EDICIONES COMPLUTENSE

Africanías. Revista de literaturas
e-ISSN: 2990-2630

MONOGRÁFICO

Wakanda as a Conditional African Utopia: Analysing *Black Panther's* Excursion (in)to Neoliberal Intergalactic Futures

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Recibido: 17/05/2025. Revisado: 04/06/2025. Aceptado: 11/07/2025 https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/afri.102813

Abstract: Black Panther's entry into the Marvel Cinematic Universe marks a significant moment in mainstream speculative fiction, offering a promising representation of blackness and Africanism while challenging Western cultural schemata. However, scholars argue that the film also reflects opportunistic capitalist moves, noting that despite celebrating black excellence, much remains to be done. This article examines how Wakanda's cartographic and sociopolitical features facilitate its categorisation as a customary utopian place and how its evolution from tribal myth to technocratic global power mirrors the shifting trends in the conception of utopia as a projection of desired sociability and the effects this brings to Afrofuturism. The discussion raises whether Wakanda serves as an effective tool against white supremacy or merely reinforces the Western hegemonic discourses that Robin James (2014) calls the MRWaSP (multi-racial white supremacist patriarchy). Ultimately, as the film's optimistic ending, which promotes sharing Wakandan technology and wealth, aligns with neoliberal interventionist intergalactic policies, this study also revisits Afropolitanism and its idealisation in Wakanda's utopianism, juxtaposing dissenting opinions: while this Pan-African utopia certainly celebrates multicultural blackness and its universal significance, it also raises criticism about the dangers of using this tale of black excellence as *the* representation of Africa.
Keywords: *Black Panther*, Afrofuturism, utopian studies, neoliberalism, blackness.

ESP Wakanda como utopía africana condicional: Análisis de *Black Panther* y su desviación de/hacia futuros intergalácticos neoliberales

Resumen: La entrada de Black Panther en el universo de Marvel marca un hito en la ficción especulativa de masas al ofrecer una prometedora representación de negritud y africanismo desafiando esquemas culturales occidentales. No obstante, la película también reproduce lógicas capitalistas oportunistas, celebrando la excelencia negra sin cuestionar del todo estructuras hegemónicas. Este artículo analiza cómo las características cartográficas y sociopolíticas de Wakanda lo configuran como una utopía al uso y cómo su evolución de mito tribal a potencia tecnocrática refleja tendencias cambiantes en la concepción de utopías como proyección de una sociabilidad deseada, además de los efectos que ello conlleva para el afrofuturismo. El debate plantea si Wakanda sirve como herramienta eficaz contra la supremacía blanca o simplemente refuerza discursos hegemónicos occidentales del patriarcado multirracial supremacista blanco (James, 2014). Además, atendiendo al final optimista de la película, que promueve compartir la riqueza de Wakanda alineándose asi con políticas intergalácticas intervencionistas neoliberales, este estudio también revisa el afropolitanismo y su idealización en el utopismo de Wakanda, yuxtaponiendo opiniones discrepantes: aunque esta utopía panafricana celebra sin duda una negritud multicultural y universal, también plantea críticas sobre los peligros de utilizar este relato de excelencia negra como única representación de África.
Palabras clave: *Black Panther*, afrofuturismo, estudios utópicos, neoliberalismo, negritud.

Cómo citar: Machado-Jiménez, A. (2025). Wakanda as a Conditional African Utopia: Analysing *Black Panther's* Excursion (in)to Neoliberal Intergalactic Futures. *Revista de Literaturas* 3, e102813, https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/afri.102813

Considered *the* black utopia by the media, the depiction of the lands of Wakanda at the release of *Black Panther* in 2018 revived the feeling of Pan-Africanism, as the film "left Black moviegoers feeling a sense of pride" (Strong & Chaplin, 2019, p. 58) and fostered unity worldwide (Adeniyi, 2022). Carrington (2019) explains that the success of this blockbuster hinges on its "fan service for African Americans" (p. 6) and all black diaspora individuals. From the cast and direction to the screening of cultures, styles, and music, the representation of this afro-futurist *and* africanfuturist[1] utopia in the Disney conglomerate finally grants black people a major "ground for our quandaries, preoccupations, and anxieties—in other words, an opportunity to use popular culture the way everyone else does" (p. 8). These imaginaries imply the existence of "breaches opening up to a different vision of contemporary modes of living" (Fendler, 2022, p. 238), thus successfully offering a positive alternative to the old narrow Afro-pessimism narratives.

Nonetheless, Nama addresses this superhero utopian narrative as "critically celebratory" (2009, p. 135). On the one hand, *Black Panther* has made a significant impact as a cultural product during a period when mainstream science fiction envisioned "a color-blind future" (Bould, 2007, p. 175) due to the lack of representation of people of colour. The comic has promoted Black excellence since the 1950s-1960s, during the Black Freedom movement, to the present, "attack[ing] essentialist notions of racial subjectivity" (Nama, 2009, p. 136). However, a deeper analysis of the film as a Marvel Cinematic Universe production reveals the flaws of Wakanda as utopian. Additionally, it uncovers Hollywood's manipulation of hope under the façade of this fan service, which has become a powerful strategy to bamboozle spectators into capitalist ends (Carrington, 2019, p. 6). This research discusses the challenges of genuinely exercising postcolonial utopianism when the traditional concepts associated with the projection of utopian futures, such as hope and resilience, are imbued with the dominant neoliberal discourses. In doing so, this research supports Kilgore's propositions on the future of science fiction: that race has become a significant component in contemporary literary and audiovisual representations of the genre, but that racism still persists in some form (2010, p. 17). The study also highlights concerns about complicity in sustaining discrimination, particularly through the Afropolitan privilege that portrays Wakanda as the ideal representation of Africa.

1. Utopia in MRWaSP Times and the Marvel Universe: An Epic of Contemporary Resilience

The individual's capacity to depict more promising futures has always supposed revolutionary insofar as it allows "to suspend normality for a moment [...], thereby transgressing the present and believing in possible futures to come" (Evans & Reid, 2013, p. 96). Interestingly, Ashcroft's work (2013; 2021) has distinctly stated how resilience works as the driving force of African utopianism, not only in its persistence of memory but also of "hope for freedom from colonial oppression" (2013, 103). This collaborative ontology of the not-yet that emerges through imaginative action (e.g., Bloch, 1959/1986; Sargisson, 1996; Wrangel, 2014) is what characterises Afrofuturism, and more recently africanfuturism, which merges past with futurity to imagine alternative realities where blackness is not experienced under white subjugation. In order to depict these utopian landscapes, Afrofuturism aims to transgress "the normalized disparity between the black body and the cybernetic technological future" (Rollefson, 2008, p. 90); and yet, Rollefson warns about the dangers of turning this critical view on society into the restabilisation of black inferiority in unprecedented ways.

In this regard, Eshun (2003) and James (2014) warn about the incorporation of these utopian imaginaries into the hegemonic discourses that foster white supremacy: "Capital continues to function through the dissimulation of the imperial archive [...]. Today, however, power also functions through envisioning, management, and the delivery of reliable futures" (Eshun, 2003, p. 289). Additionally, resilience no longer works as a form of resistance as it has become the core of our 21st-century globalised Western hegemony. In James' words (2014), the shift that comes along with neoliberalism "upgrades classical white supremacist capitalist patriarchy [...] into multi-racial white supremacist patriarchy" (p. 11). This contemporary form of sociability diffuses binary opposition to include "*some* formerly excluded/abjected groups in racial/sexual supremacy, because *this inclusion further reinforces both the supremacy of the hyperelites and the precarity of those who pose the greatest threat* to MRWaSP hegemony" (p. 12).

This way, the incorporation of a black superhero such as Black Panther and the depiction of Wakanda as an African utopia within the Hollywood franchise of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) represents a critical celebration of blackness, instantaneously absorbed by MRWaSP in contemporary society. This predicament will directly affect the construction of Wakanda as a utopia, since its acknowledgement remains consistently conditional on its perception by the eyes of Western countries and the profit others' derive from it.

The success of their regulated inclusion into dominant representations without encountering counter-hegemonic resistance relies on the appeal of portraying individuals' resilience as their ultimate instance of empowerment. While Ashcroft describes resilience as the essence of African utopianism and Schott as a "discourse of futurity" (2013, p. 213), presenting correlations with Afrofuturism, this form of resistance is hindered in the present as it has become an investment in "life as human capital" (James, 2014, p. 49). In other words, subjects are reduced to the wealth they can produce for the system's success. The commodification of utopia under MRWaSP hyper-elites eventually conceives resilience to cope with the present instead of

[1] The term *africanfuturism* is coined by the Nigerian American writer Nnedi Okorafor, and she states that it must be spelt as one word and not capitalised. In her post "Africanfuturism Defined" (2019), she described the genre as an alternative to Afrofuturism that is "centered on and predominantly written by people of African descent (black people) and it is rooted first and foremost in Africa. It's less concerned with 'what could have been' and more concerned with 'what is and can/will be'. It acknowledges, grapples with and carries 'what has been'". Although *Black Panther* includes interactions with the United States to explore matters of the diaspora, the analysis of Wakanda as a utopian land also aligns with africanfuturism—deepening its focus on the African continent.

forging it (Wrangel, 2014, p. 184) and produces what Eshun (2003) calls a futurism fatigue in contemporary Afrofuturism due to the commodification of future:

> In the colonial era of the early to middle twentieth century, avant-gardists from Walter Benjamin to Frantz Fanon revolted in the name of the future against a power structure that relied on control and representation of the historical archive. Today, the situation is reversed. The powerful employ futurists and draw power from the futures they endorse, thereby condemning the disempowered to live in the past. (p. 289)

This sterile motion on actuality is similarly perceived in the notion of hope—the second key feature of African utopianism (Ashcroft, 2013). Under mainstream resilience, despite "striving to promote the potentiality of hopeful life, we are incessantly reminded not to step out of hope. Not to change the present, but to remain hopeful in it" (Wrangel, 2014, p. 194). As a result, resilience masquerades the exploitation of the subaltern not only to ensure hegemonic prosperity but also to make it desirable. This illustrates Suvin's Disneyfication (2003), which guarantees the resilience of these viable lives without ever acquiring critical thinking on reality, insofar as "Disneyfication is a shaping of affective investment into commodifying which reduces the mind to infantilism as an illusory escape from death: a mythology" (p. 195).

Apart from the irony of placing the origins of postcolonial utopianism in the colonialist ethics of More's utopia (Ashcroft, 2021, p. 47) and particularly in the imperial roots of the superhero genre (Gavaler, 2014, p. 110), along with the literal Disneyfication after conceiving an African utopia within the Disney cinematographic conglomerate, the triumph of MRWaSP absorbing utopian hope is totalising under the superhero narrative, which maximises the resilience discourse through James' *spectacle of pain*: "Overcoming is necessary, but insufficient; to count and function as resilience, this overcoming must be accomplished in a visible or otherwise legible and consumable manner" (2014, p. 88). The portrayal of radical individualism that comes with the glorification of the superhero tactically conceals and leaves intact the necropolitics of sovereign Western nations, which still hold the "power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die," as Mbembe (2003, p. 11) defines.

MCU's protagonists gain ultimate recognition as superheroes not for their exceptional skills or weapons, which are indeed essential traits, but because of their incessant and exemplary absorption and overcoming of suffering. In the case of *Black Panther*, this performance is even ingrained in Black Panther's new vibranium suit, which has the power to absorb the kinetic energy of every blow, shot, or damage he receives to redistribute it as an attack. Ward (2020) exposes the ambiguity of this correlation between resilience and strength in the construction of black utopianism, as while

> this can be understood as a reclamation of black trauma and survival in the face of extreme brutality, [it] conversely could be decoded by the audience as essentialising the black body as the site of pain and somatic suffering, recuperating trauma as a cathartic and useful process—and thus justifying the actions of white supremacy. (p. 20)

Superheroes coax the audience to endure pain as they play "a significant role in presenting often idealised projections of ourselves" (Nama, 2009, p. 134). By doing so, the acceptance of their precarity diverts attention from the background structural violence of contemporary necropolitics.

In a sense, the superhero narrative serves as a fearful fable for spectators who are hesitant to contribute to the governance of MRWaSP, especially considering how this necropolitical administration becomes critical in moments of war. Mbembe (2003) and Butler (2009) agree that the permanent declaration of the state of siege purposefully justifies the administration of grievability among community members, and in so doing, it naturalises the dehumanisation of those lives considered *ungrievable.* This is a recurrent situation in the MCU: Avengers' interventions in global politics display how their sovereignty comes along with *"the generalised instrumentalisation of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations*" (Mbembe, 2003, p. 14).

The predicament of necropolitics worsens in the globalised MRWaSP era, especially with the demand for instant vengeance that Marvel superheroes flaunt through their branding. Indeed, this motif is employed to introduce Black Panther as part of the Avengers. The opening of *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) sets the battleground between the Avengers and Crossbones' terrorists in Lagos, and despite provoking a catastrophe in the city, the only lives mourned in the film are those of Wakandan citizens, who are considered more prestigious, reducing the remaining deaths to nameless casualties. This incident prompts King T'Chaka to take action at a United Nations conference, expressing his desire for peaceful collaboration with the Avengers and the rest of the world. T'Chaka's words resonate the description of resilience as bouncing back from injury as a condition *sine qua non* they cannot belong to the hegemonic global powers: "We will not, however, let misfortune drive us back. We will fight to improve the world we wish to join" (Russo & Russo, 2016, 37:08).

King T'Chaka's death during his UN speech shifts the political landscape, making T'Challa the new Black Panther. Despite his desire for vengeance against his father's murderer, T'Challa chooses justice over retaliation: "Vengeance consumed you, it's consuming them [the Avengers], I'm done letting it consume me" (Russo & Russo, 2016, 02:08:59). This choice highlights Black Panther as not only a hero but also a just ruler of a country, contrasting with the Avengers' individualistic tactics. However, his political stance also exposes the desired "syntheses between massacre and bureaucracy, that incarnation of Western rationality" (Mbembe, 2003, p. 23) that will last until the end of the superheroes' franchise.

Despite his country's significant contributions in this battle, Black Panther's role in the Marvel Universe remains largely dependent on Wakanda's strategic ties with Western powers, particularly the US, which capitalise on its resources and military strength. The hegemonic pressure for Black Panther to be viewed as an ally, and consequently as a superhero, compromises the genuine universal solidarity advocated by Afropolitanism (Eze, 2015). Niessen (2021) critiques this naïve portrayal of Wakanda "stuck in the humanist delirium," suggesting it reflects a conventional Hollywood logic (pp. 129-130). Wakanda's solidarity aligns with what Dean (1996) termed conventional solidarity, echoing James' analysis of MRWaSP in commodifying this type of utopian ideals:

> Putting otherwise privileged people of color at the center of white supremacist institutions obscures the white supremacy (and the imperialism/coloniality). *This inclusion is always conditional and always instrumental*—this can't be emphasised enough. People of color are admitted into white supremacy only insofar as this augments white supremacy; the moment this becomes a bad deal for white supremacy, it ends. (2014, p. 13)

The fan service of all superheroes assembled in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), ready to continue fighting even on the brink of catastrophe, serves as a master lecture on resilience. The saga illustrates how "life learns from catastrophes so that it can become more responsive to further catastrophes on the horizon" (Evans & Reid, 2013, p. 84). More importantly, presenting the enemy from outer space confers on the audience the illusion of living in post-racial times. However, Galaver (2014) reveals that despite this post-racial decolonised imagery being elevated, the reality remains that "the United States [continues expanding] its neocolonial control of emerging nations, relying on economic exploitation rather than military occupation" (p. 111). In this ultimate battle, all Avengers unite with Wakanda, yet this cooperation masks the exploitation of the country's resources, sanctioned by its political leaders, becoming even the sole nation-state that acts as a war machine in this intergalactic conflict.

As Niessen (2021) concludes, the incorporation of the critique on the history of colonialism in the MCU's neoliberal narrative of individualism and resilience results in a "watered-down Afrofuturism": "through its fiction of a never-colonized African superpower that brings the human race together, *Black Panther* bypasses the colonial history of the universalist notion of a 'human race'" (pp. 129-130). Further exploration of the geographical and social cartography of Wakanda and its evolution as a utopian text evinces that the project of building black utopianism in this particular space can easily be flawed due to its elitism and cajolery with the hegemonic MRWaSP supremacy.

2. Wakanda, a Pan-African Utopia?

An insight into Wakanda's architectural and sociopolitical structures reveals how this nation-state mirrors classic utopian models, particularly the Plato-More Pansophist approach. Regarding location, these utopian spaces secure their perimeter "both by nature and art" (More, 1516/1997, p. 32), utilising their privileged geography and fortifications for stability and containment. In the case of Wakanda, the country is a hidden gem in the heart of Africa, protected by a vibranium-powered holographic shield that conceals its existence, akin to Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1626), which envisioned a land shielded from outsiders through the invisibility strategy to prevent the risk of being polluted by others' dissenting or different experiences. The placement of utopian lands in the Southern hemisphere, as observable in the general history of utopia, is noted by Ulysses Klaue, who reveals Wakanda's true nature to Agent Ross.

> It's all a front. Explorers searched for it for centuries. El Dorado. The Golden City. They thought they could find it in South America, but it was in Africa the whole time. A technological marvel. All because it was built on a mound of the most valuable metal known to man. Isipho, they call it. "The gift". (Coogler & Cole, 2018, 56:11)

Klaue's contradictory attachment to Wakanda, as shown in his disdain for its people, whom he calls "savages," mimics what Ahmed terms as *loving hate* (2014). This eventually produces Eshun's futurism fatigue (2003), as Western depictions of Wakandans trap them in the past while their resources are exploited to shape others' desired futures.

Nonetheless, as the king's craft crosses the holographic boundaries, the audience discovers how the unspoilt landscape opens to reveal the Golden City, capital of Wakanda. The exuberant wealth of the metropolis responds to various structural elements of the utopian land, such as concentric urban planning that places the ruling power at the epicentre, and the general abundance of resources—all thanks to the fertility and wealth of vibranium of the soil from which the land emerges.

The social cartography of Wakanda and the specialisation of its five tribes are shaped by vibranium, which "runs every aspect of life in Wakanda" (Strong & Chaplin, 2019, p. 58). The Wakandan origin myths state that a vibranium meteorite—considered the strongest substance in the universe—impacted near Ethiopia, transforming the local flora, fauna, and communities, ultimately leading to the emergence of a powerful civilisation. Vibranium causes the perfect balance and connection between nature and mysticism with science and technology, as the heart-shaped flower exemplifies (Niessen, 2021; Kabir, 2020; Posada, 2019). Consuming it grants the warrior-king physical and spiritual strength, enabling access to the Ancestral Plane where the goddess Bast awaits. In this context, vibranium serves as a social and spatial marker—not only facilitating global mobility via aircraft but also serving as a means of genealogical identification among the Wakandan

people, since the consumption of the heart-shaped flower enables their leaders to communicate with their ancestors and predecessors in the crown.

Wakanda's political system is a constitutional monarchy, with its leader being the warrior-king, responding to the archetypal figure of the philosopher-king found in classic utopias. Scholars (Ward, 2020; Kabir, 2020) agree that the story of Black Panther revolves around African masculinity and patriliny. Nonetheless, the presence of the goddess Bast stands out as the most significant deity for Wakandans—retrieving this Feminine Divine that characterises Afrofuturism. As Womack (2013) argues, with the inclusion of the Feminine Divine as pivotal, Afrofuturism distinguishes itself from other forms of sci-fi by emphasising that "technological achievement alone is not enough to create a free-thinking future. A well-crafted relationship with nature is intrinsic to a balanced future too" (pp. 103-104). In the earthly realm, Wakanda also counts with the active participation of powerful women in political and scientific matters within the narrative: the dora milaje, Black Panther's mother Queen Ramonda, his lover Nakia and his sister Shuri, who is in charge of all the technological advances in the land. Strong and Chaplin (2019, p. 59) underscore how this powerful representation of women in this scenario is effectively decoupled from the Western gaze and retrieves suppressed depictions of powerful women from precolonial times.

The figure of the philosopher-king—or more appropriately in the case of the Black Panther, the warrior-king—is not only that of the ruler of the land; he usually acts as the mediator between the divine and earthly realms. Nevertheless, this semi-divine position comes with the responsibility of using his superpowers to protector Wakanda. Interestingly, bloodline is not the only determining factor in marking the successor to the crown; yet the ritualistic procedure to gain access to the throne and contest the proposed heir reinstates the focus on masculinist rites of passage into manhood associated with the demonstration of manly strength and violence. In this way, the fight relives the origin myth of the war of the five tribes and the goddess Bast conferring special powers to one warrior shaman, Bashenga.

As can be observed, Wakanda's utopian design shows resemblances with the Plato-More model, and yet it does not project its ideal into the beyond or *terra nullius*, simulating the hopes of imperialist expansionism. On the contrary, Wakanda traces its utopian origins in a journey back home, as the storytelling that opens the film explains:

> —Baba?
> —Yes, my son?
> —Tell me a story.
> —Which one?
> —The story of home. (Coogler & Cole, 2018, 00:05)

Adeniyi (2022, p. 3) comments on how this story of home supposes the retrieval of an African Golden Age—a futurist projection to a past time in the continent when it was not disturbed by colonialist oppression. The fact that this utopia is conveyed through storytelling reclaims memory and oral tradition not only as a means of illustrating Wakanda's African rootedness but, most importantly, as a responsibility for building new futures with the remnants of a corrupted land. This "cyclic continuity between the past and the future through the present" (Ashcroft, 2021, p. 51) establishes the foundations for an African utopianism, resulting in what Bhabha (1992) referred to as "time-lag." While presenting a disruptive temporal and spatial flow can provoke "a liminal interrogation 'without' words of the culturally given, traditional boundaries of knowledge" (p. 59), it certainly creates a space of possibility and "cultural survival in conditions of political contestation" (p. 60) where new identities can be imagined. This way, this Afrofuturistic tale presents a mode of historical rewriting of "blackness in all its complexity, [offering] a novel form of revolution that is rooted in a long history of black opposition" (Rollefson, 2008, pp.104-105).

The time-lag is manifest in the merging of the magnificent architecture and the splendour of the metals, as the core of technological development, with the oral literatures of the coexisting tribes and the mysticism of the heart-shaped herb—exploring the beauty and wealth of what Kabir describes as a "carefully assembled Africanity" (2020, p. 128). The celebration of this multiplicity of textiles, languages, beliefs, and cultures contrasts with the hostility present in Western scenarios in the film, including those that exiled Wakanda-descendants endure and execute.

However, setting this concept of assembled Africanity within the framework of a conventional utopia that relies on isolationism for its survival implies the end of spatial freedom and of history itself: "Already perfect, its order is immune to change" (Ferns, 1999, p. 59). The idealisation of isolationism presents two major hazards: the illusion of conformism in Wakanda's way of life and the illusion of security. Regarding the former, the narrative conceals how the archetypal cartography of the utopian land as prosperous is achieved through repressive techniques from the ruling classes that, since no opposing discourse challenges it, never dystopify the land. For example, the mining process to extract the vibranium, which has caused significant damage to neighbouring African countries, is barely addressed, and if so, it is depicted as a fantastical manufacturing industry:

> Wakanda resembles Apple's American Dream: a pure fiction in the non-speculative sense, in which, certainly in the Black Panther film, the exploitation of human labor and natural ecosystems that defines every extractive economy is left out of sight—much like the cobalt mines and Chinese assembly lines remain unseen in Apple's green utopia. (Niessen, 2021, p. 148)

Only when these mines and their materials are exploited by foreigners does the vibranium industry face scrutiny, as seen with Ulysses Klaue's contraband and arms black market. Indeed, those like Klaue that

attempt to cross the borders are severely punished with physical violence: "I'm the only outsider who's seen it and got out of there alive" (Coogler & Cole, 2018, 57:14).

Hence, the excellence reached in the harmonious combination of nature and technology is fallacious, as it is this very technology that supposes an impact on the magical nature and welfare of the land. This claim was persistent in the majority of classic utopias, with isolationist and protectionist policies—which directly affect the tribes of miners and the outer regions, in contrast with life in the metropolis.

With regard to the pursuit of security, Evans and Reid (2013) debunk it as "an incomplete project because its biopolitical foundations are flawed; life is not securable. It is a multiplicity of antagonisms and for some life to be made to live, some other life has to be made to die" (p. 86). The extreme security measures in Wakanda prevent the nation from achieving genuine interdependence with other African countries. As a result, the concept of pan-Africanism falters in its superficiality, since "Wakandan politics [...] rest firmly in favour of nationalistic protection rather than global black liberation: the nation-state takes precedence over racial solidarity" (Ward, 2020, p. 19). Such confrontation is embodied in *Black Panther's* protagonist and antagonist, T'Challa and Killmonger: "Each is focused on continuing his father's legacy, one rooted in the past, the other in the present. Both are reliant on the future" (Strong & Chaplin, 2019, p. 59). As the warrior-king of Wakanda, T'Challa projects his vision of utopia through conservative politics for the benefit of his people, yet he refuses to assist other neighbouring countries. Before Killmonger, T'Challa's political stance is criticised by Nakia, who, although she is Wakandan, undertakes missions outside the country for the War Dogs, the national intelligence service. Her experiences beyond Wakanda expose her to the struggles faced by fellow Africans and people of African descent, prompting her to reveal the harsh reality underlying the maintenance of Wakanda as a utopia:

> I've seen too many in need just to turn a blind eye. I can't be happy here knowing that there's people out there who have nothing. [...] We could provide aid and access to technology and refuge to those who need it. (Coogler & Cole, 2018, 33:50)

Regardless of T'Challa's attempts to detach Wakanda from the rest of the world—"We are not like these other countries, Nakia. If the world found out what we truly are, and what we possess—we could lose our way of life" (Coogler & Cole, 2018, 34:13)—the status of Wakanda as a utopia is revealed as conditional upon how others perceive it. The notion of this utopia cannot be taken for granted; rather, outsiders will judge its state as utopian, and they may even take away that status.

Bhabha (1992) critiques the impossibility of such absolute closure in constructing an identity and introduces the idea of arbitrary closure to emphasise the need for cultural spaces that promote "*new* forms of agency and identification that confuse historical temporalities, confound sententious, continuist meanings, traumatise tradition, and may even render communities contingent" (p. 59). In this regard, he also cautions against the potential negative consequences of this arbitrary closure, which can lead to a "relative autonomy" or "an open-ended liberal pluralism," where we must always be on the "look out for marginalization."

A problematic representation of arbitrary closure comes with Killmonger, son of the Wakandan Prince N'Jobu, the brother of King T'Chaka. Born in Oakland as a second-generation African American while his father was on a War Dogs mission, Killmonger's backstory is defined by tragedy. His father's treason against Wakanda, after selling vibranium-powered weaponry to help black people fight oppressive authorities, prompts his assassination by King T'Chaka. Thus, Killmonger's journey of retaliation begins—not only against white supremacy but also against Wakanda for looking down on his fellow Black people, demonstrating how the country "extricates itself from culpability and is thus complicit in these nations' struggles" because it was not directly affected by colonialism (Ward, 2020, p. 19). After Killmonger ascends to the throne, he addresses the tribes' leaders, urging them to recognise the changing world outside and the pressing need for action:

> Where I'm from, when black folks started revolutions, they never had the firepower or resources to fight their oppressors. Where was Wakanda? Yeah, all that ends today. [...] I know how colonizers think. So, we're gonna use their own strategy against them. 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 [...]. 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. (Coogler & Cole, 2018, 01:29:55)

Killmonger serves as a living reminder of the trauma experienced by Black people due to the history of colonialism worldwide while also embodying progressive ideals (Mayward, 2018, p. 59). However, his depiction as a killing machine—especially troubling "when this violence is implicitly and explicitly directed towards other people of colour" (Ward, 2020, p. 23)—and the use of neo-imperialist discourses (Ostby, 2018, p. 216) to justify vengeance obscures the message of black liberation and racial solidarity (interestingly, his quest for revenge is depicted as villainous, while the actions of the Avengers are celebrated by the public). Moreover, Killmonger's illusion of black sovereignty also succumbs to the same statism that characterises classic utopian ideals: "The sun will never set on the Wakandan Empire" (Coogler & Cole, 2018, 01:30:45), failing to acknowledge a dialectical understanding of interdependence.

This confrontation over how to best administer resources hinders the ability to identify the underlying systemic oppressions that perpetuate global racism. Ward (2020) warns that it is precisely this confrontation between the African diaspora and African countries that ultimately "allows Western hegemonic rhetoric to remain unchallenged" (p. 16). The origin myth situates the foundation of the land and the Black Panther legend in a civil war among the five tribes of the nation. Similarly, this contemporary civil war between T'Challa and Killmonger oversimplifies the postcolonial debate as an internal conflict among Wakandans, illustrating

colonialism as merely a casualty that affected humanity and downplaying the Middle Passage and contemporary Western brutality within these few lines: "As Wakanda thrived, the world around it descended further into chaos" (Coogler & Cole, 2018, 01:19). So, as Ward (2020) concludes,

> when violence is explicitly racialised it is black, and when we see the inclusion of violence racialised as white, it is simply described as a global descent into chaos, and the terms 'slavery', 'colonialism', and 'imperialism' are conspicuously absent. [...] Colonialism here is only hinted at in the veiled mention of benign 'explorers,' rather than by providing a direct engagement with the specific forms of resource extraction that colonialism has constituted historically. (p. 16)

Not only is the concept of colonisation downvalued by the Wakandan government, but the alignment of the Wakandan elite with the coloniser is also depicted as complicit and humorous in the film. The decision not to assist the hijab-wearing women at the beginning of the film, but rather to aid the white CIA agent, not only suggests hints of Islamophobia and social superiority over other African countries, but it certainly marks the beginning of Wakanda's transformation to adapt to the contemporary demands of the world neoliberal market. This shift towards global interventionist measures was already hinted at with the death of King T'Chaka. Nevertheless, T'Challa's UN speech in the mid-credit scene of *Black Panther* officially opens Wakanda's frontiers for collaboration with other international powers sharing its vibranium. In his speech, he rejects the initial protectionist policies that characterised the nation-state and envisions a new form of utopianism based on cosmopolitanism:

> For the first time in our history we will be sharing our knowledge and resources with the outside world. Wakanda will no longer watch from the shadows. We cannot, we must not. We will work to be an example of how we as brothers and sisters on this Earth should treat each other. Now more than ever, illusions of division threaten our very existence. We all know the truth: more connects us than separates us. In times of crisis, the wise build bridges, while the foolish build barriers. We must find a way to look after one another, as if we were one single tribe. (Coogler & Cole, 2018, 02:05:35)

While the inspiring speech highlights the relevant forms of resistance from racialised groups during Trump's regime and revives the sentiment of pan-Africanism worldwide with the #BlackLivesMatter movement, it implicitly illustrates the conditional treatment of Wakanda as a utopian land, contingent upon its cooperation being instrumental and viable for MRWaSP's profit. The inconsistencies in forging this global citizenship point to the power differences inherent in Ahmed's notion of hospitality: "The nation is hospitable as it allows those genuine ones to stay. And yet at the same time, it constructs some others as already hateful (as bogus) in order to define the limits or the *conditions* of this hospitality" (2014, pp. 46-47). This control of hospitality operates in two directions: Wakanda's entry to the UN can be denied if control over its wealth is not surveilled, and Wakanda's assistance to marginalised black populations is maintained only as long as it reinforces their utopian status. The assistance provided in Oakland indicates that if help is to be extended to the powerless, it must not disrupt the ideas that underpin the hegemonic narratives of resilience surrounding the American dream: "it is charity rather than systemic change that is proposed as the solution to empower and uplift black Americans" (Ward, 2020, p. 24).

3. On the Boundaries of Afropolitan Life and the Liberation of Melancholy

The utopianism represented in Afrofuturism "is grounded in a critique of the present, not just of the colonial past" (Ashcroft, 2021, p. 44), shifting its contemporary narratives from Afro-pessimism while projecting futures that challenge existing stigmas. In this light, Afropolitanism reflects on Wakanda as a celebratory space for blackness, evolving from a secluded land to a dynamic intergalactic entity. However, it also explores the shortcomings of its ideals, not only when compared to a Pan-African utopian vision for all Black people, but also due to the inevitability of their discourses being subsumed by the hegemony of the MRWaSP hyper-elite because, "with the exception of a few well-positioned individuals of African origin, who now have a larger market to whom they can 'sell' this image of Africa, who really are the beneficiaries of this branded Afropolitanism?" (Dabiri, 2016, p. 105).

Eze's positive projection of Africanity as a "society comprised [by] people from diverse ethnicities [...] in the ever expanding universe" (2015, p. 117) demonstrates the commercial success of the Afropolitan identity in *Black Panther.* Unlike other Hollywood products, the representation of Wakanda under the Afropolitan lens displays how "the colonized is no longer at the periphery. Nor [...] to be understood exclusively as a victim" (Eze, 2014, p. 245). And, although he states that the African identity is "no longer shaped exclusively by geography or blood" (2014, p. 235), the glowing purple tattoo on Killmonger's lip—which signifies that his bloodline is Wakandan, akin to those from within the country—serves as "an Afro-Futuristic mark of consanguinity ruptured, disavowed, but indelibly embodied" (Kabir, 2020, p. 125). The tattoo acts as a reminder that this form of African cosmopolitanism is characterised ultimately by its rootedness in particular geographies (Eze, 2011; Gehrmann, 2016; Ostby, 2018). So, with this in mind, the principles of this rootedness would theoretically imply how this universal narrative fosters empathy and interdependence:

> Others affirm me; they provide the context within which my story has meaning. The issue therefore is no longer how different we are from others, but rather what we can learn from them, from what we have in common with them. (Eze, 2015, p. 118)

Nevertheless, the previous analysis of MRWaSP demonstrates how the universalist narrative portrayed in the Afropolitan ideal is naïve and can easily be spoiled, insofar as its forms of resistance will be absorbed by hegemonic discourses of the elite powers. Furthermore, Wakanda's isolationist policies hinder the freedom of mobility—both physical and intellectual—that characterises Afropolitanism, or at least mark a differential mobility among its citizens. Hence, Wakanda's system of differential mobility anticipates Gehrmann's reproach to the narrative of Afropolitanism—marked by elitism, apoliticalness and, its commodification—regarding it as "short-sighted because of its individualistic political effects" (2016, p. 90).

The films illustrate how T'Challa and his team can travel worldwide using their advanced invisibility aircraft: Vienna, Busan, Oakland. While the Golden tribe enjoys this mobility beyond borders and across nations, other inhabitants remain confined to their land, and in case they are in contact with the outside world—as is the case with the Border Tribe—it is to protect the perimeter. Indeed, their liminal position between the exterior and Wakanda prompts them to quickly become supporters of Killmonger's expansionist quest.

Moreover, incoming mobility to Wakanda is not permitted, hindering the universal flow of African citizens across the universe. This creates a clear distinction between cosmopolitanism and other forms of migration, such as the experiences of refugees or diasporic individuals living in America, like Killmonger. In the initial excerpts of the movie, Wakandan leaders distance themselves from other African countries affected by colonialism, and their perceived superiority contradicts the initial lemma for Pan-Africanism: "You let refugees in, they bring their problems with them. And then Wakanda is like everywhere else" (Coogler & Cole, 2018, 35:14). This ignoring merges the dynamics of resilience with Afropolitanism's apolitical stance, considering how the ruling powers undergo a collective cultural amnesia (Evans & Reid, 2013, p. 87; Ede, 2016, p. 97).

The arrival of Killmonger represents a confrontation with their desire to remain uninvolved in colonial oppression and white supremacy. As T'Chaka explains, Killmonger "was the truth [he] chose to omit," highlighting the willful ignorance that was complicit with the ruling classes of the MRWaSP. Additionally, the lip tattoo reveals the impossibility of erasing the ancestral connection between the metropolis and the diasporic individuals who have long felt lost: "He is a monster of our own making" (Coogler & Cole, 2018, 01:37:40). As Kabir (2020) notes, "the more monstrous he is shown to be, the worse it makes the Wakandans look" (p. 130). This observation demonstrates that the portrayal of their homeland as a Pan-African utopia becomes flawed the moment they fail to welcome their diasporic descendants:

> N'Jobu: What did you find?
> Killmonger: Your home.
> N'Jobu: I gave you a key [the glowing tattoo] hoping that you might see it someday. [...] But I fear you still may not be welcome.
> Killmonger: Why?
> N'Jobu: They will say you are lost.
> Killmonger: But, I'm right here. (Coogler & Cole, 2018, 01:26:53)

Again, while addressing a migratory action, the resulting sense of dislocation or disorientation that Killmonger's diasporic condition embodies thwarts the absolute closure of the Wakandan ideal.

The commodification of Afropolitanism occurs through the Westernisation of its foundations. Interactions with the Western world are often desired as pleasurable consumerist transactions. These exchanges take place not only when individuals travel outside of Wakanda but also when foreigners visit their country. For example, in the final credit scene of *Black Panther*, T'Challa takes Shuri to Oakland to show her the location of the Wakandan International Outreach Centre, but Shuri comments, "when you said you would take me to California for the first time, I thought you meant Coachella, or Disneyland" (Coogler & Cole, 2018, 02:00:58). Similarly, when King T'Challa receives his first visit from the Avengers into Wakanda to plan warfare strategies against Thanos' interstellar army, Okoye complains:

> Okoye: When you said we were going to open Wakanda to the rest of the world... This is not what I imagined.
> T'Challa: And what did you imagine?
> Okoye: The Olympics. Maybe even a Starbucks. (Russo & Russo, 2018, 01:31:07)

Beneath the comic surface, these episodes reveal that the reality of MRWaSP's biopower in today's neoliberal society is anything but pleasurable. While the Disneyfication strategy promotes Western consumerism as joyful, the inclusion of Wakanda into dominant powers leads to an exchange of their weaponry, soldiers, and land for the romanticisation of their own insecuritisation:

> Wakandan Officer: Requesting confirmation, My King. You said open the barrier?
> T'Challa: On my signal.
> M'Baku: This will be the end of Wakanda.
> Okoye: Then it will be the noblest ending in history.
> T'Challa: Wakanda Forever! (Russo & Russo, 2018, 01:40:41)

The motto of *Wakanda Forever!* prompts the illusion of the immortality of the nation-state and revives a prior state of prosperity and statism. Its repetition among warriors demonstrates that Wakanda's survival—and MRWaSP's prosperity—comes at the cost of citizens' resilience and instrumental empowerment. Hence, the present analysis of Wakanda as a utopian text in the MRWaSP era challenges Kabir's (2020) and Posada's (2019) views of the nation-state as a unique space that rejects capitalism but also reveals Wakanda as a product of neoliberalism. The temporal trace of this Eden presents the expected evolution of desirable

sociability by the dominant discourses: from the magical origin myth, a monarchy with socialist touches, a robust nationalist dream, to the present where MRWaSP policies grant the elite the illusion of self-sovereignty through the maximum exploitation of resources. Consequently, Wakanda will redefine its identity by opening its borders, ironically presupposing its end as a utopian space, despite resilience framing it as the "noblest ending in history."

In the end, the central issue does not lie in determining the most appropriate way to construct a Wakanda, but rather the unwavering hope that is placed entirely in this specific form of postcolonial development. If hope—the driving force behind utopianism (Ashcroft, 2013; Bloch, 1986)—becomes commodified, how can we establish effective forms of resistance for a brighter future? The power of representation is crucial for presenting alternative narratives about the African continent. However, when this representation is limited by neoliberal influences, the outcomes can be disappointing since we witness how unavoidable "the chilling commodification of all walks of life—including the commodification of dissent"—is (Dabiri, 2016, p. 104).

However, this motto also suggests that utopia can be viewed not as a geographical location, but rather as an emotional place where interdependence can thrive, despite the risks associated with romanticising the resulting precarity, as seen in Eze's claim on Afropolitanism: "[Afropolitans] are not trees that are condemned to a place. Our roots are in our hearts" (Eze, 2015, p. 117). This analysis has demonstrated how the maintenance of a utopian place (in the sense of *space*) eventually fostered the repetition of colonising inclinations, as well as demanded differential mobility and grievability among community members. Oppositely, the understanding of *place* as experience underscores the emotionality of utopia, i.e. its present intra- and interpersonal relations, past experiences, and creative forces towards the future:

> Emotions tell us a lot about time; emotions are the very 'flesh' of time. [...] Through emotions, the past persists on the surface of bodies. Emotions show us how histories stay alive, even when they are not consciously remembered; how histories of colonialism, slavery, and violence shape lives and worlds in the present. [...] Emotions also open up futures, in the ways they involve different orientations to others. [...] Where we go, with these feelings, remains an open question. (Ahmed, 2014, p. 202)

In light of the uncertain conditions presented by MRWaSP, James (2014) reflects on ways to exercise counterhegemonic utopianism:

> Traditional concepts and practices of "resistance" have been so successfully co-opted by neoliberal hegemonies that they no longer have any counterhegemonic punch. If you can't "resist" neoliberalism, what do you do? How can you critique or subvert the power over life? Is death the answer? (p. 18)

After *Black Panther's* actor Chadwick Boseman died of cancer in 2020, the sequel *Wakanda Forever* (2022) was conceived as a homage. The rejection of using a substitute for the role of the warrior-king or even depicting a heroic death for T'Challa instead of his illness defies the neoliberal imperative of resilience and the impositions "to die in the right way, at the right time, or at the right pace" (James, 2014, p. 20). Similarly, Killmonger's choice to reject life, despite potential healing from Wakandan technology, highlights how death exposes the background conditions allowing such horrors, like the Middle Passage:

> T'Chaka: Maybe we can still heal you.
> Killmonger: Why? So you can just lock me up? Nah. Just bury me in the ocean, with my ancestors that jumped from the ships... 'cause they knew death was better than bondage. (Coogler & Cole, 2018, 01:57:43)

Killmonger's misfired resilience in the film introduces a form of uncommodifiable utopianism, which also serves as an equaliser, a demonstration of emotional Pan-Africanism: melancholia. James (2014) explains how melancholy provokes a disruption in the system, as "death is technically illegible to neoliberal 'power over life,' as biopolitics is primarily focused on administering and investing in *life*" (pp. 73-74). Bhabha (1992) already described this form of resistance as *melancholia in revolt*:

> Let us call the melancholic revolt the "projective disincorporation" by the marginal of the Master. [...] It says: All these bits and pieces in which my history is fragmented, my culture piecemeal, my identifications fantasmatic and displaced; these splittings of wounds of my body are also a form of revolt. And they speak a terrible truth. In their ellipses and silences they dismantle your authority. (pp. 65-66)

This wound opening diverges from James' spectacle of pain as its display does not intend to be spectacularly overcome or follow an individualistic stance. The death of King T'Challa and the funeral ceremony in *Wakanda Forever,* devoid of dialogue, is filled with silence yet remains rhythmic and celebratory. This wordless opening illustrates that grieving and melancholy are private yet communal, which is further reinforced when breaking from the traditional Marvel Studios logo intro with soundtrack, as it features images of Chadwick Boseman without his helmet, mourning both the hero and the actor. The ritual conducted in Xhosa, accompanied by traditional music, chants, and dances, and the wearing of white clothing, not only displays the vindication of mourning, but of doing so rejecting the biopolitical conventions imposed by the Western gaze, particularly through the Afrofuturistic merging of technology and spirituality rooted in the cultural heritage of various traditions contributing to the vision of this African utopia.

All these instances where melancholy is set to the foreground suppose a direct attack on the MCU's heroic resilience discourses and other oppressive powers. They also remind us of our finitude, returning us to our shared precariousness and portraying the failures of those who protect us. Not only does the tribute in the sequel demonstrate the aftermath of Wakanda's exploitation by MRWaSP's dynamics following the

intergalactic war by the elite powers, but it extends this discussion to the exposition of centuries of colonial oppression experienced by African communities and, as the movie later develops, the global South—exemplified by the brutal hitory of the inhabitants of Talokan, a hidden underwater kingdom in South America (near Mexico), whose power is also derived from the vibranium of its region.

The impossibility of consuming a resilience that negates the pain elevates this melancholic expression of vulnerability as an action of counterhegemonic utopianism. Sorensen (2007), however, reveals the dangers of institutionalising this resistance, coining the term postcolonial melancholia to illustrate the potential stagnation in postcolonial studies amid global commodification. Nevertheless, celebrating the aesthetics of melancholia and enterprises deemed "*too* 'exceptional,' too femme, too black, too queer, to 'count,' that is, to boost the vitality of MRWaSP in general" (James, 2014, p. 20), reinvigorates its critical vitality and challenges such stagnation. Moreover, this counter-resilience strategy in building utopianism 'into the death' is not literal, but rather a biopolitical response: "'Into the death' isn't about killing ourselves, it's about upsetting the balance of factors that contribute to the production of multi-racial white supremacist patriarchy and neoliberal capitalism" (p. 21).

The melancholia at the funeral and Shuri's remembrance of his brother evoke recognition of an unshareable pain: "the impossibility of feeling the pain of others does not mean that the pain is simply theirs, or that their pain has nothing to do with me" (Ahmed, 2014, p. 30). Despite the limitations and criticism presented against Afropolitanism (especially concerning its elitism, commodification and apoliticalness), Eze (2014) defends the potential for mutual recognition through cosmopolitanism's *empathic imagination*. Deprived of any power relations—he claims for it to simply be "in alignment with the moral attitude of the Golden Rule, the idea of one treating others as one would have others treat one" (p. 243) and, consequently, without pity nor any traces of superiority. In connection with this, Ahmed advocates for collective action as "a politics based not on the possibility that we might be reconciled, but on learning to live with the impossibility of reconciliation, or learning that we live with and beside each other, and yet we are not as one" (p. 39). The melancholy portrayed in *Wakanda Forever* effectively embodies this—Wakandans no longer seek to overcome vulnerability, and assert that, as precarious beings, we must engage in interdependence to build a counterhegemonic utopianism against MRWaSP.

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This article has sparked a discussion about the futures of African utopianism and, most importantly, it has brought attention to the challenges of realising it in a world dominated by neoliberal ideals (MRWaSP). This issue is particularly evident in genres such as superhero stories, where the exaltation of individualism exploits resilience to cater to the profit-driven motives of the elite. The resulting scenario presents the predicament of disentangling resilience from its neoliberal productivity in order to reclaim this trademark in the construction of postcolonial utopianism and genuinely empower black communities, since "resistance without a utopian element, a vision of possibility, can never be truly transformative, and transformation is the key to confident post-colonial resistance" (Ashcroft 2021, p. 45).

The introduction of a Pan-African utopia into the mainstream cinematic universe through *Black Panther* exemplifies both the celebration and shortcomings of Afrofuturism regarding its Afropolitan ideals, silencing unpriviledged voices to favour "the dominant narrative for African success" (Dabiri 2016, p. 105). In this regard, Ward (2020) notes that the film primarily glorifies Wakandan blackness, and while it represents a disruption of anti-Black racism, "a closer look reveals that there is still much more to be done" (p. 25). Despite the contentious nature of this utopianism today, Eze (2014) and Dabiri (2016) remain optimistic about how the exploration of literary and cinematic imaginaries "will progressively engender more creative articulations of what Afropolitan can and might mean—after all, literature provides an ideal space for such transformative processes to occur" (Dabiri, 2016, p. 109).

Still exhibiting certain inconsistencies in its postcolonial, post-galactic era, Wakanda is far from being the mythical utopian nation-state. However, Queen Ramonda's speech at the UN condemns the long-term suffocation imposed by global powers such as the United States and France. She critiques their hypocrisy in exercising peace, operating a global solidarity whose "membership [...] is both exclusionary and repressive" (Dean, 1996, p. 15): "You perform civility here. But we know what you whisper in your halls of leadership, in your military facilities: 'The King is dead. The Black Panther is gone. They have lost their protector. Now is our time to strike'" (Coogler & Cole, 2022, 08:48). While its prequel glimpsed at such denunciation subtly and instead focused on the internal conflicts within black utopianism, *Wakanda Forever* overtly exposes the Northern Hemisphere's responsibility in the oppression of racialised communities, escaping from the reductionist victim-oppressor: "We mourn the loss of our King, but don't think for a second, that Wakanda has lost her ability to protect our resources" (Coogler & Cole, 2022, 11:03).

The indictment reflects Kilgore's idea that when races are presented as essential components of the narrative, it allows for the opportunity to "gaining imaginative as well as political control over their transmission and meaning" (2010, p. 21). Consequently, this research reaches a consensus on how to best exercise utopianism in contemporary society: Ramonda's words acknowledge Ahmed's call for education on the ethics of pain (2014), promoting an interdependence based on empathetic healing. The recognition of their loss through the power of melancholic revolt sets counterhegemonic strategies to resist the commodification of utopia and life itself by rampant neoliberalism. Thus, despite the challenges and fears in addressing James' question (2014), whether death is the only possible solution to resist and challenge neoliberalism,

an examination of Wakanda's past and present paves the way for promising new directions in the futures of African utopianism—both within and outside the screen.

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