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Black Panther in widescreen: cross-disciplinary perspectives on a pioneering, paradoxical film

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ABSTRACT

Critics and scholars alike hail *Black Panther* (2018) as a celebratory cinematic response to decades of racial injustice in Hollywood while also calling attention to popular culture's limited means to transform structural oppressions. Our Introduction to this themed issue explores the provocative tensions—between jubilation/disappointment, progress/regression, and reality/fantasy—that surround *Black Panther*. These tensions have animated the Black Panther franchise since its inception and continue to shape the character's cinematic rendering. Our interpretation of *Black Panther* as reformist yet simultaneously pernicious cinema is framed by paradoxical ideation not only as the core narrative device for the film and its comic antecedents, but also as the central feature of its mediated context—first as a product of Marvel Comics and now the Walt Disney Company.

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The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) released *Black Panther* (2018), its 18th blockbuster film, to global enthusiasm and fanfare. Throughout 2018, 2019, and still today amid the anticipated 2022 sequel,¹ the hype surrounding *Black Panther* has soared as

[a] film of many firsts—the first “black blockbuster,” the first Marvel film to feature a black superhero, black director and mostly black cast, the first to make more than \$1 billion globally, the first film to get a studio-funded Oscars 2019 campaign, and the list goes on.²

Critics and scholars alike largely hail *Black Panther* as a celebratory cinematic response to decades of racial injustice in Hollywood—a film industry predicated on prioritizing white normativity and consistently portraying caricatured Black characters who are seldom cast in lead roles.³ Capturing the widespread jubilation the film inspires, Adam Serwer says:

Black Panther is a love letter to people of African descent all over the world. Its actors, its costume design, its music, and countless other facets of the film are drawn from all over the continent and its diaspora, in a science-fiction celebration of the imaginary country of Wakanda, a high-tech utopia that is a fictive manifestation of African potential unfettered by slavery and colonialism.⁴

Conversely, a small chorus of contradiction importantly reminds us that popular culture—while important in terms of representation, cultural meaning-making, and ideology—has

limited means to transform structural oppressions. Khanya Khondlo Mtshali humbles us with the reminder that “watching a film is not a brave act of resistance,”⁵ while Christopher Lebron sharply contends that

Black Panther is not the movie we deserve Why should I accept the idea of black American disposability from a man in a suit, whose name is synonymous with radical uplift but whose actions question the very notion that black lives matter?⁶

This provocative tension—between jubilation/disappointment, progress/retrogression, and reality/fantasy—fueled our motivation to coedit this themed issue from the intersections of our respective positionalities.⁷ As critical/cultural communication scholars, we find ourselves cerebrally drawn to theorizing institutionalized disenfranchisement, power discrepancies, struggles for equity, and varied interpretations of race matters. Our interpretation of *Black Panther* as reformist yet simultaneously pernicious cinema is framed by paradoxical ideation not only as the core narrative device that the film and its comic antecedents rely on, but also as the underlying ideology of the mediated context from which *Black Panther* emerges. For instance, understanding *Black Panther*’s contemporary significance requires engaging the tensions surrounding *Black Panther*’s origins; it emerged as a creative product of two second-generation U.S. American Jewish white men—Stanley Martin Lieber (aka Stan Lee) and Jacob Kurtzberg (aka Jack Kirby)—and is a commercial product of a company largely invested in reproducing ethnocentric ideologies of whiteness.⁸ Theorizing the 2018 film also requires consideration of the Walt Disney Company’s business practices, which incongruously champion both innovation and safety. We survey these paradoxical tensions to anchor and frame the analyses of *Black Panther* in this themed issue. To begin, we offer a plot synopsis that also exemplifies how paradoxical ideation governs the narrative of *Black Panther*.

***Black Panther* and paradoxical ideation**

Black Panther’s central plot pivots around three paradoxical ideations that drive the narrative toward climax and resolution: (1) Wakanda’s thriving reality versus global assumptions of its third-world status; (2) T’Challa’s nationalistic allegiance versus Killmonger’s diasporic activism; and (3) distinctions between providing aid and resisting capitalist structures. The film opens with Wakanda’s backstory to account for Wakandan wealth and explain how five African tribes came to live on land enriched by vibranium, a coveted metal resource with tremendous energy properties used to cultivate the country’s superior technological and medical advances. Wakandan scientists use this precious metal to provide its citizens with a quality of life and futuristic capabilities unavailable to the rest of the world. Of utmost importance is the use of vibranium to hide Wakanda under a cloak of technological invisibility and hoodwink the rest of the world into assuming the African nation is impoverished. Wakanda presents itself as stereotypically impoverished as a means of sovereign protection when, in fact, it is a wealthy African nation with a natural resource that could globally alleviate Black suffering. Because Wakanda is undetectable, other nations assume that the country and its people survive on minimal resources. In reality, Wakandans thrive in the most technologically and scientifically advanced nation in the world due to its exclusive and exclusionary access to vibranium,

a monopolistic arrangement that allows them to pursue innovation from a position of relative safety. The film's setting provides a candid example of how paradoxical ideation governs *Black Panther*—the story as well as the franchise.

The film centers Prince T'Challa's ascendance to the throne and emergence as the Black Panther in the aftermath of his father King T'Chaka's murder. The central conflict driving the plot emerges when Erik "Killmonger" Stevens (aka Prince N'Jadaka, his Wakandan title and birthname), returns to Wakanda from the U.S.A. to claim his birthright to the throne. Flashbacks reveal that Erik grew up in Oakland, CA, where he was abandoned by his Wakandan family after T'Chaka murdered his brother/Erik's father, Prince N'Jobu. Conflicted over ideological differences, T'Chaka killed N'Jobu because he was planning to distribute Wakanda's cherished resources and technology throughout the African diaspora to fund Black liberation. In direct opposition to T'Challa (and T'Chaka's legacy), Killmonger seeks the throne and Black Panther mantle to fulfill the dream his father died for. This conflict, framed as T'Challa's nationalistic allegiance versus Killmonger's diasporic activism, animates the tension between their divergent pathways to Black liberation. For T'Challa, his primary, and arguably only, responsibility is to those in Wakanda, whereas Killmonger embraces a greater responsibility to arm and empower a global Black community.

Early on, Killmonger defeats T'Challa in a battle for the throne and throws him over a waterfall to his presumed death. Once King, he begins to execute his plan to globally reveal Wakanda's power and mass-distribute vibranium. However, Nakia (a War Dog and T'Challa's romantic interest), Princess Shuri (a scientist and T'Challa's sister), Queen Ramonda (T'Challa and Shuri's mother), and U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Agent Everett Ross quickly flee Killmonger's rule and seek help from the Jabari Tribe. They discover that the tribe rescued T'Challa; he is alive, but comatose. T'Challa is healed with the vibranium-saturated purple heart-shaped herb that bestows the Black Panther with superhero abilities. Restored and determined, T'Challa kills Killmonger before he can distribute Wakandan resources and reclaims his role as King. At the end of the film, T'Challa relents somewhat to acknowledge Wakanda's global responsibility. The African nation establishes an international outreach center, dedicated to Shuri's scientific and technological acumen, in Oakland. This resolution introduces lingering tensions for audiences to consider; for instance, how might the outreach center as a "solution" in an impoverished neighborhood ultimately reinforce disempowering capitalist structures, educational systems, and respectability politics? Also, how/does one community outreach center—even if it serves predominantly Black children—materially disrupt the machinations of anti-Black racism?

Black Panther's central plot and internal paradoxes correspond to the tensions that have animated the Black Panther franchise since its inception and continue to shape the character's cinematic rendering. In the next sections, we briefly review the histories of both Marvel and Disney to situate this themed issue in a broader constellation of scholarly inquiry that centers Marvel Comics and its ideological work, the Walt Disney Company and its incongruous yet successful business practices, and *Black Panther's* collision with real world sociopolitical issues. The key histories and tensions we foreground in the Marvel and Disney origin stories highlight how Black Panther has always already been entangled with racialized historic and current affairs.

Marvel Comics and Black Panther's tenuous history

The origins of Marvel

Marvel's story starts during the Golden Age of Comics (1938–1956). Marvel's founder, Martin Goodman (1908–1992), published *Marvel Comics No. 1* under Timely Comics in 1939 to showcase superheroes amid the rise of Adolf Hitler's anti-Semitic Nazi regime, World War II, and beginnings of the Cold War Era.⁹ Soon after, Goodman featured a character who later became one of Marvel's beloved Avengers; Captain America first appeared in 1941 in *Captain America Comics No. 1*.¹⁰ Goodman's obituary features his son Charles's recollection of his father's early vision to use comics "to express his feelings about what the United States stood for."¹¹ Marvel's characters have long paired popular culture with political advocacy; fulfilling Goodman's vision, the cover of Captain America's debut comic features him punching Hitler.¹²

Spanning the Golden Age and the Silver Age of Comics (1956–1975), Marvel feverishly competed with its longstanding rival, DC Comics.¹³ When DC Comics sought to counter the Silver Age's decrease in comics' popularity by grouping seven famed superheroes together as the Justice League in *The Brave and the Bold No. 28* (1960), Marvel followed suit and debuted the Fantastic Four in *The Fantastic Four No. 1* (1961).¹⁴ Infamously created by Lee, a writer, and Kirby, an illustrator and writer, the Fantastic Four and subsequently the Avengers (1963)—an ever-changing squad of Marvel superheroes—secured Marvel's future. Many argue that the key distinctions between DC Comics and Marvel Comics during this transformative era were Marvel's willingness to humanize superheroes as flawed and emotional beings whose storylines echoed real world struggles.¹⁵

Mirroring Goodman's approach, Lee and Kirby were attentive to the sociohistorical politics of the 1960s era in which Marvel Comics and the Marvel Universe were established as brands that enticed fans' parasocial identification with superheroes scripted with relatable challenges such as self-doubt, responsibility, and loneliness.¹⁶ After initially being sketched as "Coal Tiger," Black Panther made his comic debut in *Fantastic Four No. 52* (1966) as the joint creation of Lee and Kirby and was "widely known as the first black superhero."¹⁷ Like their work on Black Panther's predecessors, the X-Men, who first appeared in *The X-Men No. 1* (1963), Lee and Kirby drew inspiration from the civil rights era to inform T'Challa's character development and storyline.¹⁸ Notably, although Lee and Kirby were inspired by the era, Black Panther is often erroneously linked to the Black Panther Party.¹⁹

Another key element of Black Panther's history is its haphazard false starts in the Marvel Universe following its debut. After several guest appearances in Marvel storylines featuring the Fantastic Four, Captain America, the Avengers, and Daredevil, Black Panther earned a solo comic series when the character became the central protagonist in *Jungle Action* (1973), which typically storied white adventurers' experiences.²⁰ Despite white normativity undermining Black Panther's solo appearances, the multi-issue story arc of this series solidified his place in the Marvel Universe. In 1977, Black Panther earned a self-titled series that was quickly cancelled after only 15 issues and did not return until 1988. Christopher Priest, hired in 1983 as "the first black writer to work full time at either Marvel or DC,"²¹ continued the trend of groundbreaking firsts associated with Black Panther. Priest proved pivotal to the character's genealogy when he revived Black

Panther's flat 1970s and 1980s storylines by reimagining T'Challa "as a Machiavellian master strategist concerned with maintaining Wakanda's sovereignty at all costs."²²

Black Panther and the trappings of white supremacist ideology

Despite Lee and Kirby's "good" intentions to tell stories that resonated with the Civil Rights Movement and to render the Marvel Universe more racially diverse, covert racist ideology and white supremacy have informed Black Panther from the beginning. Take for instance, Lee's defense of their decision to script Black Panther as "colored" against the Black community's rightful grievances with white normativity, token Black characters, and the lack of Black representation in the comic genre writ large.²³ In 1969, D. A. Latimer called attention to Marvel's exclusionary production and representation practices in Harlem's *East Village Other* by asserting, "The only black character with anything like top billing in the Marvel lexicon is a cat named T'Challa . . . [who] works with the Avengers in the guise of—now dig this—the Black Panther."²⁴ Latimer continues, "[W]hat Marvel needs now is somebody who can write spade dialogue. Everybody in Marvel sounds either like a refugee from a Shakespeare stock company or a Bronx bricklayer—Marvel can't even get 'sock it to me' to read right."²⁵

At Lee's instruction, a Marvel editorial assistant responded to Latimer's critique. The response, quoted at length below, entirely misses Latimer's keen point, authored from a disenfranchized racial positionality. Instead, it offers a disgruntled, oddly colorblind dismissal of white privilege and the omnipresence of whiteness in Marvel's Black characters:

We were particularly interested with your feature on Marvel and its dealings with the color situation; Mr. Latimer's approach, however, is such that we are concerned with the one-sided opinion your readers might have appreciated.

We would remind them that comic books are unrealistic by nature . . . The HULK is certainly not your average everyday factory worker, neither could Peter [Parker] be considered a typical college student. Why then would you think T'CHALLA representative of a Harlem superhero? Certainly the man is educated—many African kings, princes, and leaders are Oxford taught—why should [quoting Latimer] "this gentlemen in any way resemble Bobby Seale"?

Furthermore, you implied that THE PANTHER was a token Negro. When we became aware of the lack of Negroes in our magazines, and decided to introduce them into our stories, don't you think it would have looked rather foolish to suddenly have fifteen colored personalities appear and barnstorm through the books? . . . [W]e think that we have approached a decent start with these characters.²⁶

This passage reveals Marvel's disregard for considerations of racial marginalization and privilege, and the trivialization of their raced storytelling in the creation of Black Panther. This "defense" ignores Marvel's poignant responsibility for the lack of people of color in comics and self-congratulatorily commends their own efforts to depart from token portrayals in an overwhelmingly white genre they helped to create and sustain. What Lee and this editorial assistant utterly fail to understand is that T'Challa is an African King and superhero created and scripted by white people, thereby rendering him a representation of African and Black masculinity according to the white imagination.

Moreover, just like Captain America, Black Panther is moored by Western values and virtues despite hailing from Africa—a continent that has been marred for centuries by Western ideology.

Another example of how ideologies of whiteness and colonialism are scripted into Black Panther is the disconnect between the first Black comic superhero debuting during the Civil Rights Movement and Lee and Kirby's purposeful avoidance of narratives that address racial tensions/conflicts/violence in the U.S.A.²⁷ Instead, they opted for a storyline that takes place in the fictionalized Wakanda on the African continent. Troubling the underlying geopolitics of their choice, Martin Lund argues that Black Panther (and the entirety of Marvel Comics and the MCU) must be understood within the context of the Cold War and U.S. fears about what the “then-recent decolonization of several African nations could mean for the United States and the Cold War.”²⁸ Symbolically, Black Panther “alleviate[d] those fears by ‘proving’ that the new African nation-states would align themselves with the West.”²⁹ This trajectory of critique exposes Black Panther's roots in the (neo)colonial imaginary wherein a seemingly positive representation of African culture on the African continent, in actuality, favors the Eurocentric West and functions as a counterirritant in relation to real world African empowerment and independence. Thus, Lee and Kirby crafted a storyline that, quite differently from the Civil Rights Movement, failed to challenge white (neo)colonial sensibilities, thereby pacifying their predominantly white U.S. American readership.

Embracing the friction between how Blackness is imagined by white writers versus how Blackness is authored by cultural insiders, Black Panther's roots are not entirely ruinous, and should not be dismissed as a solely reductionist imagination of Blackness and Africa. As a Wakandan Prince, T'Challa is “not a Dark Continent noble savage but a scientific genius”³⁰ who contests caricatured portrayals of African and African American men. Even more compelling is Lee's creation of Wakanda's “techno-jungle,” described in the Museum of Pop Culture's “Marvel: Universe of Superheroes” exhibit as “a landscape of machines, cables, and circuits structured like plants, lianas, and trees.”³¹ Commonly misinterpreted as a new feature of the Afrofuturist MCU screenplay for those unfamiliar with the comics, Lee and Kirby's techno-jungle provided the comic book foundation for MCU's scientifically and technologically advanced portrayal of a predominantly Black country and continent. This too is paradoxical in that a techno-jungle was utilized as the narrative vehicle that Lee and Kirby chose to showcase Africa's technological and scientific genius. Yet, through Black Panther's comic book and cinematic retelling, audiences bear witness to Africa as it always has been—a vanguard continent replete with peoples and resources that should be revered for their worldly contributions. As Marsha R. Robinson and Caryn Neumann write, *Black Panther* “takes some people to a place they never knew existed—an African nation that governs itself, manages its own economy and defense, educates and cares for its people and others, and does so without European paternalism or mission trips.”³² The question yet to be answered satisfyingly capitulates a sociopolitical weakness that spans the comics and the screenplay: Why did Lee and Kirby need to create a fictionalized country over 6,000 miles from Marvel's headquarters in Manhattan, NY, when Harlem, as but one example, was less than 20 miles away?

The Disneyfication of Black Panther

The contextual tensions that render Black Panther a fascinating cultural phenomenon emerge not only from Marvel Comics' origin stories, but also from the Walt Disney Company's history and political economy. Once Disney acquired Marvel in 2009 and took charge of the MCU, Disneyfication³³ became relevant to theorizations of *Black Panther* in multiple ways, including the imposition of Disney's branding and the consequences of its rigid commitment to formulaic storytelling. On the one hand, it is ridiculous that the Black community specifically and Marvel fans generally had to wait 50+ years for Black Panther to shift from comics to the MCU while one white male superhero peer after another (e.g., Iron Man, Thor, Captain American, Spider-Man etc.) did so repeatedly. On the other hand, that Black Panther finally made the cinematic leap is directly linked to the Walt Disney Company (WDC) being a gargantuan conglomerate that could withstand risk and failure if the MCU's first Black superhero film did not fare well at the box office. Therefore, understanding key aspects of how Disney's media empire originated is essential to theorizing this cinematic iteration of Black Panther and its cultural implications.

Since its founding in 1923, the WDC grew from a small family business to one of the largest media conglomerates in the world primarily due to three consistent business strategies: (1) industry innovation; (2) the logic of safety; and (3) proprietary acquisition. Initially founded as the Disney Brothers Cartoon Studio by Walter Elias Disney (1901–1966) and his brother Roy Oliver Disney (1893–1971),³⁴ the WDC is valued at approximately \$150 billion: \$40.9 billion in revenue/\$99.9 billion in assets/\$11 billion in profit.³⁵ Nearly a century later, innovation, safety, and acquisition still govern Disney's business practices and thereby affect productions such as *Black Panther*.

Testifying to Walt Disney's ambitious vision and its continuance long after his death in 1966, the WDC has an impressive list of industry firsts. In its early days, the WDC was the first to use preproduction storyboards and three-strip technicolor.³⁶ Moreover, "Steamboat Willie" (1928), one of the three animated shorts that introduced Mickey Mouse to consumers, was the first cartoon with synchronized sound; *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) was the first full-length animated feature and the first film coupled with a soundtrack release; *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) was the first full-length animated film to earn an Oscar nomination; and *Toy Story* (1995) was the first full-length computer-generated imagery film produced.³⁷

In addition to prioritizing innovation, the WDC relentlessly relies upon the logic of safety to ensure future successes. The logic of safety refers to a formulaic profit maximization strategy that—ironically—steers away from innovation to incentivize repetition. Brian L. Ott and Robert L. Mack describe it as "the art of imitation," which, looking to the WDC's princess and heroine franchise as an exemplar, dates all the way back to Snow White.³⁸ As detailed in a collector's issue of *Hollywood Spotlight*:

Walt [Disney] developed a recipe that would be used for years to come: Take a pretty princess, add a handsome leading man ... , mix with a jealous villain and add a generous sprinkling of catchy songs. In approximately 80 minutes ... you should have your happily-ever-after ending.³⁹

From one decade to the next, the WDC compulsively uses this formula (with notably minor tweaks) to spark nostalgia among loyal fans and captivate new audiences across

a typology of classical, renaissance, and revival princesses.⁴⁰ Successfully leveraged for its princess and heroine franchise and animated films, the WDC has extended this formulaic approach to the MCU.

Thirdly, the WDC, especially under Bob Iger's tenure as Chief Executive Officer from 2005 to 2020, has monetized corporate acquisition by acquiring lucrative franchises. By purchasing Pixar in 2006 for \$7.4 billion, Marvel in 2009 for \$4.24 billion, Lucasfilm in 2012 for 4.05 billion, and, most recently, the major holdings of 21st Century Fox in 2019 for a whopping \$71.3 billion,⁴¹ the WDC has tightened its proprietary hold on screenplay rights to Marvel superheroes, largely snuffed out major competitors, and Disneyfied (i.e., reconfigured) established companies and beloved characters "in accordance with Disney's own core values,"⁴² thereby profiting in spectacular, capitalist fashion. Reflecting on the Marvel Entertainment purchase, Iger said, "This is perfect from a strategic perspective . . . This treasure trove of over 5,000 characters offers Disney the ability to do what we do best,"⁴³ referencing the WDC's strongholds on production, distribution, advertising, and licensing that entice intergenerational cradle-to-grave consumers. Obvious, yet largely unstated, was the WDC's desire to develop a franchise that appealed to boys and men mirroring the gendered appeal of their uber profitable princesses and heroines. Far beyond recouping its \$4.24 billion investment, "[s]ince releasing its first Disney-produced Marvel movie in 2012 [*The Avengers*], the company has earned more than \$18.2 billion at the global box office."⁴⁴

While Marvel is an acquisition that has imaginably secured not only Iger's legacy, but also the future fandom of the Disney brand, the WDC's reliance on the logics of safety and acquisition as successful business strategies are as contentious as they are admirable. At the heart of the controversy is a critique of how the WDC severely concentrates media ownership and undermines democratic commitments to small business entrepreneurs, ideological diversity, and independent thinking.⁴⁵ Critics of the Disneyfication of Marvel and Marvel's "superhero-industrial complex"⁴⁶ are deeply concerned with the homogenization of filmmaking and its effects on audience expectations and theatre runs.⁴⁷ Actor and director Martin Scorsese describes what the MCU is lacking: "What's not there is revelation, mystery, or genuine emotional danger. Nothing is at risk. The pictures are made to satisfy a specific set of demands, and they are designed as variations on a finite number of themes."⁴⁸ Similarly, Jeet Heer describes the MCU as "a hugely popular but ultimately cookie-cutter franchise."⁴⁹

Extending these critiques into the realm of race, the power of Disneyfication cannot be underestimated because it is a process that secures white, U.S. American, ethnocentric normativity at the corporate foundation of every MCU film—even *Black Panther*, despite its predominantly Black cast and production crew. Marvel's cookie-cutter approach anchored in the logic of safety prioritizes sameness over difference and reinforces a mythically normative "superhero" grounded in dominant logics of whiteness. As Audre Lorde reminds us, "[i]nstitutionalized rejection of difference is an absolute necessity in a profit economy which needs outsiders as surplus people."⁵⁰ Thus, Disney's business model allows *Black Panther* to be minimally different from its MCU peers, despite being the first Black superhero film in the franchise. Nowhere is *Black Panther*'s compatibility with whiteness more apparent than in what Scott J. Varda and Leslie A. Hahner term the alt-right and far-right's "matrix of interpretation" utilized to appropriate the film as a Trumpian homage.⁵¹ While auteurs and actors certainly

cannot control interpretations or appropriations of their work, the WDC's (un)conscious allegiance to white supremacy throughout its history and political economy render its productions vulnerable to all forms of discursive whiteness—even those the corporation itself may deem abhorrent.

Black Panther's Afrofuturistic significance within and beyond dominant landscapes

Dating back to his first appearance in 1966, Black Panther's significance as a cultural phenomenon registers on myriad fronts; historically, socially, politically, and economically. The histories of Marvel and Disney highlight how Black Panther has always already been entangled with historic and current affairs; yet the global reach of present-day media deepens these entanglements and concretizes the film's cultural significance in unprecedented ways. Before previewing the essays in this themed issue, we turn our attention briefly to detailing how and why *Black Panther* symbolically resonates as a sign of Black empowerment, white consciousness, and racial progress.

Written by Ryan Coogler and Joe Robert Cole and directed by Ryan Coogler, *Black Panther* premiered on February 16, 2018. The long-awaited adaptation of the character became the first and only MCU film to feature a Black protagonist and predominantly Black cast in the 12 years since the MCU released its first film. Importantly, all the lead roles and most of the supporting roles were played by Black and African actors, including Chadwick Boseman, Michael B. Jordan, Lupita Nyong'o, Danai Gurira, Letitia Wright, Connie Chiume, Atandwa Kani, and John Kani. Another distinction from Hollywood's superhero genre is *Black Panther's* geopolitical location outside of the U.S.A. in a thriving African nation that exists beyond the grip of Western imperialism. Wakanda's fictional setting permitted the cinematic narrative to flourish beyond the normative boundaries of Black suffering and racialized catastrophe that have become ornamental in Hollywood (e.g., *Precious* [2009], *The Help* [2011], *Django Unchained* [2012], *12 Years a Slave* [2013]). The film initially faced questions from industry insiders about whether global moviegoers were prepared to support a superhero film with a predominantly Black cast. Describing the film as a "bigger gamble" than its franchise peers, Evan Narcisse—one of the Marvel Comics writers who works under Ta-Nehisi Coates—recounts that "the king of Wakanda hadn't enjoyed the same kind of awareness and name recognition as his Avengers teammates, and a solo movie seemed like a risk for the Marvel moviemaking machine."⁵²

Since the 1960s, albeit intermittently, authors have tremendously expanded Black Panther's social and political commentary, with Coates's take on the character as a prime example.⁵³ Coates and his team of writers and illustrators use sophisticated Afrofuturistic frames to mobilize Afrofuturism's "expression of suppressed and marginalized imaginaries" in service to "a dynamic alternative that challenges the dominant, mainstream portrayal of African American reality."⁵⁴ Far more complex than being reduced to a specialist genre of science fiction, Afrofuturistic storytelling leverages the mainstays of sci-fi including, but not limited to, technological innovation, fantasy, magic, and cosmic energies to reenvision the past, present, and future.⁵⁵ In a section of *Afrofuturism* titled "Black to the Future," Ytasha L. Womack describes an Afrofuturist as anyone who "ever wondered why black people are minimized in pop culture depictions of the future,

conspicuously absent from the history of science, or marginalized in the roster of past inventors and then actually set out to do something about it.”⁵⁶ Ultimately, as Afrofuturist storytelling, *Black Panther* represents far more than a marginal comic book character merely “constricted to the panels and imagination of the reader.”⁵⁷ Instead, the character and the universe his story cultivates represent the “intersections of race, science, speculative fiction, black culture, African tradition and technology, and as such stand as ideological place-holders for variegated expressions of black racial identity and black futurism.”⁵⁸

While economic metrics should never determine the cultural value of Afrofuturist cinema, dismiss the power of representation, or mask commodification as a key strategy used in Hollywood to objectify actors of color, *Black Panther* did indeed set several box office records in 2018. It ended the year with the highest domestic gross (\$700 million) of all films, finished second to *Avengers: Infinity War* in worldwide gross (\$1.3 billion), and remains the highest-grossing solo-superhero film as well as the highest-grossing film with a Black director.⁵⁹ Its multiple Academy Award nominations, including Best Motion Picture; Oscar wins for Costume Design, Production Design, and Original Score; and Golden Globe nominations for Best Original Song, Best Original Score, and Best Motion Picture speak for the film’s technical and ideological achievements, as does *Black Panther*’s status as the only Marvel Studio film to win an Oscar.⁶⁰ Further indicative of unabashed fandom are the global hashtag #WakandaForever, the intertextual appearance of the Wakanda Forever! salute in television shows such as CBS’s *The Good Fight* (2017–), recent speculation that Harriet Tubman’s image on OneUnited Bank’s new Visa debit card features the famed salute, and actor Octavia Spencer’s viral Instagram post that declared it will be her “new handshake” amid the global coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.⁶¹

While *Black Panther* espouses Afrofuturist discourses of African and African American independence and freedom that are continually circulating among everyday people as sites and sources of resistance, the history of the franchise hemmed in by capitalist logics render it hostage to antiquated ideals, including not only white normativity, but also the gender binary, heteropatriarchy, a devaluation of kinship and rapport between Black men, and a dangerously simplistic portrayal of a mythical “Africa” through all-too-familiar tropes of tribalism, exoticization, and African Others. As but one example: while the Dora Milaje are a formidable corps of women warriors with physical and intellectual acumen on admirable display, the film utilizes this representation of Black femininity to valorize militarism. Not only do the Dora Milaje offer *Black Panther*’s strongest display of militarization, but they do so under the—albeit subtle—surveillance of the male gaze. Despite Coates’s early acknowledgement that he was cognizant and “uncomfortable” with the comic’s depiction of the Dora Milaje as “a scantily clad troop of female bodyguards devoted to the Black Panther,”⁶² sexist and racist undertones remain ubiquitous in the film.

As Beschara Karam and Mark Kirby-Hirst assert, it is precisely because *Black Panther* “foregrounds black characters in the context of the white MCU, and precisely because it presents an alternative potential narrative to that offered by the extant while Eurocentric histories of colonial and postcolonial relations that the film ought to be studied.”⁶³ Indeed, *Black Panther*’s complex representation and counter/hegemonic storytelling render it a cultural text that speaks volumes to communication scholars. For instance: the industry that produced the film invites rhetorical, organizational, and political analyses of

neoliberalism and capitalism. Disney's corporatized labor across multiple mediated platforms to incite fandom calls for strategic communication inquiry. The Afrofuturist imagination of science and technology invite critique in health and science communication and media ecology. And, of course, the film stimulates ample opportunities for critical/cultural and critical interpersonal scholars to interrogate identity politics, diversity, and difference.

In addition to these broad disciplinary interests, communication scholars will find that a close consideration of context reveals the timing of *Black Panther's* 2018 release as momentous far beyond the MCU and Hollywood because it coincided with important historical events and developments—in both the nation and our discipline. As such, *Black Panther* accentuates, signifies, and participates in a wealth of conversations to which communication scholars have much to contribute and from which our discipline has much to learn. Take for example, the film's discursive presence alongside divergent cultural phenomena ranging from movements such as #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName to the Trump Administration's white supremacist rhetoric and policy to—just days before its release—the Obamas' official portraits being unveiled. Furthermore, 2018 marked the 50th anniversary of key civil rights turning points, including the assassination of Dr. Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., President Lyndon B. Johnson signing into law the Fair Housing Act, and Tommie Smith and John Carlos's Black Power salute at the Mexico City Olympics. Relevant to communication studies, this is the same year the Black Caucus in the National Communication Association was founded. Since the civil rights era, communication studies has both preceded and mirrored national progress via rebellious protests; sustained progress toward equity and inclusion, and—albeit sporadically—the election of Black presidents to our national and regional organizations (NCA, WSCA, CSCA, ECA, and SSCA);⁶⁴ the presence of Black scholars as graduate students, tenure-track faculty, and department chairs; and the dedication of space in our journals to issues of race, racism, and Blackness in particular.⁶⁵ As one vehicle for greater representation within our discipline, the contributors to this themed issue collectively join conversations surrounding racialized exclusions, struggles, and progress—within communication studies and beyond. In the next section, we preview each of the eight essays—they too tangle with *Black Panther's* paradoxical ideation—before concluding with possibilities and provocations for ongoing scholarly conversations.

Preview of contributions

This themed issue begins with Godfried A. Asante and Gloria Nziba Pindi's analysis of *Black Panther's* portrayal of transnational Blackness and African diasporic solidarity in "(Re)imagining African Futures." Welcoming cinematic expressions of Black consciousness and aesthetics alongside the film's efforts to counterhegemonically portray Black bodies, they highlight contradictions within the politics of Black consciousness and leverage those tensions to interrogate transnational representations of Blackness, transformation, and solidarity. Notably, they suggest that Wakanda's isolationist politics and political power structures align more with Western values than with African worldviews. Furthermore, they trouble T'Challa's embodiment of neoliberal respectability politics and collaboration with settler-colonial governments to redeem Killmonger as a powerful representation of the "trauma of suppression that haunts the imaginaries of audiences from

continental Africa.” Their interpretation importantly upends the reductive, two-dimensional narrative of heroes and villains that presents a false choice between these characters’ versions of Black liberation politics.

In “Wakanda for Everyone,” Fatima Zahrae Chrifi Alaoui and Shadee Abdi continue the conversation regarding transnational representation, exclusion, and inclusion. Asserting that the utopic haven of Wakanda leaves out many critical identities, concerns, and realities of Africans on the continent and in the diaspora, they join scholars who argue that *Black Panther* is not a film for Africans, but a film for Black and African Americans. Specifically, their essay critiques the film’s reprehensible lack of Muslim representation, particularly given the prominence of people practicing Islam on the African continent. They contend that the film largely excludes and erases Muslims from the romanticized vision of Wakanda but for a short scene that associates Islam with violence and extremism while also positioning Muslim women as in need of saving. As such, in a far too familiar way, *Black Panther* participates in Hollywood’s devotion to Islamophobic storytelling.

Similarly interested in exclusion and erasure, Michaela D. E. Meyer scrutinizes underrepresented intersections of Black identity in “*Black Panther*, Queer Erasure, and Intersectional Representation in Popular Culture.” Given the film’s celebrated representational politics in relation to race, Meyer troubles the absence of a lesbian relationship between Ayo and Aneka, two warriors in the Dora Milaje. Although recent Black Panther comics featured their relationship prominently, the cinematic adaptation removed all references to their queer sexuality—so much so that even a brief scene that hinted at Ayo’s sexuality did not make the film’s final cut. Meyer situates this narrative erasure within the exclusion of women of color across the film industry as producers, writers, directors, and actors. Additionally, these failures in intersectional representation are located within the larger heteronormative political economy of the MCU, wherein time and again, writers and directors ignore or erase portrayals of intersectional queer identities. Meyer suggests that these exclusions—within *Black Panther*, across the MCU, and throughout the industry—render the film’s Afrocentric and Afrofuturistic vision incomplete because it phobically positions queerness as unwelcome and nonexistent.

Amber L. Johnson offers a performative essay that questions the futuristic visions of *Black Panther*’s Afrofuturist narrative in “The Dark Matter(s) of Wakanda.” They argue that the film “projects a future of perfection designed according to an ethnocentric Western sense of perfection.” Johnson’s testimony expresses a desire to belong within Wakanda’s world of unapologetic Blackness and freedom from colonialism; yet, they explore the “dark matters”—the ideological pitfalls and oppressive realities—that dash their resonance and residence within *Black Panther*’s universe. Johnson highlights “compulsory heterosexuality, compulsory able-bodiedness, the gender binary, exoticizing the Other, and capitalism” as the dark matters that constrain *Black Panther*’s Afrofuturistic vision, ultimately suppressing its potential to be as revolutionary and inclusive as it is often proclaimed to be. Despite these limitations, Johnson concludes that *Black Panther* invites audiences into conversation about radical imaginings of a “liberated future free from racism,” conversations that have the potential to help construct pathways toward materially better futures.

In “Watching *Black Panther* with Racially Diverse Youth,” Carlos Allende González-Velázquez, Karen E. Shackleford, Lauren N. Keller, Cynthia Vinney, and Lawrence M. Drake employ a pretest–post-test survey to ascertain the psychological effects of

watching *Black Panther* for ethnically diverse youth. Recognizing *Black Panther's* disruption of representational hegemony, their study explores how strongly a sample of diverse teenagers identify with their own ethnic identity and the protagonist to measure how that identification informs their feelings of empowerment and wellbeing upon watching the film. They hypothesize that affirming portrayals of Black characters in the film would benefit Black/African American youth who identified with these characters (and possibly youth of other minoritized racial and ethnic backgrounds) by increasing their wellbeing and empowerment. The authors find that, in addition to complex results regarding viewers' identification with T'Challa and Killmonger, watching *Black Panther* increased a sense of empowerment among their sample of Black/African American viewers. Likewise, the film had a significant effect on wellbeing among the Black/African American and Asian American viewers in their sample.

Jenna N. Hanchey analyzes the film's Afrofuturist vision of the politics of international aid in "Decolonizing Aid in *Black Panther*." Ideologies of colonial power often animate international aid, especially aid sent to Africa from Western countries that criminalize needing help and espouse racist apparitions of the continent. In contrast, Afrofuturism disrupts Western hegemony and crafts visions of more liberatory engagement. Hanchey argues that although centering Wakanda as the advanced, developed aid-giver begins to challenge some neocolonial assumptions and politics that frequently drive international aid, *Black Panther* ultimately falls short of its potential to productively delink aid from prevailing neocolonial, white savior ideologies.

Jordan L. Johnson and Kristen Hoerl examine *Black Panther* as a neocolonial text that privileges U.S. and Western geopolitical interests in "Suppressing Black Power through *Black Panther's* Neocolonial Allegory." They contend that the film reductively positions neocolonial governance as well as the structures of neoliberal capitalism as the only pathways to Black empowerment. The authors first explore the narrative tension between T'Challa and Killmonger as symbolic of longstanding debates over pathways toward Black political agency in the face of oppression. Killmonger's story pathologizes resistance to colonial oppression as vengeance for personal traumas and deflects attention from structural conditions that perpetuate global racial inequality. His tragic story further frames T'Challa's philanthropic coordination with the U.S.A. (and other colonial powers) as the solution to institutionalized wealth disparities experienced by Black communities. Their analysis then turns to the film's supporting character, white CIA Agent Everett K. Ross, whose peripheral role diverts critical attention from the character's validation of white benevolence through neocolonial interventionist politics. Jordan and Hoerl offer a convincing interpretation of *Black Panther's* central narrative as an allegory that affirms neocolonialism, pinpoints Black militancy as a threat to peace, and legitimates cooperation with white, Western nations as the "correct" pathway toward empowerment.

In "Tell Me the Story of Home," Felicia L. Harris engages W. E. B. Du Bois's double consciousness to theorize Erik "Killmonger" Stevens/N'Jadaka's movement among his multiple selves and his unsuccessful attempt to reconcile these identities. Killmonger is situated as symbolic of Black American malaise and his narrative underscores the limitations of *Black Panther's* Afrofuturist imaginings to address real world complications of racialized identity politics, nationalism, and globalized oppressions. While Wakandans are afforded the status of "human," Killmonger remains an alien Other who is not afforded the privilege of home, despite his Wakandan identity. Consequently, his rejection and

defeat signify a familiar discomfort that conceivably resonates with the lived experiences of Black U.S. American viewers. Compellingly, Harris asks, “What good can come from imagining an alternate reality?”—particularly when, like Kilmonger, Black U.S. American audience members cannot readily reconcile themselves in imagined stories of home.

Concluding thoughts

Our intention is to blend voices, theoretical perspectives, and methods from different areas of communication studies. We intentionally cultivated an intellectual space that reflects multiple, overlapping, and contradictory paradigmatic theorizations from across the discipline. In the interest of offering a wider range of critique, we asked authors to craft their arguments in 4,500 words or fewer. Collectively, the authors and essays featured in this themed issue join the steadily growing chorus of scholars who carefully acknowledge the progressive potential of *Black Panther* while insisting that the film concedes far too much to dominant cultural forces in exchange for popularity and profit.

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First, we thank the reviewers for this themed issue, a role in which the intellectual labor often remains invisible; this collection of essays benefitted from their collective expertise and attentive feedback. We also thank the participants in the 2018 National Communication Association *Black Panther* Preconference who generously shared their time, energy, and intellect, which, in turn, galvanized our motivation to secure journal space for this themed issue. We are especially grateful to our cofacilitators at that preconference—Godfried A. Asante, Rachel E. Dubrofsky, Aisha Durham, and Gloria Nziba Pindi—who helped stimulate rich dialogue about the film. Additionally, we are grateful to the many scholars who submitted their work for consideration; to submit one’s work is a personal, political, and vulnerable intellectual endeavor. We hope authors whose work was not ultimately published here continue to pursue their meaningful projects. To those whose work is featured herein, we offer you a mountain of thanks for accommodating our questions, nudges, line edits, and editorial angst. Finally, a profound thank you to Kathleen McConnell and Sohinee Roy. Their brilliant editorial acumen guided us steadily through this process. We thank them for their trust, collaboration, and, above all, patience.

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64. Respectively: National Communication Association, Western States Communication Association, Central States Communication Association, Eastern Communication Association, and Southern States Communication Association.
65. As coeditors, we are enormously grateful to the *Review of Communication* for allowing us to cultivate this themed issue. We simultaneously want to emphasize the need for not only more work that centers Blackness in *all* its myriad iterations, but also work that does so differently than we do here. Thus, communication studies is in dire need of theorizations of Blackness that are not anchored in media and popular culture.