden city, Ross, a white American, quickly classifies it as third-world country just as most of the countries in Africa. Moreover, earlier he associates it with “Shepherds” resorting to the stereotypical portrayal of such countries in the Western media. Therefore, in one way, black people become reduced to myths, and, on the other, they are reduced to primitive human beings far away from technology. Though the emphasis is put on the reel-life golden city full of advanced technology throughout *Black Panther*, even that facet of Afrofuturism can be deconstructed to a stereotypical portrayal of black people. Thus, it becomes a mere means of attracting audience to the theatres by telling a subversive narrative championing black people on the surface. On a deeper level of signification, it does not carry any nuance in favour of African-Americans or black people in general. It connects *Black Panther* itself with hooks’ notion that “Hollywood recognizes that blackness as a commodity can be exploited to bring in the bucks” (73).

Similar argument can be made for another particular scene when King T’Challa’s royal aircraft, holding him and his convoy, penetrates the scientific cloak guarding Wakanda from the rest of the world (00:12:35-00:13:14). The aircraft flies over a vast farm area beside a jungle. Shepherds and their sheep can be seen just as Agent Ross tells Klaue as mentioned earlier. This is the front that Wakanda shows to the rest of the world to pose as a third world country. As soon as general Okoye manoeuvres the aircraft to nosedive into the jungle, it becomes clear that the jungle is a hologram. Instead of the jungle, the aircraft flies into a futuristic metropolis by penetrating the cloak. Now, as mentioned in the theoretical discussion, Afrofuturism imagines a possible future of technological advancement for African people and *Black Panther* is a fictional depiction of this notion. However, by putting this extra barrier between Wakanda and rest of the make-believe world, the film shows this futuristic vision to be twice removed from reality. At its core, it is a *fictional* portrayal of triumph for the African people. Then, within that fictional world, the setting of Wakanda is further fictionalized. Moreover, the aircraft itself can be seen to be inspired from

film franchises such as *Star Wars* or *Star Trek* which uncovers a large part of *Black Panther*'s being unoriginal as opposed to being a faithful representation of indigenous black culture. Hence, as mentioned in their conversation, for CIA agent Ross, Klaue's description of technologically advanced Wakanda is a fairy tale or fictional depiction much like the aforementioned film franchises. In this way, the deeper narrative of *Black Panther* reemphasizes the triumph of African people to be twice removed from reality. On the surface level, the narrative of triumph becomes a mere commodity stripped off any nuances. In another instance, when Okoye declares inside the aircraft, "My Prince, we're home" (00:12:21-24), the false image of agrarian Wakanda is shown immediately. The timing of this declaration as the false front of Wakanda is shown is also there to reemphasize the isolation of futuristic Wakanda from the rest of the fictional world.

During this entry scene to Wakandan metropolis, the musical cues are commodified as well. Initially, as the royal aircraft flies over the agricultural land, an African tribal score plays in the background (00:12:35-53). Then, as the aircraft turns towards the holographic jungle, the score is replaced by tribal drumbeats. However, as the aircraft enters the futuristic metropolis, a triumphant western orchestra score plays in the background. It is as if African tribal music is silenced by a modern western score bereft of any trace of African culture. The deconstruction of these musical cues can divulge the fact that tribal drumbeats and melody are commodified as those are there only as a means to build-up towards western music and show apparent inclusivity of African indigenous culture in Hollywood.

### **Jingoist Black African-American as Antagonist**

Eric Stevens aka Killmonger is the principal antagonist of *Black Panther* who grows up as an African-American in a rough neighbourhood at Oakland, California. Due to his father's betrayal to Wakandan people, he is denied any connection with his native nation. Later, he serves as US Navy Seal. His story is connected with Afrofuturism as well, owing to his triumph in growing up as a fatherless African-American boy. Years later, he invades Wakanda to make his claim for the throne. He envisions to circulate Wakandan weapons among black people around the world to fight against oppression, KILLMONGER. You know, where I'm from, when black folks

started revolutions, they never had the firepower or resources to fight their oppressors. Where was Wakanda? ...all that ends today... We're gonna send Vibranium weapons out to our War Dogs. They'll arm oppressed people all over the world, so they can finally rise up and kill those in power, and their children and anyone else who takes their side. It's time they know the truth about us. We're warriors. The world's gonna start over and this time we're on top. The sun will never set on the Wakandan Empire. (01:29:55-01:30:49)

This passionate speech to free the oppressed black people of the world is full of jingoism. Moreover, the character of W'Kabi (who is T'Challa's best friend and head of border security in Wakanda) agrees with Killmonger's vision. Therefore, as much as the film tries to convey that Africans can be triumphant as part of a fictional advanced and self-sufficient nation, it fails on a political level through portrayal of an African-American as the primary antagonist.

Eric Stevens grew up in a setting that exists in real world. He adopted the alias Killmonger during his service as US Navy Seal. His fictional story is more real than that of Wakanda and its people. Hence, when he is portrayed as the villain or as the black 'bad guy from the American hood', it contains a political message when seen from a political context. Through deconstructive reading, one can think that the Afrofuturistic depiction of Wakanda is presented as commodity – just as the international image of Wakanda – when the more important level of signification lies in the political dichotomy of Wakandan leaders. One set of them wants to remain isolated from the world and the other (led by an African-American) wants engage in combat to free the world from oppression.

### **Misleading and Unexplored Feminism**

*Black Panther* exhibits a deceptive idea of feminism and value of female in African community. Wakandan King is protected by the Dora Milaje – an all female squad of warriors. In Marvel comics, Dora Milaje's long history and connection with real-life African female warriors are explored in details with emphasis but it is absent in the film adaptation (Strong et al, 2021, 205). Moreover, the colours of their costume and their presentation are geared towards making them a commodity aligned with fashion models during their introduction in the film. In the scene, following line is spoken by the character of James, who describes the Dora soldiers after seeing them for the

first time, “It’s these two Grace Jones<sup>3</sup> looking Chicks. They’re holding spears” (00:03:00-05). Thus, at first glance, honourable Dora Milaje is reduced to a fashion reference in their introduction. Even though, the Dora Milaje and their general Okoye are portrayed as strong female characters especially through their combat scenes, just as the character compares them with fashion models at first sight, the audience may identify with them in a similar manner. Deconstructive reading can associate them with ideas such as “eye-candy” instead of the surface idea of strong female warriors. In addition, as their histories are left unexplored, the Dora Milaje loses much of their identity as a warrior group. It must also be mentioned that the Dora Milaje are seen to be protecting kings throughout the film. Thus, the strong group of female warriors are always playing a second fiddle to the male authoritative figure.

### **The White Saviour**

As much as Afrofuturistic *Black Panther* tries to reconfigure the African identity away from the white supremacy and oppression of the blacks, it cannot help itself from a white saviour. The severely wounded CIA Agent Ross is initially brought to Wakanda by T’Challa to be healed with the aid of Wakanda’s advanced technology. Ross representing the white world in black Wakanda is astounded at its advancement. By the end of the film, this situation is reversed. Throughout the film, Ross plays the role of a hesitant and awkward white man beside T’Challa’s sister Shuri. During the climax, he is the one to save the day for Wakanda by flying a remotely controlled aircraft (01:45:33). The technologically apt sister of the King can solve all the complexities concerning technology but needs the help of a white man to fly the plane. Thus, the film cannot save itself from resorting to the trope of using a white saviour. It could be the case that without Agent Ross, an out-and-out good white man, a large part of white audience may have felt lack of representation as Hollywood in general is predominantly white. Nonetheless, by pitting a black African-American antagonist against an African country and showing a white saviour coming to their aid – *Black Panther* blends much of its Afrofuturistic identity with commodification.

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<sup>3</sup> Grace Jones is a Jamaican-born, New-York based fashion model known for her eccentric fashion choices.

## Conclusion

As explored in the discussion section, *Black Panther's* portrayal of Afrofuturism is often reduced to commodified version of its associated elements. On a deeper level of scrutiny, under the apparent blackophilia, a large part of black representation can be called into question. The film shows a fictional country upholding the triumph of black people that were never subjected to slavery. How can it contain the true essence of Afrofuturism by disregarding such history?

In addition, with the application of deconstructive reading, the discussion part exhibited that through the depiction of black people from African and African-American community in a triumphant light, the film indicates how such triumph of black people in real world is indeed far away. Moreover, the issue of using such celebration of African triumph as a mere gimmick for box office earning becomes much more apparent after close inspection of the white saviour aspect of the film as done in the closing part of discussion section. The same goes for the portrayal of strong female characters as well. Even though the film offers a futuristic version of strong African women through Dora Milaje, by disregarding the group's rich history from source materials, it eventually renders them as a generic group of warriors. Thus, the converging point between Afrofuturism and Afrofeminism becomes reduced to a mere commodity as well. Thus, most of the subverting aspects related to Afrofuturism in terms of racial representation become questionable as deconstructive reading uncovers their commodified nature. As a sequel to the film titled *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* has been released worldwide in November 2022, it is pertinent to conduct further research on the sequel to investigate whether it continues similar commodification of such elements as well. Hence, the findings from this research can become relevant in future research in order to analyse and explore commodified nature of subverting notions related to racial representation such as Afrofuturism. In addition, the nexus between racial representation and exploitation of white audience in film industry is another point worthy of further exploration. Such representation is a mere ploy of preserving the racial hierarchy as "Black culture is intentionally being made palatable to a White audience, with the goal of making a profit" (Cherid 360). This active White participation to

exploit black culture for profit also opens up new avenues like blackfishing (deceptive presentation of non-white people as black) in media to emerge as subject of research.

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