

The Future is Now: The Power and Promise of Afrofuturism

by

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DEDICATION

This text is dedicated to the memory of Chadwick Boseman. While his performances in all his varied roles were masterfully done, it was his performance of T'Challa in *Black Panther* that was awe-inspiring to me as a scholar and an African American male. His articulation of T'Challa will be forever imprinted in my mind, and for that, I am eternally grateful.

This text is also dedicated to all my English teachers and professors, both past and present. I have gained so much knowledge about myself and the world through dedication and passion of so many great thinkers and scholars that I have been lucky to study under as a student.

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ABSTRACT

In the summer of 2020, with Covid-19 raging, the high-profile deaths of three African Americans—Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd— brought race and empathy into America’s political and social consciousness in a way not seen since the Civil Rights movement. A lack of empathy in America’s social and criminal justice systems became a major focus of study.

Lisa Blankenship, in *Changing the Subject: A Theory of Rhetorical Empathy* (2019), describes a way in which empathy can be enacted through rhetorical processes. Ytasha Womack, in *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy* (2013), examines the burgeoning Afrofuturistic culture for Blacks who are interested in Science Fiction. Womack describes an Afrofuturistic aesthetic in which Black people are no longer marginalized by racism and prejudice. Afrofuturism tells futuristic stories through a Black lens, dealing with Black themes and issues relevant to the Black community.

Relying on recent scholarship by Blankenship, Womack, and others, Chapter One explains how rhetoric and empathy shape personal narratives and how Afrofuturism disrupts traditional narrative structures to promote new points of view. Chapter Two expands on the necessity of Afrofuturism and underscores the relevance of *Black Panther* (2018), a film that merges Blankenship’s rhetorical empathy with Womack’s Afrofuturism. *Black Panther* invites viewers to see how Afrofuturism, when deployed strategically and rhetorically, engenders empathy for those marginalized in society.

Chapter Three investigates the ways in which New Media, specifically video games, use Afrofuturism to break traditional barriers inhibiting empathy. *Assassin's Creed Origins* (2017) and *Spider-Man Miles Morales* (2020) employ Black characters to engender empathy through narrative devices. Chapter Four contrasts Afrofuturism with another Black ideology: Afropessimism, or the feeling that nothing will ever change for Black people. This chapter explains how movements such as BlackLivesMatter and #OscarssoWhite speak to Afropessimism. This chapter explains that, ultimately, such movements align themselves more with Afrofuturism than Afropessimism to create a positive change in Western society for Black people.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction—The Necessity for Change	1
Empathy and Rhetoric	9
Black Panther	15
Afrofuturism	17
Overview of the Structure	20
Chapter 1: Empathy, Rhetorical Empathy, and the Nature of Rhetoric	24
Defining Empathy	24
The Promise of Empathy	29
Limits of Empathy	33
The Difference Between Empathy, Sympathy, and Pity	38
Rhetoric	42
Fantasy Theme Criticism	45
Rhetorical Empathy	47
Film and Film Theory	51
Afrofuturism	58
Chapter 2: New Narratives — Afrofuturism and the Black Panther Experience	64
Black Panther	70
Mythologizing Black Panther	76
“Present Day Wakanda” vs “Present Day Africa”	82
Piercing the Veil	85
The Women of Black Panther	90
Killmonger’s Fury vs T’Challa’s Righteousness	97
Challenging Ceremony (M’Baku)	103
Nakia’s Vision	121
Shuri’s Lab and Shuri’s Vision	125

Pretender to the Throne: Killmonger’s Excessive Use of Force	130
T’Challa’s Hope for the Future	137
Chapter 3: Afrofuturism in Video Games — Futuristic and Interactive Narratives	140
Video Games and Empathy: A Perfect Match?	146
The Rhetorical Power of Video Games	149
Games as Simulation	155
Games as Narrative	158
Assassin’s Creed Origins	164
Spider-Man Miles Morales	177
The Cultural Imperative of Video Games and Interactivity	181
Chapter 4: Lift Every Voice: Afrofuturism and Cultural Rhetoric	191
Combating Afropessimism: The Call for Afrofuturism	200
Every Shut Eye Ain’t Sleep: The Summer of 2020	208
2020, Summer of Our Discontent, Act I: Ahmaud Arbery	213
2020, The Summer of Discontent, Act II: Breonna Taylor	218
2020, Summer of Our Discontent, Act III: George Floyd	223
2020, The Year that Empathy Died	231
Afrofuturism and Black Lives Matter	240
Afrofuturism and #OscarsSoWhite	245
Afrofuturism vs. Afropessimism Redux	249
Conclusion: The Far Reaches of Outer Space	256
The Need for Afrofuturism	257
The Power of Afrofuturism	264
The Power of Rhetorical Empathy	268
The Future is Now	271

. . . the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,— [sic] a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.
—*The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B DuBois

Introduction—The Necessity for Change

In 2020, under the shadow of a raging pandemic caused by Covid-19 and in the midst of a nationwide lockdown, the deaths of three African Americans in the United States became much more than just stories on the local and national news. Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd all died in the spring and summer months of 2020. However, they did not die from Covid. Their deaths are symbols of the injustice, intolerance, and systemic racism inflicted upon those of the African Diaspora (a term used to denote the forced migration of people of African descent to various parts of the world due to the Slave Trade). The deaths of Arbery, Taylor, and Floyd became a rallying cry to protestors all over the globe, sparking conversations about racial equality and racial justice. People took to the streets in solidarity with organizations such as Black Lives

Matter, to decry the continued dehumanization and victimization of African Americans. It is essential to understand the plight of these African Americans as their deaths signify that America has yet to match its actions with its ideologies.

African Americans have, unfortunately, had a troubled history with police officers in the United States of America. As smart phones have gained in popularity, however, the number of interactions between police and African Americans caught on camera video and shared on social media platforms has risen. This visual attention has sparked widespread protests along and debates in order to find solutions to end the vicious cycle in which interactions with officers, who are sworn to “protect and serve,” often seem to result in the deaths of the very citizens that they have taken oaths to protect. While a complete catalog of deaths of African Americans attributed to various police agencies across the US would be far too numerous to list, it is important to reflect on some of the most recent and high-profile deaths so as to understand the continued victimization of Blacks at the hands of institutions. It is this victimization, caught on video in many instances, that has sparked civil protests and organized movements the Civil Rights era.

In the summer of 2020, Ahmaud Arbery, Brionna Taylor, and George Floyd became a part of the American conversation on race, race relations, and the way in which American values and the system of justice seem to be in conflict when reacting to people of color. Black and brown people often encounter a double standard when they are just going about their everyday lives or when contacted by police officers in many jurisdictions across America. Arbery was never formally charged of a crime by duly

sworn police officers nor even accused of a crime by the prospective homeowner whose under-construction home that Arbery toured during his runs and seems to have been the source of discontent by many of the White neighbors. However, Gregory and Travis McMichael presumed Arbery's guilt when they chased him and precipitated a confrontation in which Arbery lost his life and District Attorney George Barnhill presumed Arbery's guilt when Barnhill refused to prosecute the White men for Arbery's murder and later recused himself from the case. It is important to note that Arbery was killed in an extra-legal fashion while jogging, a pastime that millions of Americans, White and Black, male and female, engage in on a daily basis (Fausset).

So, too, Breonna Taylor's "crime" appears to have been that she was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Although officers were issued a "No-Knock" warrant, which allowed them to forcibly enter Taylor's apartment without announcing themselves as officers, they claimed they had made such an announcement. However, Taylor's boyfriend, Kenneth Walker, argued that they did not announce themselves, and being a registered gun owner, fired one shot at what he took to be an intruder (Fausset). In the hail of gun fire that the officers returned in response, officers struck and killed Breonna Taylor. None of the officers have, at the time of this writing, been charged with her death. However, two of the officers involved and a detective have been fired from their jobs and one, Brett Hankison, has been charged with three criminal counts of wanton endangerment for "shooting through Taylor's apartment into a neighboring residence" (Booker and Triesman).

George Floyd's death seemed to be the final straw, encapsulated the disparate nature of American ideals versus how those ideals were actually practiced concerning Black and brown communities. Floyd's death was one in which a callous lack of empathy was on display. While accused of a petty crime, Floyd's subsequent interaction with police, especially Officer Derek Chauvin, illustrate the way in which Black and brown communities are often confronted by members of police agencies. From security cameras, body cameras, and cellphone cameras, witnesses saw a callous disregard for George Floyd as another human being from the very beginning of the interaction all the way to the moment where Chauvin, in a maneuver not consistent with police training and policies (Tarm), placed his knee on Floyd's for nine minutes and twenty-nine seconds. He kept Floyd pinned to the ground despite Floyd's pleas, despite the requests and cries of on-lookers, despite the fact that Floyd lost consciousness, despite offers from a qualified medical technician to check on Floyd's medical condition. He even kept Floyd pinned despite being told by a fellow officer that, upon checking, Floyd did not have a pulse. After a three-week trial, the jury returned a guilty verdict for Chauvin, and Judge Peter Cahill enhanced the minimum prison sentence to twenty-two and a half years for the murder of Floyd with the judge enhancing the sentence for several reasons, but one key one was due to the fact "that Mr. Chauvin treated George Floyd with particular cruelty" (NBC News "Derek Chauvin").

Arbery, Taylor, Floyd have ignited a nationwide conversation about the nature of race relations in contemporary American society. While these conversations are not new,

they have taken on increased urgency because, in the wake of the January 6th assault on the Capitol, there is an increased ferocity on the part of extremists to heed the call to violent action against those in the country perceived to be threatening the social order of the US. However, the threat is not from outside terrorists, nor from spies hidden internally, but the threat is against the very idea of homogeneity and cultural heritage that marks the strength of this country. No longer is the US a “melting pot,” but rather a “simmering pot,” stirred to violence by the racism and bigotry by White supremacists, along with many in political office with a vested interest in staying in power.

Due to the specter of slavery and discrimination, police were often used to hunt fugitive slaves and were used to enforce the racist laws and edicts of the Jim Crow era. As such, African Americans have always had a complicated relationship with the American “justice” system. The following incidents are neither comprehensive nor exhaustive, but I list them to highlight the context in which many African Americans find themselves in the late 2000s, 2010s, and early 2020s.

- On January 1, 2009, Oscar Grant was “pulled by police from a Bay Area Rapid Transit . . . and killed by Johannes Mehserle in one of the first police shootings captured on video by bystanders” (Meier).
- On July 17, 2014, Eric Garner was killed by a police officer using a choke hold after “uttering the words, ‘I can’t breathe’ 11 times” (BBC “George Floyd”).

- On August 9, 2014, Michael Brown “who was not armed,” was shot by an officer over a box of cigars (BBC “George Floyd”).
- On October, 24, 2014, Laquan McDonald was gunned down by white Chicago police officer Jason Van Dyke; police video released in 2015 “showed Van Dyke firing 16 bullets into McDonald, many after the teen had crumpled to the ground.” (Meier).
- On November 22, 2014, Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old boy, was shot and killed by an officer after pointing a toy gun at officers (BBC). On April 4, 2015, Walter Scott “was shot in the back five times by a white officer” (BBC “George Floyd”).
- On April 12, 2015, Freddie Gray “died after suffering major spinal injuries while being transported in a Baltimore police van in 2015” (Meier).
- On December, 26, 2015, Bettie Jones was “struck by a bullet from Chicago officer Robert Rialmo, who was responding to a domestic dispute at a neighbor’s house that also left 19-year-old Quintonio LeGrier dead” (Meier).

- On July 5, 2016, Alton Sterling was killed “after police responded to reports of a disturbance outside a shop” (BBC “George Floyd”).
- On July 6, 2016, Philando Castile, who was legally licensed to carry a weapon which was on him at the time, was shot “as he was reaching for his license, according to his girlfriend” who live-streamed the encounter on Facebook (BBC “George Floyd”).
- On September 16, 2016, Terence Crutcher was fatally shot by a “white Tulsa police officer, Betty Shelby, who was later acquitted of manslaughter” (Meier).
- On September 28, 2017 Dominique White was “armed when Topeka officers . . . confronted him and fatally shot him.” While the officers were cleared of wrong doing, the family believes that White, who was running away, posed no threat to the lives of the officers (Meier).
- On March 18, 2018, Stephon Clark was shot “at least seven times in Sacramento, California” by police officers who felt their lives were in danger, but no gun was found at the scene, only a mobile phone (BBC “George Floyd”).

- On September 6, 2018, Botham Jean was shot by an off-duty police officer, Amber Guyger, “who said she mistook his apartment for her own” (Meier).
- On October 12, 2019, Atatiana Jefferson was babysitting her “8-year-old nephew . . . when white Fort Worth police officer Aaron Dean shot and killed her through a back window of her home while responding to a call about an open front door” (Meier).
- On August 24, 2019, Elijah McClain “died . . . when police in Colorado used a stranglehold to arrest him and paramedics injected him with an excessive dose of a powerful sedative” (Meier).

This partial list of deaths, presented for illustrative purposes only, suggests a pattern of violence against African Americans fueled by racism. This list does not include the myriad of recent social injustices against African Americans, such as the incident that occurred in the summer of 2020 where Amy Cooper, a white woman who has come to be known as “Central Park Karen,” called the police on a Black man and made a false claim, even though the man recorded much of the interaction (Vera and Ly), nor does it include the extra-legal killing of African Americans, such as the death of Trayvon Martin at the hands of George Zimmerman. Nor does it include the many “macro” aggressions that minorities often face when interacting with police nor the “micro” aggressions against

African Americans that occur when police when someone calls the police to report a Black person “for doing something that is legal and ordinary” (“Yale Incident”). News agencies across the country have reported with increasing frequency, examples of ordinary Black citizens who are harassed or subjected to harsh treatment for everyday occurrences or minor infractions. For example, Lt. Caron Nazario, an Afro-Latino active duty serviceman, was forcibly removed from his vehicle in a traffic stop after he chose to stop in a well-lit gas station (NBC News “Watch”), or Lolade Siyonbola, a graduate student at Yale University who had campus police called on her for taking a break from writing a paper and falling asleep in the common room (“Yale Incident”), or Brennan Walker, a fourteen year old who missed his bus and stopped to ask directions, only to be fired on by Jeffrey Ziegler with a shotgun (“Detroit Man”). This list also does not include racially motivated mass shootings of African Americans in which the shooter espoused racist views, such as the killing of nine people at the Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina on June 17, 2015 (Elliot) or the ten people killed and three wounded in the supermarket shooting in Buffalo, New York in 2022 (Mckinley et al.).

Empathy and Rhetoric

We cannot devise strategies or propose solutions without first understanding the “stories” behind the wrongful deaths of people like Arbery, Taylor, and Floyd that have occurred in order ascertain their causes, but more importantly, to determine what

strategies and solutions might be implemented to keep such actions from occurring in the future and to mitigate the attitudes that caused them. As Lisa Blankenship notes in *Changing the Subject: A Theory of Rhetorical Empathy* (2019), “As educators, as scholars, of rhetorical theory informed by postmodern critiques of inequity and by feminist theories dedicated to pointing out historical and contemporary injustices and amplifying the voices speaking out against them, we are highly invested in developing theories that offer ways of forging alliances across differences” (4). Empathy towards African Americans and those from the African Diaspora is woefully and tragically missing from American society and culture. Although voices throughout history have called for an end to hate and discrimination based on race and have attempted to codify an end to racial injustice into the American legal system, many people in the broader US cultural system have been slow to adopt change. In addition, many systems that are prevalent in the private and public sector are designed so as to favor certain groups over others, hence the idea of “privilege” which has become a major point of discussion in the intervening year since the deaths of Arbery, Taylor, and Floyd. Systemic racism often gives advantage to one group over the other, there has often been pushback from legislators to address inequities. In essence, stakeholders are either reluctant or unwilling to enact changes to the system because they lack understanding of, or simply do not care about, the deprivation that the inequalities wreak in Black and Brown communities. Unfortunately, it is not that stakeholders cannot understand, but rather that they are not willing to understand. They view the Other only in terms that they impose. In *Changing*

the Subject, Lisa Blankenship argues that empathy allows connection with the Other (or people who are not in one's own cultural milieu):

From its beginning, empathy has signified an immersion in an Other's experience through verbal and artistic expression. This element of an immersive experience that results in an emotional response, as well as the associations of empathy with altruism and social justice, possibly explains its continued linguistic cachet over terms such as pity and sympathy. In my definition of empathy, I focus on the *topoi* of empathy in terms of how the subject positions themselves [sic] in relation to the object. Rhetorical empathy becomes both a place and a stance. I situate rhetorical empathy as coming alongside or feeling with the experiences of an Other rather than feeling for or displacing an Other, which is usually associated with pity or sympathy.

(5-6)

Blankenship positions rhetorical empathy as way of interacting with other people in order to understand another's experience or point of view. While noting that some scholars have positioned empathy as a skill to be mastered, Victor Ferry defines empathy as a necessity: "I would argue that empathy plays a more fundamental role for the smooth running of a multicultural society: it is not just a component of intercultural competence, it is a necessary condition for peaceful intercultural contact" (Ferry "Exercising Empathy").

As one can deduce from this definition, empathy is lacking in American society, especially towards African Americans involved in encounters with police, but also where micro and macro aggression is evident. Systemic racism negatively impacts the daily lives of many African Americans. Each incident involving the figures listed above shows a lack of concern for ethical behavior (what is right and wrong to do to another human being) or social justice (in which groups of people are treated fairly with dignity and respect). Ethical behavior requires that one extend a proverbial hand to reach out and help, not destroy, fellow humans, which correlates to the idea of altruism. Empathy is a critical factor in the “glue” that binds American society together, yet we see a disturbing lack of empathy, which has led to our current crisis in which protestors have taken to the streets to decry the “double-standard” they see in the specific cases cited above.

Yet, empathy is only one component of cultural critique; a second component is rhetoric. Rhetoric, according to Sonja Foss “is the process by which our reality or our world comes into being; reality or knowledge of what is in the world is the result of communicating about it [and that] it is not fixed [but] changes according to the symbols we use to talk about it” (Foss 6). In Foss’s view, scholars must investigate communication acts, in whatever form they appear, in order to understand how communication defines reality—our desires, our assumptions, our equivocations, in all of our various ways of communicating in order to understand the world around us. To Foss, all means and forms of communication offer a chance for scholars to study and investigate: “rhetoric includes, then, non-discursive or nonverbal symbols as well as

discursive or verbal ones. Speeches, essays, conversations, poetry, novels, stories, television programs, films, art, architecture, plays, music, dance, advertisements, furniture, public demonstrations, and dress are all forms of rhetoric” (6). Foss aligns herself with other rhetorical scholars by noting the need for a “systematic way of investigating and explaining symbolic acts and artifacts for the purpose of understanding rhetorical processes” (6-7). She goes on to explain the three demarcations of the rhetorical system: (1) analysis of symbols and articulating what impact those symbols might have on communication, (2) description of the symbols being presented to the rhetor’s audience and how those symbols are likely to be interpreted, and (3) discussion of the impact that the rhetorical act of understanding symbols, meanings, and interpretations has on the communicative process itself, or in other words, how does the very act of communicating change the communication process (6-8).

Rhetoric is an important tool to this study because it deals with the transmission of messages:

Knowledge of the operation of rhetoric also can help make us more sophisticated audience members for messages. When we understand the various options available to rhetors in the construction of messages and how they work together to create the effects they produce, we are able to question the choices made in the construction of rhetorical artifacts because we see possibilities other than those selected. We are less inclined to accept existing rhetorical practices and to respond uncritically to the messages we

encounter. As a result, our participation in the shaping of our culture is less reactive and more proactive. (8-9)

Rhetoric allows us to examine the ways in which messages are propagated out into the larger culture and lets us examine the critical structures underlying communication. One particularly powerful form of rhetoric is film. Films are hugely successful across the world and have the potential to disseminate ideas and values to much broader communities than traditional works of fiction. Images of representation in film present the opportunity to help increase empathy in audiences due to rhetorical choices by filmmakers. Video games, too, have this same potential. While drawing on many of the filmic techniques of their predecessors, games offer a heightened amount of interactivity which allows for a heightened level of immersion in the fictional world, thereby engendering even more empathetic resonance between the representational character and the player. I am interested in how films and video games that feature Afrofuturistic narratives do the work described by Blankenship and others. These narratives present opportunities for viewers and players to experience empathy actively through a tight interweaving of this culture, this historical perspective, and this positive, forward-looking aesthetic into a cohesive whole that inspires empathy from those who view and/or interact with it. The film, *Black Panther*, is a great example of how Afrofuturism can help to engender empathy and engage with the racial problems of today.

Black Panther

On February, 16, 2018, *Black Panther* was released in the American domestic market, and the response stood in stark contrast to the everyday inequalities and inequities that permeate much of the American cultural landscape. Empathy was on display in American society after the release of this eighteenth entry into the Marvel Cinematic Universe, and this shift in the rhetoric of inclusion towards Africans and African-Americans occurred not only in America, but also globally, as a new movie debuted, shattering expectations of audience goers across the world. *Black Panther* debuted to both critical and commercial success, and as Marsha Robinson and Caryn Neumann note in their prefatory remarks, “Introduction: On Coogler and Cole’s *Black Panther* Film (2018): Global Perspectives, Reflections and Contexts for Educators,” “the film opened . . . to worldwide excitement. It drew incredibly enthusiastic crowds who returned to see the film again, drawn by the positive representations of African men and women, as well as a solid story, fabulous costumes, and fun special effects” (1). Alex Abad-Santos, writing for *Vox*, wrote the headline for a year-end wrap-up published in December of that year that declared “2018 belonged to *Black Panther*. And it could change Marvel’s future” (Abad-Santos). The subtitle of the same *Vox* article was no less superlative: “This year, *Black Panther* became Marvel’s flagship hero” (Abad-Santos). Abad-Santos went on to write about the ways in which *Black Panther* was culturally significant, but more importantly, went on to speculate about how *Black Panther’s*

success could influence the female solo action movie as *Captain Marvel* was upcoming for the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Other sources were similarly effusive of their praise of the box office performance of *Black Panther*. In April of that year, *Vanity Fair's* Emma Stefansky wrote, "Marvel knew they had something big when *Black Panther* turned in the studio's biggest opening week ever, trouncing the opening numbers of 2012's *The Avengers* . . . [and] the latest broken record: *Black Panther* has passed the once unsinkable *Titanic*" (Stefansky). News outlets from all over the globe at the time reported on the amazing box office records that *Black Panther* shattered. However, it was not the records that were necessarily important to *Black Panther's* ultimate success; rather it was the fact that "it established the [fictional] African nation of Wakanda as a technological utopia and the most advanced civilization in the Marvel Universe" (Abad-Santos). While historical movies, such as *Hidden Figures*, helped to illustrate the power of Black intellectualism, the fictional country of Wakanda, as realized in *Black Panther*, articulated this vision without the specter of colonialism. Thus, audiences get to see an unrealized version of the African continent unspoiled by the ravages associated with colonialism.

Despite the box office success of the film, Robinson and Neumann see the *Black Panther's* cultural impact as the film's true legacy as they note, "However, it's most lasting value may be even more impressive in that it may be as significant in the near term as Alex Haley's *Roots* (1977) and it may have unprecedented impact in global conversations about the complexities of slavery, colonialism, African diaspora relations,

identity, and the social, gender and economic transformations now taking place in the fifty-five nations of the African Union” (Robinson and Neumann 2). Robinson and Neumann have correctly pinpointed *Black Panther*'s potential to inspire empathy towards Black culture and Black history.

In addition to Rhetoric, film critique is also an important tool that we can use to examine *Black Panther*. As Graham Roberts and Heather Wallis note in *Introducing Film* (2001), “Film was, is and will remain a medium of messages and values” (2). *Black Panther* is an Afrofuturistic text that promotes and disseminates positive messages through cinematography, lighting, and editing, among other elements that comprise the “language” of film.

Afrofuturism

Black Panther creates a space for discussions about the nature of race relations in a safe and transformative environment. As Abad-Santos notes, “*Black Panther* gave us [Black audiences] a hero to root for and a place to dream about [a vision of what Africa might have been like unspoiled by colonialism]” (Abad-Santos). *Black Panther* was, and still is, a cultural marvel in that, while a superhero film, it also showcases Afrofuturism. Coined in 1992 by Mark Dery, Afrofuturism is the synergy of futuristic thought with the culture of those from Africa and/or the African Diaspora. It can present either futuristic narratives which relate in some way to Africa or the African diaspora, or it can present imagined worlds and futures that engage the narrative from the African or Black point of

view, such as *Pumzi*, *Brown Girl Begins*, and *Afronauts*. Afrofuturism shapes the conversation about race into a constructive conversation in which possible solutions are displayed in narrative form. Afrofuturism, in the form of a narrative, moves the cultural conversation beyond the recriminations and continued victimization narratives of the past. Afrofuturistic narratives present the opportunity to help people around the world, but most critically in the United States, to “engage in an Other’s experience” (Blankenship 5) in manner that humanizes people of color. This humanization is a crucial first step to combating the two-tiered justice system that continues to allow systemic racism to rob America of the rich tapestry of voices that include American citizens such as Arbery, Taylor, and Floyd.

Afrofuturism reconceptualizes the African and African American experience. Built upon imagination, it looks towards the future and dares to imagine what the Black community can achieve unencumbered by the colonial, racist histories and dogmas that have attended those from the African Diaspora since the expansion and colonization of the world. “Can you imagine a world without the idea of race? Can you imagine a world where skin color, hair texture, national origin, and ethnicity are not determinants of power, structure or access?” (Womack 41). Yet, while imaging liberating futures, Afrofuturistic filmmakers do not want to ignore the past, for in understanding our past, we find that we can chart our future more clearly according to Womack: “[Mark Dery] compares the atrocities of racism experienced by Blacks in the United States to a ‘sci-fi nightmare in which unseen but no less impassable force fields of intolerance frustrate

movement; official histories undo what has been done; and technology is too often brought to bear on Black bodies (branding, forced sterilization, the Tuskegee experiment and tasers come readily to mind.” (Womack 32). Afrofuturism is a lens through which to view the African American experience. While many works, such as *Roots*, *Precious*, *Glory*, and *Amistad* focus on the historical destruction wrought by slavery, racism, and poverty, Afrofuturistic literature, soundscapes, films, and other media representations focus on the future and what happens when “Blackness” as concept is imagined differently, without the pejorative connotations imbued by centuries of slavery and racism. As a social construct, “Blackness” in the US has been ascribed pejorative connotations. In other words, Afrofuturism looks to the future instead of the past while always remembering that the past influences the future in some way. The film, *The Brother From Another Planet* (1984), is an example of the past influencing the future. While it could be argued that it is a proto-Afrofuturistic movie, the past deprivations are a part of its foundation. However, the filmmaker chooses to focus on “The Brother’s” alienness and otherworldliness in order to bring into stark relief the inanities of racialized life on Earth, specifically in New York City, one of the most diverse cities in America.

Afrofuturism’s power and potential lies in the way that it both challenges and changes the narrative, both literally and figuratively. Literal change lies in Afrofuturistic works like *Black Panther* where a character like Shuri, T’Challa’s sister, is fully realized rather than a stereotype. Shuri is smart and capable, funny, and relatable. She invites viewers, particularly brown-skinned teenager girls, to both admire and emulate her. Shuri,

in turn, provides the potential for African and African American teenage girls all across the globe to identify with this inspirational character. The figurative change can occur as more and more Afrofuturistic texts appear in popular culture. People all across the globe will be invited to see “Blackness” in a normative fashion rather than in the current racialized fashion that has been carried over from slavery and other attempts to ascribe genetic variance to the cultural stereotypes that are now currently part of the idea of “Blackness.”

Overview of the Structure

Chapter 1, “Do We Not Bleed: Empathy, Rhetorical Empathy, and the Nature of Rhetoric,” illustrates the concept of empathy and the ways in which it has been traditionally formulated as a multidisciplinary concern. After describing a broad conception of empathy, Chapter 1 then focuses on a more specific form of empathy, Rhetorical Empathy, which will situate empathy under the auspices of rhetoric and rhetorical thought dealing with communication. Finally, Chapter 1 illustrates how rhetoric not only circulates ideas, but also promote values, including empathy.

Chapter 2, “New Narratives — Afrofuturism and the Black Panther Experience,” focuses on the aesthetics of Afrofuturism in a variety of contexts, such as film, literature, art, music and fashion. After providing a clear definition and discussing contexts, Chapter 2 features an in-depth examination *Black Panther* in order to illustrate Afrofuturistic elements inside the film. In addition, the chapter foregrounds the ways in which *Black*

Panther uses film theory and rhetorical techniques to engender empathy to its audience under the auspices of story and story construction. This chapter examines key scenes in *Black Panther* to help illustrate the ways in which Afrofuturism works to foster empathetic awareness among film viewers.

Chapter 3, “Afrofuturism in Video Games — Futuristic and Interactive Narratives,” focuses on New Media representations of Afrofuturism, specifically in video games. Like films, games use narrative techniques and rhetorical techniques to grab and keep the attention of the players, but video games provide a secondary layer—interactivity—that this chapter also examines. A key component of video games, interactivity has received a considerable attention by scholars interested in the ways players of a game exhibit agency in the actions of the characters and/or narrative of the game, and the manner in which this interactivity affects their awareness. While many older studies argue that increased violence and aggression result from playing video games, many newer studies indicate that playing video games may actually lead to *empathetic play*, a state in which players come to understand “the Other.” The *Assassin’s Creed* (2007-2020) games have prompted quite bit of scholarship. While the games in the series take place in a historical time period, the fiction inside the games is reliant on a science fictional framework. This series contains three protagonists who are people of color: Adewale, Aveline de Grandpre, and Bayek of Siwa. Two of the three protagonists live in times when slavery is still occurring, and in Aveline’s case, the designers specifically integrate the slavery aspect, not only in the game’s setting, but with

gameplay mechanics as well. The third protagonist, Bayek, is a Medjay, an ancient protector of his country, so his attitude and beliefs correlate to modern-day police officers. While African and African American characters are not highly prevalent in video games, especially as protagonists, this chapter looks those presented in Science Fiction and Afrofuturistic contexts to investigate how Afrofuturism might help engender empathy in players.

Chapter 4, “Lift Every Voice: Afrofuturism and Cultural Rhetoric,” discusses the historical connections between the Civil Rights Movement, Black Lives Matter movement, and #OscarsSoWhite movement in order to ascertain how Afrofuturism impacts these cultural movements and in what ways Afrofuturism might be used to impact the American, and even global landscape.

Chapter 5, “The Far Reaches of Outer Space,” includes a restatement of major findings and summarizes the ways in which Afrofuturism can inspire empathy towards those of the African Diaspora. It notes the weaknesses inherent in Afrofuturism in order to present a balanced view of its ability to engender empathy in a broader audience. However, even allowing for Afrofuturism’s limitations, I argue that Afrofuturism is still one of the most effective ways to transmit understanding and tolerance of Black and brown communities, specifically those that are a part of the African Diaspora. Readers will see how Afrofuturism offers ways of thinking about race, especially in light of the events of summer 2020, in addition to other recent challenges for the Black community. Readers will see that Afrofuturism could be an important tool for Africans and African

Americans in order to alter the prejudiced paradigms of the late 1700s and 1800s and create new paradigms appropriate for the twenty-first century and beyond based on empathy and rhetorical choices.

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that the Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.

—*The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B DuBois

Chapter 1: Empathy, Rhetorical Empathy, and the Nature of Rhetoric

Defining Empathy

Empathy and the study of empathetic rationality undergird the discussions of the *Black Panther* experience, and by extension, Afrofuturism’s cultural and rhetorical power. Empathy, while widely written about and studied, unfortunately generates confusion about how it works in society. We know that empathy exists as concept because, as noted by Neil Roughley and Thomas Schramme in *Forms of Fellow Feeling: Empathy, Sympathy, Concern and Moral Agency* (2018), “humans frequently act and

react in line with what they take to be *morally* right or wrong” (3). Even though popular perception portrays humans as acting out of self-interest, Roughley and Schramme indicate that this is not always the case. At times, humans act in a moral manner which may, in fact, work against their own self-interest for the good of the group or the good of another.

However, empathy is an extremely hard concept to define, partly because it is a human construct that encompasses a range of “prosocial” behaviors that have a moral, and therefore, subjective, component. The interdisciplinary nature of the study of empathy crosses the boundaries. It is this disparate nature of the “nebulous” term for empathy that is rife with ambiguity. Roughley and Schramme believe that empathy, as it pertains to morality “has been a concern of philosophy” (3). However, when empathy is linked with prosocial behavior, then it “has primarily been the object of research in social, developmental and—more recently—neuropsychology” (3). Thus, we can see that because multiple disciplines are involved in the discussion of what we know to be empathy, each discipline’s definition must be considered in order to discover a complete picture of the nebulous process that is empathy. Roughley and Schramme see an additional complication, namely that “consideration of the relationship between morality and prosociality” must be considered in order to formulate a complete definition of what empathy and similar concepts truly encapsulate (3).

Before delving into the various *types* of “fellow feeling,” a brief history might reveal how empathy has evolved over time as a term. In her book *Empathy: A History*

(2018), Susan Lanzoni lays out the rise of the “extended mind” that we now consider as “empathy.” Her work specifically investigates the origin of the term and traces its development throughout modern history as she notes that the term is a modern construct. Lanzoni notes that what we know as empathy actually arose from a German historical term “*Einfühlung*, or literally ‘in-feeling’” (2). This term first appeared in 1908 and was linked to the German aesthetic movement that “captured the aesthetic activity of transferring one’s own feeling into the forms and shapes of objects” (2). Rather than we, as humans, *taking in another’s perspective*, the term originally was used to illustrate how we, as the audience and/or as the viewer, *project our own perspectives* on another’s art in order to *inhabit* that space and make it our own. Lanzoni argues that this was empathy’s original meaning, but that this meaning has largely been either forgotten or ignored by society over the years (2).

Like Blankenship, along with Roughley and Schramme, Lanzoni observes that the concept of empathy appears in different disciplines, ranging from “aesthetic psychology to social work and psychotherapy, to politics, advertising, and the media” (2). Lanzoni argues that empathy, as utilized today, conveys a multitude of meanings, including “emotional resonance or contagion, motor mimicry, a complex cognitive and imaginative capacity, perspective taking, kinesthetic modeling, a firing of mirror neurons, concern for others, and sometimes, although rarely, aesthetic self-projection” (3). Lanzoni elaborates a set of definitions that, while much more simple than those that Roughley and Schramme postulate, still manages convey empathy’s interdisciplinary nature. She draws

in schema from the “social, psychological, and neurological sciences” (7), while noting that these various definitions are “vigorously debated” by scholars in both their “meanings and scope” (7). For Lanzoni, empathy, as modern speakers use it today, is entirely different from its original historical definition. Empathy’s meaning has evolved over time and morphed from an outward aesthetic connection to art to an inner connection of “fellow feeling” that connects one person’s emotional state to another’s:

“Empathy” is a relatively new English word. Anglo-American psychologists coined “empathy” as the best translation of the German *Einführung* (in-feeling) only in 1908. In the late nineteenth century, psychologists began to examine aesthetic response as a bodily engagement with form, which engaged a spectator’s muscles, breath, and posture. *Einführung* was defined by Theodor Lipps, one of its main theorists, as the projection of inner feelings of striving and movement into objects, key to all forms of aesthetic experience . . . At first, psychologists suggested a number of competing translations including “aesthetic sympathy,” “play,” “semblance,” and “animation.” In 1908, the Cornell psychologist Edward B. Titchener offered “empathy” as a translation, although it was first misspelled as “enpathy” [sic] in a philosophical journal and overlooked. That same year, the psychologist James Ward at the University of Cambridge in England also suggested “empathy” to his colleagues. In 1909 the term appeared in psychological textbooks, and by 1913 it became the generally accepted translation. (9)

This early definition of empathy focused on objects might allow one's mind to be "suffused" into objects in such a way that the audience might be able to create a "mental image of bodily movement" so as to create what Titchener "called the kinesthetic image," and this image would be added to the other visual, auditory, and olfactory images produced during the early era of psychological introspection (9-10). While further definitions of empathy, move away from the idea of *Einfuhlung*, it is still important to keep this definition in mind when examining the role empathy plays in art. The audience, who interact with the art, is impacted by this original conception of *Einfuhlung* because lived experiences merge with the artist's expression. In other words, the audience member feels a visceral connection to the artist's work in a way that moves the person to an emotional response due to a particularly powerful memory or experience. This original definition is still valid for expressing inner feelings and investigating artistic works, such as films or other new media representations.

Empathy is both similar and distinct from "sympathy" and "concern." Roughley and Schramme situate these overlapping, but distinct, together, explaining their decision by noting, "there are good reasons to think that certain kinds of emotional connections between human agents are crucial for the explanation of both forms of behavior [morality and prosociality] . . . we group together the kinds of emotional connection that appear the best candidates for such a role — empathy, sympathy and concern—under the label *forms of fellow feeling*" (3). According to Roughley and Schramme, empathy has been debated and studied by both philosophers and psychologists (3), but neither group has an

exclusive claim on knowing what truly makes a person empathetic. However, they contend that core concepts and hypotheses help to articulate the move in human beings exhibit concern for their fellows, because “humans are also animals with strong *prosocial* behavioral tendencies, that is, tendencies to benefit others,” although that concern is often mitigated by factors such as bias for friends, family, and members of one’s in-group (Roughley and Schramme 3-4). This is important to Schramme and Roughley because they believe that “present-day conceptions of morality” are affected by, at least in part, by “fellow feeling” attributes (4).

The Promise of Empathy

Key to my study of *Black Panther*, along with other Afrofuturistic texts, is the way in which empathy-allows one to consider various intercultural modalities when interacting with racial and ethnic others not your own. Indeed, Lanzoni makes the assertion that some believe that empathy embodies the power to combat racism and prejudice. In societies in which the self is particularly valued, such as in Western cultures, empathy allows for a way to understand and connect with fellow individuals. Mental states and schema are often unknown and unknowable outside of direct statements as to how one is feeling, emotional displays, or inference from observation. Empathy allows a sort of imaginative role-play as to how another might be feeling. It takes on a role of positive care in that it allows connection with others that sympathy and pity often do not.

Lanzoni discusses the rise of “empathy” as a concept and why it has gained popularity, especially in the west, and particularly in America:

The increased public presence of the concept of empathy resulted from the postwar popularization of psychology and the explosive growth of psychological experts. Empathy had cachet after the turbulent war years: not only did it reflect psychological expertise, but it offered new possibilities for connection, identification, and understanding that might improve social relations of all kinds . . . Empathy could enhance employer-employee relations, forge connections between consumers and advertisers, sell products, and model harmonious family bonds. (12)

For social scientists committed to community improvement, fostering empathy in intercultural educational projects could help eradicate prejudice and increase tolerance. The social psychologist Gordon Allport, well versed in the German literature on *Einfühlung*, connected the study of aesthetics, form, and personality to an ability to show tolerance toward other ethnic and racial groups. By the mid-1960s, Kenneth B. Clark, the African American psychologist and civil rights activist, ardently championed empathy as a form of social sensitivity sorely lacking in his White liberal colleagues and more broadly in the competitive nature of American education institutions. As early as the 1960s, scholars understood the importance of empathy in combating racial inequity. Empathy has an “equalizing” capability because it asks one to consider how others might be impacted. In fact, for many scholars, empathy is still a prime factor in multiculturalism

and is increasingly important in the global economy. In “Exercising Empathy: Ancient Rhetorical Tools for Intercultural Communication,” Victor Ferry discusses empathy not as feeling but as a “a critical skill for peaceful intercultural contact . . . several studies have demonstrated a link between, empathy, the ability to simulate others’ subjective experience and altruism, that is caring for others’ wellbeing in our words and actions” (Ferry). Ferry likens the interaction between empathy and altruism as a “Russian doll” in which emotional contagion is the key that drives the process (Ferry). For Ferry, the larger “doll” is the idea of empathy as we understand it today. That is, the upper level of empathy allows us to see the world as another might see it, while “perspective taking” relies on the lower level and creates an emotional contagion in which we can see or feel the other’s “subjectivity.” Finally, the process only works, according to Ferry, because we are able to see ourselves as individuals who are *apart* and *separate* from another (or in Ferry’s words, we can “differentiate oneself” from the other) and in doing so, this makes empathy more “effortful and less immediate” than sympathy (Ferry). Since we have both the dual ability to sense ourselves and to simulate what the other person might be experiencing, this dual state of being keeps us from falling into the trap of experiencing the exact same emotion/emotional response, but engages our faculties in such a way as to create both a lessened emotional response along with a heightened critical response. It is as if, by creating a simulacrum of the other person’s emotional response, we can then create an emotional response in ourselves that *aligns* with this simulacrum, without allowing us to be drawn into the actual emotion, thereby allowing us to maintain a

distance in which we feel *with* the person. He goes on to argue that “altruism occurs when all levels smoothly run together: emotional contagion makes us care about others and perspective taking allows us to understand their needs” (Ferry).

Afrofuturistic texts like *Black Panther* allow the audience to view the *characters* as simulacrum, stand-ins for Africans and African Americans, who are able to act without the prejudices that have been historically heaped on them. The characters allow the audience to *align* their own internal perceptions to the same perceptions that characters already exude, rather than the preconceived notions that the audience may have already had before entering the theater. In this instance, the filmmakers have exploited a filmic device, *willing suspension of disbelief*, in order to reset the audience’s expectations, and to help engender empathy towards the characters, and possibly to others who are *similar* to those characters. In essence, the audience members, no matter their race, gender, or cultural markers are no longer outsiders, but through the shared process of experiencing the movie’s narrative, they instead become members of the in-group. While the audience as a group do not have to *suffer* (i.e., their own emotions are not at risk as might be the case with sympathy), meaning they can be objective and simulate the feelings of the characters and thereby feel *with* the characters without literally *being* the characters. Feeling with “the other” is a powerful antidote to racist stereotypes that dehumanize and debase.

Limits of Empathy

Empathy, by itself, is not a complete corrective to society's ills. Empathy has the *potential* to address problems that affect modern-day society, such as prejudice and racism, but it is not a panacea. Several scholars have noted where empathy falls short of fulfilling its currently defined function: to allow others to feel as others feel so as to engage altruism and limit selfishness. A few scholars have even noted that, in some very specific instances, appeals to empathy actually backfire, making it harder to employ altruism in certain individuals.

In the 2021 article "Against Empathy Bias: The Moral Value of Equitable Empathy," Zoe Fowler, Kyle Fiore Law, and Brendan Gaesser, report on their research into empathy and bias. These scholars set out to discover whether or not empathy was actually biased towards those who people are "close or similar to" (Fowler et. al 766), which would necessarily hinder the formation of what these scholars term as "equitable empathy," or empathy that is spread uniformly throughout a particular population or social structure. In particular, Fowler et. al have discovered an interdisciplinary relationship between psychology and neural science in the research from both areas that seems to indicate similar results. Three psychological studies have found that "empathy is inherently biased and parochial, meaning it is narrow in scope and likely felt for a limited group of people" (767). In addition, the authors also discovered that studies done utilizing

neural imaging seem to confirm this correlation as pain centers in the brain light with more “neural similarity” when processing the pain of someone in one’s own in-group as opposed to one’s out-group (767). While noting that there is still a gap in our understanding of how empathy can predict behavior, they do believe that “this body of work demonstrates that empathy is often experienced in an unbalanced manner for close and similar individuals and that this empathetic bias predicts in-group favoritism in prosocial behavior” (767).

The authors then looked at several published studies and saw that a correlation between social biases came into play when there were choices on whether to help a “socially close target (i.e., a family member, friend, community member, and fellow citizen) or a socially distant target (i.e., a stranger in need living in a distant country)” (768). They discuss the fact that other research points out that “people perceive a moral obligation to help a family member instead of a stranger” (768) and even *judge* others more favorably when they conform to this social paradigm.

The authors discovered an additional component to the study of empathy and altruism that had not yet been addressed, namely, “whether this parochial preference also colors moral judgments of the empathy one feels for those who are socially close versus socially distant” (768). Two studies ultimately determined that, while socially biased empathy does occur, the person who acts with *equitable empathy* is considered the “most moral” (775). Morality, in other words, does not play a significant part in the biases of those acting with more empathy towards a socially close person versus a socially distant

person. The authors suggest that “biased feelings of empathy may arise from differences in people’s motivation to empathize or in response to competing goals and costs” (775). Thus, while people might know it is morally right to act in an empathetic manner to all, they may have other motivations or goals that keep them from acting in an equitable manner. The authors note that further research is needed, especially in the areas of linking empathy with altruistic behavior versus moral behavior, along with the need of investigation of moral judgments of empathy in “naturalistic contexts” (776) instead of the hypothetical used in their studies. Still, the studies by Fowler and others establish a correlation between empathy and equitable behavior as being seen as the best moral choice, while recognizing that external factors such as motivations and competing goals often complicate the decision-making process.

In the 2018 article “‘Should You Encounter’: The Social Conditions of Empathy,” Eric Leake also identifies areas in which empathy breaks down. He argues that “social conditions of empathy are too often overlooked in an individual phenomenon or as occurring between two individuals without taking larger social conditions into consideration” (3-4). Essentially, he’s not discounting the “neuroanatomy” of empathy, but rather, sounding the alarm that social conditions and the socially constructed methods of determining who is “worthy” of empathy must also be taken into consideration (4). He believes that much of what we believe to be an empathetic response (or the rejection of an empathetic response) can be determined by viewing empathy through a rhetorical lens, and does, in fact, reference the rhetorical empathy of Lisa Blankenship to help support his

argument. However, in acknowledging that rhetoric plays a part in the construction of empathy, he positions empathy as *more* than an individual response or even a neurological one. He states, “empathy is more than personal: This [sic] understanding of empathy is in line with the work of such theorists as Gross and Sara Ahmed, who have pushed for a rhetorical understanding of emotions as not merely personal or neurological phenomena but as occurring in socio-historical spaces” (4). Without this understanding that social perspective plays a part in empathy, it might be impossible to understand how, and when, empathy falls apart.

Leake’s understanding of the socially constructed nature of empathy provides both an explanation for why (and how) empathy can be positioned as a rhetorical construct that both engenders and inhibits the processes involved in empathetic behavior. As Leake says, “the idea of a shared humanity—that there are some similarities in the human experience and that human concerns transcend difference—contributes to self-other overlap by acknowledging shared vulnerabilities and possibilities. A shared humanity also establishes a common community so that one believes that another’s suffering is one’s own concern” (10). Thus, according to Leake, acknowledging the various commonalities that make us human is what gives us the ability to see beyond the differences—whether physical, mental, spiritual, or any other manner of differentiation—and allows us the capability to envision all manner of circumstances that may befall another human.

Yet, as Leake argues, this very commonality inhibits empathy as “social forces, values, logics, and possible subject positions” (11) that also come into play. He argues that scholars, all too often, focus on the individual, or individual encounters when determining whether empathy will be extended to a subject. In reality, according to Leake, it is often a subject without recognizing the role social pressures and social dynamics play in determining outcomes. Leake identifies two main areas in which social forces are critical in the conception of empathetic formation: 1) whether the victim is perceived as having fault for creating a situation and 2) recognition of “self-other overlap” through shared experiences, concern, and a recognition of shared potentialities and vulnerabilities (12). These two areas aid understanding how (and when) empathy will be enacted. Leake provides evidence for his claim by telling the story of Roger Jacobs, a freelance writer, who became homeless in the summer of 2010 and who wrote about his experiences in the *Las Vegas Sun*. Leake uses responses to his story to point out various the comments and responses to the story and points out various rhetorical positions and choices demonstrated so as to provide an “assessment of suffering and responsibility” and to illustrate “our places [sic] in relation to others in a community” because “since empathy is unevenly distributed, some members of a community are granted greater access to empathy than others” (2-3).

This idea that a concept as universal as empathy can be distributed with inequity is central to the premise that African Americans constitute a community from which empathy is withheld due to a perception that their status as victims is somehow their own

fault, an idea that Thomas Jefferson advanced in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785) when he wrote, “I advance it therefore as a suspicion only, that the Blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind” (Jefferson). This supposition, by one of the nation’s “founding fathers,” lays the groundwork for the system of legalized slavery in the US, the rise of Jim Crow laws, and even today influences many of the racist and racialized acts perpetrated by citizens and some officers of the law, underscores how pervasive racism is in society. Afrofuturism, as it manifests in various rhetorical forms, such as films and video games, challenges Jefferson’s supposition. Afrofuturism helps to engender empathy which then fosters a move away from the idea of “victim” altogether, into a “self-other overlap.” This recognition of the other’s well-being as a part of one’s own well-being leads to recognition of common potentialities and vulnerabilities.

The Difference Between Empathy, Sympathy, and Pity

While *empathy*, *sympathy*, and *pity* are all forms of “fellow feeling,” they are not equivalent terms. Scholars are quick to differentiate each term because each has its own definition. The general public often uses the terms synonymously, not understanding the distinctions between each term. Researchers have also noted that, in some cases, the very *perception* of these concepts in society has a marked impact on the *reception* of them. For

my purposes, I note that there is often a pejorative connotation to *sympathy*, while *empathy* generally receives a more positive connotation.

Roughley and Schramme highlight the difference between sympathy and empathy in the Introduction to their *Forms of Fellow Feeling: Empathy, Sympathy, Concern and Moral Agency* (2020): “the basic difference is that, whereas sympathy or care involves a positive evaluation of the well-being, or — more to the point — a negative evaluation of the ill-being of others, empathy involves the positive evaluation of the subjective point of view of its relevant target” (40). In essence, from the subjective view of the person extending the emotion, sympathy maintains that the subject’s well-being is in a *negative* state, and as such, the emotional outpouring seeks to address that deficit. Empathy, in contrast, describes the subject’s well-being in a *positive* state. Specifically, an empathetic state is one that does not necessarily need to be corrected, and thus, one’s own emotional state is not needed to redress a problem or issue. The editors then reference the work of one of their contributors, Stephen Darwall, in order to explain why this distinction is important. They argue that sympathy “requires seeing their welfare as of a value thus diminished” (40). In other words, sympathy seems to evoke a response in which the reciprocal nature of the emotional transference is in some way inhibited, and when we feel sympathy, it is because we want the “ill-being” to stop or end. Sympathy works on an emotional surface level versus the deeper emotional connection that empathy offers.

Susan Lanzoni points out that the confusion between empathy and sympathy played a pivotal role in the 2009 confirmation debates for (then) Supreme Court nominee

Sonia Sotomayor. Senator Orin Hatch took issue with then President Obama's comment about "empathy" based on the conservative view of empathy as "a dangerous substitution of emotion for rational judgment" (5). Lanzoni notes that William Safire then attempted to distinguish between empathy and sympathy in "On Language," his column for the *New York Times*. Safire explained that "sympathy was aligned with pity, but empathy . . . comprised a stronger emotional identification" (5). Lanzoni then puts the discussion in a much wider historical context:

Empathy and sympathy are still confused, although back in the eighteenth century "sympathy" was the moral and aesthetic concept debated by the philosophers David Hume, Adam Smith, and Edmund Burke. Nineteenth-century [sic] spoke of "sympathy" as an interpersonal value in evolutionary and physiological frameworks. By the early twentieth century "empathy" first appeared and connoted an aesthetic experience. Just a few decades later, however, empathy was introduced to the broader American public as a more powerful capacity than sympathy. Rather than feeling bad for someone else's misery, empathy enabled a comprehensive grasp of another's experience. "Empathy" soon took over the meanings of "sympathy" even as it extended beyond them. Today, sympathy is usually defined as a distanced feeling of pity for another, whereas empathy is a deeper-going ability to engage with a variety of feelings and to inhabit, sometimes even bodily, the other's perspective. (5-6)

Like Roughley and Schramme, Lanzoni underscores the emotional distance that sympathy (and pity) create when engaging with the plight of the other. While you might feel sympathetic toward the situation of another, that feeling does not usually equate to you putting yourself in their position. Empathy, on the other hand, allows you to simulate the emotional state of the other because you can take their “perspective” or “role play” (Lanzoni 6) what they are feeling. This distinction elevates empathy over sympathy and pity. It is this idea of seeing through another’s eyes their cultural values, mores, and cultural conflicts that is at the heart of why Afrofuturism is an important tool to help transmit new cultural values because rather than pitying, people are encouraged to empathize with others.

Empathy allows for a level of role play that increases the understanding of the Other. Lisa Blankenship in her book *Changing the Subject: A Theory of Rhetorical Empathy* (2019) argues that, “*Empathy* can be a slippery term” (5). Blankenship, like Roughley and Schramme and Susan Lanzoni notes that empathy is a concept that is much different from sympathy and pity. Blankenship, however, has a particular reason for using empathy in her scholarship:

I chose *empathy* rather than its various similar alternatives for a number of reasons. *Pity* and *sympathy* are even more culturally loaded terms than empathy in their associations with patronization, colonization, and somewhat removed experience of an Other’s plight. From its beginning, empathy has signified an immersion in an Other’s experience through verbal and visual artistic expression.

This element of an immersive experience that results in an emotional response, as well as the associations of empathy with altruism and social justice, possibly explains its continued linguistic cachet over terms such as *pity* and *sympathy*. (5)

For Blankenship, empathy is essential to engaging with the Other. Without empathy, any articulation of the Other's experience is doomed to failure as Blankenship believes "empathy, like rhetoric, is an epistemology, a way of knowing and understanding, a complex combination of intention and emotion" (7). Both empathy and rhetoric allow for knowledge to be generated, disseminated, and analyzed to enhance interactions between disparate groups.

Rhetoric

Much like empathy, rhetoric also is a valuable paradigm in which to study and understand the ways that Afrofuturistic texts are able to use rhetorical theories to encourage people to act with empathy. Rhetoric undergirds the discussion of Afrofuturism, film, and texts because it allows humans to understand the basic element of human interaction: communication. Sonja Foss, in *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice, 2nd Edition* (1996), notes that rhetoric has four "dimensions" which conceptualize how humans use symbols for "the purpose of communicating" (4). Rhetoric is an *action*, a *symbolic* action, a *human* action, and *enables us to communicate* with one another (4). Foss then defines the parameters of each of these statements. She argues that when we take an action, we are making conscious decisions about engaging in

communication, and when we communicate, we make conscious decisions about our communication choices (for instance, would a face-to-face meeting, phone call, email or text message be most appropriate in a particular situation?) (4). Rhetoric relies on the use of signs to communicate; Foss says happens when a sign is “connected to another object” and a symbolic sign is “only indirectly connected to its referent and is a human creation.” She provides an example with the word *chair*, a word whose relation to sitting is not inherent in the letters that make up the word, but rather to the object that allows the act of sitting to take place. It is a symbol as well as an object (4-5). Foss also identifies humanity as a particular trait of rhetoric and the rhetorical process; however other rhetors, notably Debra Hawhee in *Rhetoric in Tooth and Claw* (2016), have investigated-non-human forms of rhetoric. While Foss acknowledges the idea that other living things may be acting in ways that constitute rhetoric, humanity is important as it focuses the attention on the use of symbols and the symbolic interaction inherent in human communication (5). Foss uses the term *rhetor* to denote “a human designer, creator, or producer of rhetoric such as a speaker, a writer, an architect, or a filmmaker” (5). Lastly, Foss looks at the *ways* in which humans communicate with each other along with the *reasons* why they communicate. She notes that persuasion is often an inducement to communicate, as is “an invitation to understanding . . . [and] sometimes . . . as a means of self-discovery or for coming to self-knowledge” (5). Yet, ultimately, no matter the reason, Foss asserts that when we communicate, we are creating a shared world, a common existence, and that our very reality is implicit upon the symbols and actions we use to communicate with one

another. This has major implications for rhetorical “texts” like films and other entertainment work which rely on mass consumption along with shared experiences to help promote themes and ideas:

Symbols assume a variety of forms; any message, regardless of the form it takes or the channel of communication it uses, is rhetoric and is appropriate to study in rhetorical criticism. Rhetoric includes, then, non discursive or nonverbal symbols as well as discursive or verbal ones. Speeches, essays, conversations, poetry, novels, stories, television programs, films, art, architecture, plays, music, dance, advertisements, furniture, public demonstrations, and dress are all forms of rhetoric . . . [and] one reason to engage in [rhetorical] criticism is to understand particular symbols and how they operate . . . [as] the critic is interested in discovering what the artifact teaches about the nature of rhetoric . . . Its final outcome is a contribution to the improvement of our abilities as communicators and consumers of symbols . . . [and] knowledge of the operation of rhetoric also can help make us more sophisticated audience members for messages . . . When we understand the various options available to rhetors in the construction of messages and how they work together, to create the effects they produce, we are able to question the choices made in the construction of rhetorical artifacts because we see possibilities other than those selected. We are less inclined to accept existing rhetorical practices and to respond uncritically to

the messages we encounter. As a result, our participation in the shaping of our culture is less reactive and more proactive. (7-9)

Foss, and other rhetors who identify symbols as an important part of the rhetorical process, believes that by understanding the meaning of the various symbols and the way in which they interact with each other and are encoded/decoded is an important aspect of determining the way in which communication and messages are constructed. As Foss makes clear, one needs to study the speech act in which communication can occur and which messages can be constructed, as well as to investigate other venues of communication that are non-discursive in nature, such as narratives in various forms, including in the visual arts, to discover the ways in which symbols are expressed in the medium and show how messages are communicated through these non-discursive modes.

Fantasy Theme Criticism

Rhetorical power explains why film influences cultural values and beliefs. Sonja Foss argues that “symbols create reality because of their capacity to introduce form and law into a disordered sensory experience. The chaotic and disorderly sensory world is organized and made manageable by the symbols that are devised to dominate it” (122). Movies and film organize the image in such a way that it creates meaning for the viewer. With the advent of sound and sound reproduction, the abstract nature of film gives way to a more concrete or realistic semiotic grammar that allows the viewer not only to more easily suspend disbelief, but also more deeply connect to the concepts, ideas, and

symbols presented to the viewer. Indeed, the idea of symbolic convergence theory hinges on this very notion of connection as Foss notes: “A second assumption on which symbolic convergence theory is based is that symbols not only create reality for individuals but that individuals’ meanings for symbols can converge to create a shared reality to participants” (122). Foss draws on the work of Ernest Bormann to explain how symbolic convergence theory has consequences for the rhetorical process—indicating that “the message itself is important, but the sharing of the message is even more significant in the symbolic convergence theory” (123). In order to begin to analyze artifacts, however, one must use the “fantasy theme” (123) in order to ascertain what is happening in the sharing of a message or idea. This is important because symbols constitute an ordering of reality and that this ordering can pass beyond individuals to groups so that they “create a shared reality for participants” (122).

Even though the word “fantasy” is used to describe the type of criticism, it does not bear any relation to the use of the word in its genre connotations. Rather, according to Foss, “[a fantasy theme] is a word, phrase, or statement that interpreted events in the past, envisions events in the future, or depicts current events that are removed in time and/or space from the actual activities of the group” (123). This idea of envisioning possibilities or reconstituting known history tracks well with the tenants of Afrofuturism. According to LaFleur, Afrofuturism is an umbrella term that consists of multiple ideas coalesced into one overarching idea: “. . . a way of imagining possible futures through a Black cultural lens” (qtd. in Womack 9). The fantasy theme, then, for Afrofuturists would be looking at

works that envision possible futures through a lens of the African American or someone from the African diaspora. However, this would not be the only fantasy theme available to scholars. One could also look at the way Afrofuturism pervades throughout the community of Afrofuturists (what is brought into the canon of Afrofuturism by scholars and community members and what is excluded and the reasons to justify inclusion/exclusion). Also, looking at the ways in which fantasy themes are utilized in the various forms of Afrofuturism, such as music, art, and fashion, in addition to literature and filmic representations, could reveal other salient ways in which Afrofuturism offers an analysis of cultural and systemic issues that endemic to American society.

Fantasy Theme Criticism is rarely used in modern rhetorical discussions as it has been mostly supplanted by newer techniques, such as text visualizations, which are used to investigate communication. However, Fantasy Theme Criticism is still a relevant and viable mode of critical analysis, especially when examining artifacts that have a strong narrative component to them, such as films, plays, television shows, and other narrative-rich forms of media.

Rhetorical Empathy

How then is Afrofuturism able to leverage the symbolic power of rhetoric and the shared visions of fantasy theme criticism to help foster social change? Lisa Blankenship, author of *Changing the Subject: A Theory of Rhetorical Empathy* (2019), puts forth a theory that merges the seemingly disparate notions of rhetoric and empathy. For

Blankenship, rhetoric and empathy are not separate disciplines. This commingling of the two disciplines creates an amalgamated discipline that inherits the strengths of each.

However, Blankenship is not unaware of the constraints of this amalgamation of the two disciplines and does address the limits of rhetorical empathy in her work.

In her introduction, Blankenship argues that her notion of empathy is drawn particularly from psychology, although there are other disciplines and their attendant scholars that inform her work, notably “cultural studies (Ahmed), rhetorical theory (Gross), and neuroscience (Decety and Meyer)” (6). Blankenship did not intend for her book, nor its chapter on empathy, to function as “an exhaustive study of the concept of empathy” (7). She leaves that work to scholars like Lanzoni and Roughley and Schramme. Blankenship is, instead, interested in the ways in which both rhetoric and empathy intertwine to create a systematic way of communicating and understanding the Other:

My study combines a focus on both empathy and rhetoric—*empathy* as: both a conscious, deliberate attempt to understand an Other *and* the emotions that can result from such attempts—often subconscious, though culturally influenced along with *rhetoric* as a strategic use of symbol systems using various modes of communications—language, still and moving images, and sound. For Blankenship, it is this engagement with the Other, through the use of both rhetorical choices along with empathetic choices this is a crucial aspect in understanding the Other. She argues that empathy, like rhetoric, is an “epistemology, a way of knowing and understanding” (7). What empathy adds to

rhetoric for Blankenship, however, is a way at getting at the “complex combination of intention and emotion” (7) and noting that, while rhetorical empathy has many positive effects and outcomes, such as being able to “shift power dynamics among interlocutors,” there are instances in which it can actually re-inscribe “existing power relations under the guise of sympathetic identification” (7).

Blankenship’s work is particularly well-suited to examine both Afrofuturistic texts as well as the genre of films and other visual media in that her book describes the conscious choices made on the part of the rhetor and the idea that narrative forms the basis for the communicative act among communicators (5). She sets forth the concept of what her book, as well as her theory, sets out to do: “This book’s premise is that pathos—appeals to the personal in the form of stories and the (always political) emotions that can ensue—is one of the most powerful forms of persuasion and change” (5).

As noted previously, Blankenship argues that there is a verbal and visual (artistic) component piece to identifying with the Other (7), which means that there is also a rhetorical component to the process of empathy. Rhetoric deals with the ways in which humans communicate, and that communication can be non-verbal or verbal, written, or in the form of images, static or moving. Thus, in addition to the socio-political and psychological aspects of empathy, we must also consider the rhetorical ways in which empathy is or is not expressed in society. This work happens in three major ways or forms for Blankenship. First, Blankenship relies on Catherine Prendergast’s discussions “on critical race theory” where “self-expression” contributes to “identity formation” and

an “in-group form of resistance,” specifically focused on marginalized groups work to change how they are perceived by the mainstream culture. It relies on understanding one’s own consciousness as existing separate from the mainstream, focuses on a “discourse of disruption,” but promotes a kind of “collaborative understanding” to initiate new ways knowledge generation and identity formulation (51).

According to Blankenship, it is through engaging with stories “real or imagined,” (4) especially from those who are different from oneself, that scholars can find meaningful ways to become more empathetic, something she argues is needed for “polarized” (4) times like we are living in currently in the West, particularly in the U.S. She also goes further and makes it a scholarly imperative that we study and learn to use rhetorical empathy as something that is the duty of educators everywhere: “As educators, as scholars of rhetorical theory informed by postmodern critiques of inequality and by feminist theories dedicated to pointing out historical and contemporary injustices and amplifying the voices speaking against them, we are highly invested in developing theories that offer ways of forging alliances across difference” (4).

My research answers Blankenship’s call to action. While her work focuses mostly on feminist rhetorical practices, the religious divide over gay rights, and discussing how rhetorical empathy might be practiced in the realm of composition pedagogies, my work focuses on movies which are important, but not addressed to any major degree by her work. Movies and films are watched by hundreds of millions across the world and routinely earn billions of dollars for the movie industry. Films are an important cultural

touchstone. Also, while New media, such as the internet, spawned from advances in technology, video games, in particular with their interactive elements, are drawn from the language developed by film and are changing the way in which stories (narratives) are told. Television is also seeing a renaissance, and Afrofuturism is becoming a fixture in more and more of society. An investigation of Afrofuturism thus responds to Blankenship's call for "more work on engaging across difference" (126) by exploring the rhetorical power, with regard to empathy, of Afrofuturistic narratives. Afrofuturism, thus, becomes the platform through which these stories are told and becomes a way for rhetorical empathy to be inculcated into mainstream society.

Film and Film Theory

James Monaco argues in *How to Read a Film: The Art, Technology, Language, History, and Theory of Film and Media* (1981), that while film is not a "language" in the same sense of a traditional language such as English or an untraditional one such as mathematics, film *functions* as a language (121). He goes even further to claim "people who are highly experienced in film, highly visually literate . . . see more and hear more than people who seldom go to the movies" (121). Monaco cites an early test conducted on how humans perceive images, noting two important conclusions drawn from that experiment: namely, that (1) "every normal human being can perceive and identify a visual image" and (2) "even the simplest visual images are interpreted differently in different cultures" (122). He believes that images are "read" by the viewers. He also

argues that this “reading” takes into account not just images themselves, but “auditory phenomena” as well. Monaco claims that this is true not only for images, but also “auditory phenomena” because sounds that have been produced by mechanical reproduction are essentially indistinguishable from the original sounds. These sounds are processed and “read” by the ears, just as images are processed and “read” by the eyes, so that an “image” consists of both the actual image along with any auditory phenomena that is included. One can speak of “photography” and “cinematography” as a “language, because a learning process is involved” (125).

Monaco describes how perception works, visual perception in particular, and notes the way human eyes work. Using the “fovea” area of the retina, one must “stare directly at an object in order to have a clear image of it . . . the result of this foveate vision is that the eyes must move constantly in order to perceive an object of any size. These semiconscious movements are called ‘saccades’ and take approximately 1/20th second each, just about the interval of persistence of vision, the phenomenon that makes film possible” (125). Monaco uses this persistence of vision as a basis for how viewers interact with a film on a physiological, ethnographic, or psychological perspective. He then asserts: that those who have learned how to comprehend visual images through these three schemas—physiological, ethnographic, or psychological—are able to decode these images with more sophistication than others (126).

Monaco claims that once “a new, larger category of thought developed in the fifties and early sixties—one that saw written and spoken language as just two among

many systems of communication—that the real study of film as a language could proceed” (127). This field was semiology, the study of signs. Monaco says that, essentially, a sign consists of two parts: the signifier and the signified (127). The signifier is the thing that is represented, while the signified is the meaning. For example, “word” (the letters) represents the signifier while the meaning of the word “word” (dictionary definition) represents the signified. Monaco believes that semiology is an important system for establishing a language of film because it helps the audience to decode/interpret the film:

The artist’s choice in cinema is without limit; the artist’s choice in literature is circumscribed, while the reverse is true for the observer. Film does not suggest . . . it states. And therein lies its power and the danger it poses to the observer: the reason why it is useful, even vital, to learn to read images well so that the observer can seize some power of the medium. The better one reads an image, the more one understands it, the more power one has over it. The reader of a page invents the image, the reader of a film does not, yet both readers must work to interpret the signs they perceive in order to complete the process of intellection. The more work they do, the better the balance between observer and creator in the process; the better the balance, the more vital and resonant the work of art. (128)

Monaco, with this quotation, does two things: (1) he subsumes other filmic theories such as *mise-en-scene*, coding, syntax, and connotative and denotative meaning under this

larger umbrella of signs, and (2) creates a link between film studies and rhetoric. While semiology has largely lost much of its original luster from the 1980s and 1990s and has been supplanted by newer theories, semiology was popular for *both* film and rhetoric. Thus, Monaco through the use of semiology, makes much the same argument that Foss does, in essence saying that by better understanding the way in which signs are encoded into films, one is better able to take control of the artifact in question—in this case, movies—and understand the way in which the audience not only interacts with the artifact, but also interprets its meaning. Echoing Foss’s sentiment, Monaco states: “the observer is not simply a consumer, but an active—or potentially active—participant in the process” (126). This idea of active participation is central to my study of the power of Afrofuturistic narratives and media to prompt empathy from viewers, readers, and gamers.

In *Introducing Film* (2001), Graham Roberts and Heather Wallis depart from Monaco’s focus on semiology and signs while emphasizing film as a language. They recognize that “film is a language . . . [and] all films can be better understood with a grasp of common threads of expression and tradition” (2). Roberts and Wallis also believe that film includes messages and values. Again, while not explicitly referencing semiology, they assert that “the viewer can develop a mature and subtle understanding of this process of making meaning through application of critical approaches (and evaluating those approaches)” and that “textual and contextual analysis is a transferable

skill” (2). It is a skill that can be learned and is, as the authors argue, an entertaining way of acquiring knowledge.

Roberts and Wallis differ from Monaco in that it is *mise-en-scene* that drives visual linguistic acquisition, not semiology, and that it works in concert with other filmic elements to create a filmic language. For Roberts and Wallis, “the language of film is constructed from three elements” (3). The first of these elements is what is to be filmed (*mise-en-scene*); next, how it is filmed (cinematography); and finally, how the material is constructed (edited) (3). The choices the filmmaker makes, according to Roberts and Wallis, are what define the language of the film. They move away from semiotics and the reliance on signs as the primary vocabulary of filmmaking and focus on the elements within a given scene, such as the setting, the costumes and make-up, the figure (as presented on-screen), expression and movement (of the figure), and the lighting as valid choices for filmmakers and valid avenues of investigation by critics and audience members. Monaco also identifies *mise-en-scene* as an appropriate means to investigate films; however, he subsumes *mise-en-scene* under semiology, coding, and syntax. In addition, Monaco breaks down *mise-en-scene* into “the Framed Image” (149) and the “Diachronic Shot” (161). In the framed image, Monaco explores the relationship with all elements contained within the camera’s “frame,” while the diachronic shot examines elements such as shot distance, focus, and even lighting, such as the “Hollywood Lighting” used in Vincente Minnelli’s *Meet Me in St. Louis* in which, “the set is vibrantly,

thoroughly lit [and] there are only the faintest hints of shadows, even in the back room, which is out of focus” (167).

The notion that signified meanings function as signifiers is an important factor to texts such as films. For example, the term “Black panther” acts as signifier for no less than four different signified meanings: (1) a large feline with a Black pelt, (2) a member of a political party formed by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, (3) the alter-ego of the Marvel Comics character T’Challa, and (4) the 2018 movie featuring the Marvel character. Each of these meanings rely on context to make clear which of the signified meanings is applied to the signifier.

More contemporary notions of *mise-en-scene* (including cinematography and editing), as presented by Roberts and Wallis, will be the primary focus of inquiry for this project. Even though semiotics and semiology comprise a theory that is largely no longer in use, it should not be entirely dismissed as it deals with the way symbols and symbol-making is be important to the discussion of Afrofuturism. With its insistence on semiotics too often straddles the line between visual media and literature and, with its insistence on a connection between a signifier and what it signifies, does not always do a good job of indicating or highlighting the idea of *choice* within the “text” of the film. *Mise-en-scene*, however, almost always focuses on the *choices* that individuals make in the construction of the film, even if those choices are not always conscious ones, as Roberts and Wallis contend:

To conclude, *mise-en-scene* is the term we use to describe everything we see within a single shot. In terms of film production and film analysis it is distinct and separate from cinematography (film stock, position and movement of the camera) and editing (the joining of shots), although meaning is created from the way these things work in conjunction with each other and with sound . . . the prominence of (and meanings attached to) [specific film elements] were created through the *mise-en-scene* but also the type of shot that effectively highlights those aspects of the *mise-en-scene* the film-maker [sic] wants us to focus on.

(13)

Roberts and Wallis note that these distinctions are often artificial and arbitrary. Yet, they feel that it is useful to use these distinctions to break down a scene by looking at it through its constituent parts rather than trying to analyze it as a whole. Both authors believe that it is much easier to ascertain meaning by looking at a “single element” and then moving on to something else rather than trying to encompass all the elements at once. By doing this close and detailed analysis one can “see how meanings are created from the different elements of film language, and, how they work in conjunction with each other” (13).

My discussion of *Black Panther* draws from a variety of techniques scholars use to analyze film. *Film Studies: Critical Approaches* (2000) edited by John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson, includes a section entitled, “The Film Text: Theoretical Frameworks,” in which the authors elaborate on the various techniques that film scholars use to investigate

works. Anthony Easthope, in the chapter “Classical Film Theory and Semiotics,” discusses the more classical ways that films were studied before semiotics. He notes a division between the aesthetic (artistic) value of a film and the social construction (social purpose) of the film and that films were often studied for either their artistic representation of life or for their ability to represent a realistic version of life. These two camps became the “creationists (or formalists)” and the “realists” (50). He then goes on to explain that after Saussure revived the “distinction between signifier and signified,” this distinction permeated film criticism from 1968 to forward (51-52). This idea, championed by Christian Metz, asserts “the whole visual, aural, and narrative effect of cinema [is open] to inspection for its significance, the meaning it produces” (52-53).

Afrofuturism

The power and promise of Afrofuturism, especially in the realm of film, cannot be understated. Afrofuturism, as an ideology that manifests in narrative, counters the ills of colonialism, presents an alternative to the horrors of past enslavement, and challenges false claims of Black inferiority that justified colonialism, slavery, and institutional racism. These false claims rest on another false claim—that race is biological. In an episode of the documentary *Race: The Story We Tell* (2003) titled “The Difference Between Us,” a high school teacher and his students conduct an experiment in which they compare skin color, in addition to collecting other genetic material (swabbing cheek cells and typing their blood), upon which they experiment. They then send off the evidence

and receive the results. Throughout the episode, the high school students are continually surprised that many of their long-held beliefs and assumptions of race and who they might be most similar to in terms of others in the class, are not born out by the results of the tests. In many cases, the students find that they have more in common genetically with other students who look nothing like them in terms of a “phenotype group,” such as skin color, than they do with members of a similar “phenotype group.” This experiment is designed to emphasize “why the idea of race is a biological myth [that] requires a major paradigm shift, an absolute paradigm shift, a shift in perspective . . .” argues Alan Goodman, a Biological Anthropologist. Goodman contends that “for me, it’s like seeing, you know, that the world isn’t flat, and perhaps I can invite you to the mountaintop, and you can look out the window and at the horizon, and see, ‘oh, what I thought was flat, I can see a curve in now,’ that the world is much more complicated, in fact that race is not based on biology, but that race is, rather an idea we ascribe to biology” (04:50). This is, perhaps, the most pervasive and insidious role of race in society, particularly in Western society: the idea that biology explains racial “characteristics” when, in fact, it is society that ascribes the characteristics of race upon the individual due to what is expressed by phenotypes.

The rest of the mini-series explores the socio-political ideology of race and racism in and throughout US history including slavery, Jim Crow discrimination, redlining, and other social ills involving the construction of race in the US. In essence, *Race: The Story We Tell* seeks to educate “away” the problem of racism by making clear that race is a

fiction we have chosen to make real. Making race real justified (and continues to justify) racism. The filmmakers want the audience to see that what we ascribe as biological, is in fact, social which has massive implications. If race is not biological and innate, but socially constructed, then we can eliminate the idea of race and racism, if we choose to do so. In other words, humans created race and the attendant problem of race, so we end it as well. Yet, overcoming over three hundred years of ingrained social learning is a massive task.

Afrofuturism seeks to subvert and supplant the “biological myth” of race through the use of creativity and imagined worlds. Ytasha Womack, in *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-fi and Fantasy Culture* (2013), asks the salient question at the heart of both the myth of race and Afrofuturism: “Can you imagine a world without the idea of race? Can you imagine a world where skin color, hair texture, national origin, and ethnicity are not determinants of power, class, beauty, or access?” (41). Afrofuturistic narratives create that world and thus present an alternative vision we can choose to make a reality.

Afrofuturism as an ideology is hopeful and forward-thinking:

The imagination is powerful. The narrative of hope that spews from change agents working for social equity is no accident. Dr. Martin Luther King, Rev. Jesse Jackson Sr., and even President Barack Obama centered their missions and speeches on hope. On the surface, hope rings as very altruistic—something simple that anyone can do if they reshuffle their thinking caps or wish upon a star. But the results of a changed mind backed by a bit of empowerment can turn

a conflicted world on its head . . . desire, hope, and imagination are the cornerstones of social change and the first targets for those who fight against it . . . imagination, hope, and the expectation for transformative change is a [through line] that undergirds most Afrofuturistic art, literature, music, and criticism. (Womack 41-42)

For Womack, imagination has the power to rectify the harm done by colonialism.

Womack expresses the idea that race is “a deliberate by-product of the transatlantic slave trade enforced by violence and law, race (i.e., the division of white and Black and the power imbalance based on skin color) simply didn’t exist prior to five hundred years ago . . . [and] analyzing race as a technology morphed into both an imaginative playground for writing for me but also a very practical tool for real-world space-colonization issues that readers connect with. Just as the action in the present dictate the future, imagining the future can change the present” (42-44).

That is the power that Afrofuturistic texts, such as *Black Panther*: to imagine a future in which Africans and those from the African Diaspora are whole and complete. For example, the characters in the *Black Panther* function without the constraints of racialized prejudice and bias constraining their actions. T’Challa is not “good” because he has the threat of police violence upon his body and the threat of incarceration with its resultant loss of freedom, but rather, he is “good” because he is moral and because he struggles to find the “right” way of acting (i.e., choosing the most moral path as opposed to the most expedient path). T’Challa has two main struggles in the film, as do most good

protagonists created for film. He has an internal struggle and an external struggle:

T'Challa's internal struggle is how to be a "good" man and a "good" king as, sometimes, those two roles are not compatible, while T'Challa's external struggle comes about from his foil, Killmonger.

Eric "Killmonger" Stevens, T'Challa's cousin, has no problem with retaliation, revenge, and outright murder (as opposed to killing in self-defense). Killmonger, as his nickname suggests, does not have any limits on what he will do in order to achieve his objectives, even if it means that others, including innocents, must suffer or die for, or because of, his cause. Killmonger is influenced by, is a part of, and is a victim of the old system of slavery and colonization. T'Challa, on the other hand, is a fully rounded character, illustrating that his imagination and boldness is what is needed to affect the present for the African Americans in the city of Oakland as illustrated at the end of the film. This small detail has major implications for how Afrofuturism and Afrofuturistic texts work to foster new imaginative worlds that "re-envision the past" which can "shift minds" away from racism to a more equitable (and self-sustaining) stance (Womack 42-44).

I am interested in how media, including film and video games, have the *potential* to challenge ideas and encourage empathy among viewers and players. While Womack is envisioning the way in which Black scientific invention has often been erased from the historical record, or how African American youth have an under-represented presence in the field of science and technology, my work investigates the way in which "established

media,” such as film, and “new media,” such as video games, have the potential to “change prevailing ideas” (46) about African Americans and those from the African Diaspora in meaningful and positive ways through the use of concepts such as rhetorical empathy.

In those sombre forests of his striving his own soul rose before him, and he saw himself,—darkly as through a veil; and yet he saw in himself some faint revelation of his power, of his mission. He began to have a dim feeling that, to attain his place in the world, he must be himself, and not another.

—*The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B DuBois

Chapter 2: New Narratives — Afrofuturism and the *Black Panther* Experience

The portrayal of African-Americans in movies has been problematic, at best, highlighting one of the critical failures of the movie industry in providing strong, positive, and empathetic “personal stories” that Blankenship sees as a crucial component in engendering empathy (104). To illustrate the problematic nature of representation in movies, John Leland, in a 1999 article for *Newsweek*, “They’ve Got Next,” highlights the struggles of then upcoming African-American actors, such as Don Cheadle and Omar Epps. He includes a telling quote by an unnamed white Vice-President of Production at an unnamed studio, who states, “when I’m in a meeting about a big film, if the script doesn’t call for a Black or minority character, it really doesn’t cross our minds to put somebody Black in it. It’s not racism, though I’m sure that’s what everyone wants to call it. But all-white movies sell. There’s no Blacks in ‘Saving Private Ryan’ [sic] or ‘There’s Something About Mary’ [sic] and they sold at the box office. So there’s not a lot of

incentive to make changes. It's wrong, but that's the reality" (Leland 4). Even though this Vice-President of Production is not named, Leland's inclusion of the quote is telling in that it creates its own narrative: that "White movies" or narratives that appeal to "White audiences" are somehow the default and that all "other" types of movies are for "The Other." For many Hollywood executives, there seems to be an idea that African Americans simply cannot bring in wide audiences, and, as such, must be relegated to a supporting role, or part of an ensemble. *There's Something About Mary*, which does feature an African American as a supporting character, seems to provide evidence for this reality as the "unnamed" V.P. of Production seems to gloss over this fact in the quote. It appears that, to the V.P., because the lead of the movie is White, then the movie itself has become "racialized" as "White movies" should only appeal to White audiences, no matter the narrative or quality of the movie. This assumption seems to be born out by Leland, the author of the article, when he recounts exchanges that Eugene Brady, director of *The Nephew*, had with distributors about his multi-racial protagonist and lead character of the film. As Brady states, "I heard a number of times from studios that the film is great, but can't the lead be white?" (qtd in Leland). "Whiteness" as a default value is inculcated into the very structure of Hollywood and this attitude of "Whiteness" as a default value appears to be shifting at a glacial pace.

In 2015, the #OscarsSoWhite movement drew attention to the predominately white male membership of the Academy and the way in which the Academy votes. Five years later, *Variety* published an article by April Reign, originator of the #OscarsSoWhite

movement, in which she notes that while there has been improvement, diverse films are still passed over for Academy recognition, so much so that she is heartened by African-Americans who start their own production companies, because she notes, “I’ve always said that it is not about the faces we see on-screen. It’s about who’s telling the story and whose stories are being told” (4). Both the success of Afrofuturistic movies, such as *Black Panther*, and the focus on Hollywood’s detrimental practices from social movements like #OscarsSoWhite have hastened the once glacial pace of Hollywood, so that more recent movies such as *Till* (2022), *The Woman King* (2022), *Black Panther Wakanda Forever* (2022), *Devotion* (2022), and *Chevalier* (2022) have focused on more diverse stories that seek to widen, rather than restrict, films to tell stories that have a broad appeal.

This is where the empathetic nature of Afrofuturism comes into focus. A film represents both narrative and visuals. It can tell stories that affect an audience and it can show audiences the effects of those stories on the characters who experience them. Afrofuturism allows audiences to see an alternative narrative of the African diaspora rather than continuing past historical injustices or depicting prevalent stereotypes, such as movies like *Till* (2022) or *Driving Miss Daisy* (2014). The core concepts of Afrofuturism, especially as they play out in narrative form in transformative movies, such as *Black Panther*, illustrate the ways in which solutions to the problems in American society along with those contained specifically to the African Union are enacted through rhetorical methods, including what Sonja Foss defines as “Fantasy-Theme Criticism.” She notes

that Fantasy-Theme Criticism is “a methodological approach for studying how rhetoric creates realities [which] was suggested by [Ernest] Bormann and is based on the process of fantasizing that occurs in small groups” (Foss 134).

This dramatization is important, as Foss aptly notes, because “fantasy” has the potential to capture the dramatic imaginations of larger groups from the shared rhetorical vision of the smaller groups. For example, a small group may envision a world where African American children getting arrested might play to the broader sympathies of a white community. As more and more children are depicted as being arrested, having dogs tear at their brown skin, and doused with water hoses and cannons, the “rhetorical vision” of might makes right changes to empathy for the plight of the children unjustly brutalized. This “rhetorical vision” then has the potential to express itself in ever larger social and political movements, such as the broader Civil Rights movement. Afrofuturism has the potential to tap into this power to effect change on a large-scale population through dissemination in a small-scale environment. For example, in their introduction to a special issue of *Journal of Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies*, Marsha R. Robinson and Caryn Neumann note that one contributor “comments on the power of science fiction and fantasy to inspire inventors to produce ‘videoconferencing, cell phones, helicopters, and tasers.’ When the social commentary function of science fiction and science fantasy is applied, ‘one can hope that these visions will also become reality for the futures of Black women’” (4). Robinson and Neumann choose to focus specifically on Black women because of Shuri, sister to T’Challa. Shuri is not an overly

sexualized creation, which is rare in the American entertainment arena for female characters. Shuri's defining feature is her intelligence. Shuri is a technological genius and child prodigy, only matched in creative genius in the Marvel Cinematic Universe by Tony Stark. As such, Shuri is a new creation, a completely fully formed character that transforms notions of what Black womanhood can achieve through characters in movies.

Much has been made of *Black Panther's* cultural significance and importance to the African American experience. It also has been praised for its prominence as a touchstone movie for Blacks across the world in which Black representation countered so many of the negative perceptions and stereotypes against those from the African Diaspora. Before delving into the ways in which *Black Panther* and the concepts of empathy embodied within the Afrofuturistic tradition, it is necessary to understand the historical landscape of film before *Black Panther*.

While an in-depth look at racism in the early years of the developing media of film is beyond the scope of this project, Wil Haygood, author of *Colorization: One Hundred Years of Black Films in a White World* (2021), noted that one of the earliest films, DW Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), set negative representations of African Americans firmly into the American psyche. While basing his film on a book by Thomas Dixon entitled *The Clansman* (1905), Griffith realized his own vision. Griffith wanted to do a movie where he "could just see these Klansmen in a movie with their white robes flying" (Haygood 9). As Haygood explains, Griffith hit upon the masterstroke of culling the words for the "descriptive explainers" from the works of Woodrow Wilson, "his

Southern-born heroic president” (11). This connection allowed Dixon to request a screening of the film at the White House with Wilson after a visit to the see the President. Griffith’s response to this news underscores the potential of film to influence attitudes and perpetuate, in this case, White supremacist values: “If we could get the backing of the President, we would have a powerful weapon” (Haygood 11). Haygood’s discussion of *The Birth of a Nation* makes clear how disastrous the film was for Blacks at the time

On screen was a depiction of family drama bracketed by war. Two Southern families were at the center of the narratives as they became enmeshed in war and the battle to “save” the South from intrusion. That intrusion involved interactions with the Negro populace. The Black characters were white actors wearing Blackface makeup; no Black actors were cast in major roles. The Blacks were portrayed as thieves, rapists, wild-eyed fools who had joined with Northern liars to wreak havoc upon the South. There were scenes to make any Southerner whoop with patriotic joy: A Confederate soldier plunging a flag into a Union cannon before dying; Reconstruction scenes depicting Southern legislators becoming undone by the chicanery of Black lawmakers. The scenes cut right to the core of Southern emotion. Movies, as Griffith knew, need heroes. Griffith found his in the white-robed Ku Klux Klan, fiercely galloping across the screen to save the white race from Silas Lynch, the Black man who is portrayed as the personification of Black power run amok. (Haygood 11-12)

These stereotypes and harmful representations of African Americans came to be “codified” into the burgeoning American movie-going psyche as the prevailing image of Blacks, not only in the Americas, but throughout the world. The film proved to be deliriously popular at the time among white audiences, but massively unpopular with African Americans, who “recoiled from the brutish portrayals they saw on-screen” (Haygood 14). There were massive protests against the film, but even the titans of African American political movements, such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, and the NAACP were unable to stop the film through legal challenges or protests (Haygood 17). Haywood argues that cinema became a major force in America, at what Haygood sees, “a terrible price to Black America” (21).

Black Panther

Black Panther, however, represented something profound and different when it entered the theaters on February 16, 2018. Even though Black cinema has been around for over a hundred years, some scholars have argued that *Black Panther* represents a seismic shift in perceptions of Blacks and Black culture, especially because of its focus on the future along with a radical reconceptualization of past injustices. For example, Donald Bogle, author of *Hollywood Black: The Stars, The Films, The Filmmakers* (2019), *Black Panther* represented something that stands in stark contrast to the destructive representation of African Americans in demonstratively racist movies such as *A Birth of a Nation*. Bogle argues that *Black Panther's* value is also apparent in the way that it

reconceptualizes Hollywood's ambivalence to Blacks, either as filmmakers or audience goers, and shows the African and African American cultural landscape, not as oddities and stereotypes to be mocked, but glorious wonders to be beheld and experienced. Bogle makes the case for *Black Panther* as a revolutionary film:

Throughout the language and the accents in Wakanda, the song, the movements, the set design, and the costumes created by Ruth Carter with their beads and vibrant colors, were all cultural statements unto themselves, bringing to the big screen the aesthetic wonder of Africa. The film was also steeped in Afrofuturism . . . a concept that in the future Blacks will not only be an extraordinary part of the new world but will also triumph through technology. And so while *Black Panther* had elements of old-school Hollywood entertainment (at its best), it was also revolutionary cinema. (247)

Black Panther is one of the most high-profile and prevalent movies that exemplifies the ethos of Afrofuturism. It is very much an example of what Afrofuturism entails in an entertainment medium, and also an example of how Afrofuturism allows an Afrocentric view in a narrative to illustrate the dangers of colonial thought processes without becoming didactic. Echoing Bogle, Anthony Faramelli calls *Black Panther* a “revolutionary film” that is “purposeful and knowingly immersed in Blackness with a storyline, cast and crew that showcases the ‘Black excellence’ that North American and European societies often try to obscure” (2). It is through this idea of “Black excellence” that *Black Panther* begins to slowly construct a new narrative, but not just in terms of the

actual plot of the movie, but also in the way Blacks are portrayed in the world. *Black Panther* reminds audiences that Africa once had a vibrant culture and society, and but for the ravages of colonialism, might have developed into something unique, something special, like the fictional country of Wakanda. The movie works on several levels. First, it works as a strong fictional narrative that entertains its audience. Second, the film works by underscoring the representational nature of film by showing archetypes of African Americans and those from the African Diaspora how perceive *themselves* rather than as how the *world* perceives them. Third, because, as an Afrofuturistic text, *Black Panther* reimagines the world in the fictional narrative and illustrates the power of possibilities. Colonialism, enslavement, and prejudice disrupted, in a brutal and dehumanizing manner, the development of Africa as a continent and Blacks as a people, but it is still *possible* that, with cooperation and commitment, a new and more liberating reality can be forged. The sins of the past do not have to continue to repeat themselves in the future. Indeed, the final scenes of the movie move towards this more redemptive and hopeful vision. It has been argued that *Black Panther's* true strength is that its ultimate impact is far more than just a cultural moment for Black and brown people, but as a cultural phenomenon whose ideas help shape a brighter future. Faramelli puts *Black Panther* within the context major events in the US Civil Rights Movement:

The importance of seeing Black people for the first time depicted in a major movie as kings, queens, inventors, and diplomats, rather than slaves, thugs, dealers and thieves, has given the movie a real-world political engagement not

seen in other superhero films. The journalist Shaun King even went as far as to argue that it is a cultural phenomenon equal in importance to Dr. King's "I Have a Dream speech" and Rosa Parks refusing to give up her bus seat. (2)

While invoking Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks might seem, to some, an exaggeration, Faramelli's inclusion of Shaun King's quote is not only accurate, but pertinent to the Black community as a film with representational force. This force is indicated by responses of various filmgoers who were asked to speak on the importance of the film and Chadwick Boseman's role as T'Challa to them as audience members for a segment on *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*. The segment featured the actor behind a curtain, waiting to surprise the filmgoers at the end of their comments. This video, published approximately two weeks after the initial premiere of *Black Panther*, has garnered nearly 6.5 million views at the time of this writing. A representative selection of the comments appears below and illustrates just how perceptive Faramelli was to include the quote by Shaun King:

- "It means a lot not to see a Black movie, but a great American superhero movie with, you know, people who look like me . . ." ("Chadwick").
- "I cannot tell you how much it means to have you step into our role as the king [of Wakanda] and be holding it with such grace and poise and joy" ("Chadwick").

- “Well, for me, as the mother of a young son, my son’s childhood has been defined by Barack Obama and now *Black Panther*; so thank you” (“Chadwick”).
- “As a creator, as an entrepreneur of color, just seeing this movie made me realize that our stories need to be told. There’s so many of us out here who are trying to create great things, and I was just so inspired, as someone who wants to make movies one day and wants to inspire people, that art can really change the world” (“Chadwick”).
- “I absolutely loved this movie . . . but on a personal note, my father is African. He’s from Ghana, he’s a scientist. My mother, my sisters, brilliant African American women. So, basically everything that represents me was honored in this movie . . .” (“Chadwick”).
- “I just want to thank you for making *Black Panther* for the kids. Representation is very important. It gives the kids, like, hope . . .” (“Chadwick”).
- “Words can’t even describe what this movie has meant to me and to other Black people. And I know this is for you Chadwick, but I wanted to take a second to thank the Black women, too, because they were so strong on their own terms and answer to no one but themselves, and I think it was so important because they

weren't strong because they were angry, they weren't strong because they were hurt, they were strong because they were strong. And that meant the world to me. So thank you. Wakanda forever." ("Chadwick")

The Afrofuturistic narrative of the *Black Panther* movie works because of the way in which it displays characteristics of rhetorical empathetic practices: telling stories from the Other's point of view as well as inviting the audience to "listen" to those stories.

Hollywood has been closed to narratives that allow Blacks a voice to speak to the future, especially in forward looking genres like science fiction. As discussed by Blankenship, in *Rhetorical Empathy* (2019), empathetic rhetorical practices focuses on the personal within the system, invites others to listen to the hopeful narrative that is embedded within narrative of a superhero movie and to feel the emotional tenure being displayed/ discussed, and calls for social change (79). Afrofuturism does not preach nor does it didactically present a theme or moral of the story. Its strength is that it tells a compelling narrative with a focus that is slightly askew—choosing not to focus on the traditional, but rather the reinvention of the old into something new and different. This transformation helps to break down barriers and makes the audience more receptive to a different interpretation or point of view. Historical movies such as *12 Years a Slave* (2013) and *Till* (2022) are important because they chronicle past injustices against Blacks and those from the African Diaspora, but they do not always show how Blacks and Blackness can become partners in creating a more equitable path forward for all sides in the future. As above responses indicate, many in the Black community see *Black Panther* as a film that

not only discusses the dehumanization of the past, but also allows for a path forward into a future in which no culture feels unduly burdened by the mistakes of the past.

Mythologizing *Black Panther*

Nowhere is this transformation more evident than the very beginning of *Black Panther*, which begins with two prologues. The first, an Afrofuturistic prologue, sets the mythology of the world and begins the narrative task of describing to the audience the requisite backstory needed to understand the plot, setting, characters, and initial action of the film. The second prologue, set in Oakland, California, establishes the divisions, and “factions,” of the film which express the two competing worldviews of the protagonist, King T’Challa (Black Panther) and his cousin, Erik (Killmonger). The film’s theme of unity over violence and radicalization is expressed through the conflict of these two characters. This mythology is crucial to establishing *Black Panther* as an Afrofuturistic text, as described by Anthony Faramelli:

Black Panther opens with an animated sequence narrated by King T’Chaka, T’Challa’s father, explaining how Wakanda formed. This origin story is that a meteorite of Vibranium, a fictional metal that, in the Marvel universe, is the strongest, most versatile and valuable known substance, hit East Africa. Five tribes later settled the area. The tribes were constantly at war with each other until one tribe discovered the “Heart-Shaped Herb,” a plant mutated by Vibranium deposits. The king of one of the tribes ate the herb and was endowed

with super-human powers. He became the first Black Panther and united four of the five tribes, creating the nation of Wakanda. The fifth tribe, the “J’Abari,” retreated to the Wakandan Mountains and refused participation in the social and cultural life of the nation. (3-4)

Faramelli’s succinct summary establishes the Afrofuturistic reinventing by challenging the image of Africa and Africans in the popular imagination of its viewers. Indeed, in *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (2013), Ytasha Womack argues, “the imagination is a tool of resistance. Creating stories with people of color in the future defies the norm” (24). This new mythology is the key to understanding not only the narrative basis for the story that Ryan Cooglar and the Marvel Cinematic Universe wants to tell, but also why Afrofuturism is the best tool for analyzing the way in which this mythology affects the movie’s plot. One of the elements that Faramelli leaves out in the summary is the way the Panther goddess Bast inspired the Black Panther persona. For Womack, an important aspect of the mythologizing process is the combination of merging old knowledge with new thought:

Afrofuturists love to anchor their work in golden eras from times long gone, and there’s no ancient culture that merges the heights of science and the esoteric like the Egyptians and Nubians. Egypt’s reign in the ancient world and Nubia’s influence stand as proof that cultures of dark-skinned people ruled advanced societies and shaped global knowledge. (81)

It is this merging of old African culture with updated Afrocentric sensibilities that is one of the reasons why *Black Panther* works as both a film and an Afrofuturistic text: it mythologizes the African culture in a way that honors the spirit of African culture while also rewriting the traditional myths to create and formulate something new and unique. Without this prologue where we see the formation of Wakanda and the rationale for the powers of Black Panther, we would be unable to engage in the collective positive identities of our protagonist and his closest friends and family, which would thereby create a distance between the audience and the protagonist's inner character. This distance would be detrimental to the audience's identification with the Black Panther and would hinder our concern for his goals throughout the movie.

The prologue also sets the stage for a reinvention of what it means to be African or descended from African blood as it works to combat European hegemonic and colonial racism endemic in the Western world. The narrator of the story makes clear that Africa, in particular Wakanda, is not primitive nor is it devoid of culture in the way the Western world might have envisioned it (or perhaps is still envisioning it): "The Wakandans used vibranium to develop technology more advanced than any other nation. But as Wakanda thrived, the world around it descended further into chaos. To keep vibranium safe, the Wakandans vowed to hide in plain sight . . . keeping the truth of their power from the outside world." (*Black Panther* 1:14—34). As this voice-over is given to the audience, abstracted images in Black sand are displayed on the screen: these images include references to the Spanish conquistadors and the colonialism that occurred from the search

for gold and wealth, the marching of enslaved people, presumably Africans, on to waiting slave ships to carry them across the water, and the images of the world wars, particularly World War II, which evokes the Holocaust and the genocide that occurred to the Jewish people. While both the ore of vibranium and the country of Wakanda are fictional, both elements speak against the real-life horrors depicted and enacted upon Black and Brown communities and those who were considered as the other. The mythic first scene gives the audience two necessary ideas: (1) if Western culture could foment the misery and devastation it caused with normal means, what untold level of destruction could have been wrought had it had access to “the strongest substance in the universe” (*Black Panther* 1:11-13), and (2) if it were possible to hide away from the madness of colonialism, would not that be the most prudent course for a people, especially one of color, to make?

However, myth making for *Black Panther* helps the movie travel beyond the confines of “traditional” mythic structures as the film shifts into the “contemporary” era of the 1990s for the second part of the prologue. The film time jumps to the year 1992 in a presumably predominately Black inner-city neighborhood in Oakland, California. There are only two locations displayed in the scene, so it is difficult to get a full read on the area, but it is apparent from the scene that Coogler is establishing a clash of two cultures—a more contemporary Western culture, with a more militant focus on weapons and stolen vibranium, and a more traditional, African culture, with its focus on traditions, customs, and laws. The director creates a new mythology in the movie’s prologue, one in

which Africans and those of the African American Diaspora are no longer socio-politically connected and that there is division within the two groups. This conflict reveals itself throughout the narrative of the movie and is a crucial point of argument between the two central characters, T'Challa and Erik "Killmonger" Stevens. This division, illustrated by newly created modern mythology that the movie presents, is that colonialism has affected and militarized many of those from the African Diaspora. The division is at the heart of the narrative conflict, that Godfried A. Asante and Gloria Nziba Pindi, in their 2020 article, "(Re)imagining Futures: Wakanda and the Politics of Transnational Blackness," explain the "mythologizing" process:

To make *Black Panther* an Afrofuturistic emancipatory production useful to continental Africans, it is essential that we interrogate it in conjunction with postcolonial theory to provide a sustained critique of Western epistemologies that continually shape Black being and belonging . . . importantly, postcolonial theory and Afrofuturism both gesture towards emancipation through the recuperation of Black diasporic consciousness as a key feature of global activism against anti-Blackness . . . however, a politics of Black consciousness in the diaspora context is a site of tension—wherein people of African descent negotiate their multiple affiliations, and most importantly, fight for their recognition by constantly navigating at the borderlands of racial discrimination, globalization, neocolonialism, and their racial and national pride. Black consciousness as a site of contradictory tensions is evident in Wakanda in a way

that allows for transnational conversations on Blackness and how it is anchored differently in specific places, but ultimately emerges as a site of transformation and solidarity. Thus, transnational Blackness is a unifying theme in *Black Panther* that allows us to meaningfully rethink the past, present, and futures of the African diaspora and those on the continent. (223)

This “tension” is at the heart of the ideologies and themes at play in the narrative of *Black Panther*. Colonialism and its effects have not affected Blacks equally. Afrofuturism allows for a conversation between different sites of “Blackness” and the different ways in which the trauma of colonialism and post-colonialism have affected African Americans and those from continental Africa, in particular, while realizing that they are not the only Black and brown communities affected by depredations of colonialism.

As Blankenship has shown, empathy and the ability to listen, is crucial to the process of rhetorical empathy. She illustrates this point by looking at the way Joyce Fernandez investigates posts on Facebook by Black and Brown women on the racism they face as domestics, noting that Fernandez focuses on “characteristic of empathetic rhetorical practices, [and that] she [Fernandez] focuses on the personal within the systematic, [and] she listens and invites listening and attendant emotion and calls for social change” (79). The tension that Ryan Coogler is setting up here, while necessary for the narrative, is also an invitation to listen: to hear the pain and rage of those that have been enslaved, discriminated against, and have faced (and continue to face) prejudice

versus those who have faced international scorn and skepticism because they lack the resources to generate profits to sustain themselves without foreign aid.

“Present Day Wakanda” vs “Present Day Africa”

The story proper begins in the “Present Day” in the Sambisa forest in Nigeria. While Wakanda is a fictional country, the Sambisa forest is a real location, likely chosen because of its connection with the Boko Haram terrorist organization. The forest is well known for its location of the terrorist group: “The Sambisa Forest, located in Borno State in northeast Nigeria, has become synonymous with Boko Haram terrorism. Boko Haram has waged a bloody war against the Nigerian state in a bid to foist its own brand of religious order on the secular state” (“Once Upon a Game Reserve”). This note of terrorism was referenced in *Black Panther’s* first introductory scene in which Nakia, T’Challa’s girlfriend is embedded in a group of women being transported through the forest by men with automatic weapons and militaristic uniforms. Asante and Pindi argue that “this scene sets up the tensions around the interventionist ethos that drives *Black Panther’s* compelling narrative [and] it also preempts Wakanda as an imaginative space where audiences with scant knowledge about the US’s racialized geopolitics confront the complexities and boundaries of representing Blackness on a transnational scale in ways that attend to global responsibility” (224). Asante and Pindi understand that Africa wants to reject interventionist policies and follow policies that allow Africa to develop on its own, free of outside Western interference. This outside interference, they argue, that has

been the source of woe and misery on the continent. Their reading of the movie's central argument is supported by current affairs since, as of this writing, many of the elements of Boko Haram have been recently captured by Nigerian forces as noted by Abuja Oditia Sunday, writer for the Nigerian-based news-gathering organization *Guardian*. According to Major General Benard Onyeuko:

On or about 9.00.a.m on March 24, 2022 the gallant troops of Operation Hadin Kai in a Special Operation codenamed Op Desert Sanity captured the terrorist stronghold of Ukuba/Camp Zairo in Sambisa Forest. In what could be described as a blitzkrieg, the troops routed the terrorists and captured their enclave. The terrorists fled the camp leaving behind their heavy weapon arsenal (Nigeria).

While this event is notable on its own, the fact that *Black Panther* takes the time to use a real forest with troubling connotations to terrorism as its backdrop to introducing the movie's main character (T'Challa as the Black Panther) shows an understanding of the deep divisions and conflicts that are endemic to the African continent due to the effects of colonialism. It is this particular interweaving that Afrofuturism is so adept at handling and promoting. By taking familiar elements of the past and reorganizing them in a way that allows them to morph, using imagination, into something more compelling the actual historical circumstance, that ultimately gives Afrofuturism its ability to speak to an audience's sense of empathy. As Asante and Pindi go on to say: "time can be stretched and deployed to dispossess others by keeping them in the past (Africans) while harnessing the future becomes a tool of empowerment for (Western) others. *Black*

Panther draws on the past to show the audience what constrains Black imaginations of emancipation and to offer possibilities for the future” (222). That T’Challa, as Black Panther, has no issues with defeating these unnamed terrorists with his suit, made out of Vibranium, and his powers, a liquid derived from the plants of the area and imbibed from the extract, illustrate that the Black Panther is seeking to right the wrongs of his continent- T’Challa’s suffering mirrors their suffering.

For Asante and Pindi, this engagement and focus on Africa as a continent and the way in which the problems made by African *Blackness* are often distinct from problems experienced by those exhibiting Western (American and Black European) *Blackness* is a virtue. They believe that Ytasha Womack’s focus on the African American’s and Black European’s point of view, robs Afrofuturism of the African point of view. Asante and Pindi argue that “. . . *Black Panther* gets it right because Wakanda is not on Mars or Jupiter but is an African nation on Earth [and that] Black consciousness as a site of contradictory tensions is evident in Wakanda in a way that allows for transnational conversation on Blackness and how it is anchored differently in specific places but ultimately emerges as a site of transformation and solidarity” (223). The problems that Africa is dealing with in terms of Blackness as a cultural identity and colonial markers are not the same as those found in the West, argue Asante and Pindi, and as such, *Black Panther*, to the authors, appears as if it minimizes some issues concerning African Blacks and completely ignores other issues.

Asante and Pindi's reading of *Black Panther* may ultimately prove to be too harsh, especially in respect to their argument that "Disney's cooptation of radical racial narratives—a [sic] Pan-African aesthetic masks the appropriative tools of capitalist exploitation in the name of social justice" (223). While noting that the movie is a "welcome shift" from the traditional portrayal of Africa and Africans in the Western film world, they believe that it is an "imperfect" representation of Africa that is still caught in the throes of post-colonial thought under a hegemonic gaze (226).

Piercing the Veil

I disagree with Asante and Pindi's assessment of *Black Panther*, and its impact on the idea of transnational Blackness, especially in light of the scene in which T'Challa, Nakia, and Okoye zoom over the abundant and verdant mountains and valleys of the rich African landscape to "pierce the holographic veil" that both protects and hides Wakanda. *Black Panther* illustrates a *possible* Africa, one that is both unspoiled and unsullied by white hegemonic colonial ideas and depredation of resources. As the characters zoom over the landscape and pierce the shimmering hologram, the scene shifts to a futuristic city, one that has gleaming towers and a modern, yet distinctly, urban feel. In the background, the rolling mountains illustrate the Wakandans' desire to integrate the rural with the urban. Indeed, unlike many Western cities, designed primarily by white planners, there's little-to-no bifurcation of the green spaces with urban environments depicted in the Wakandian cityscape. *Black Panther's* depiction of Africa's gorgeous natural

resources and sprawling, yet futuristic, urban areas is at odds with Africa's contemporary image of a Third World continent, rife with corruption, violence, and beset by disasters such as famine, war, and genocide. Asante and Pindi are so focused on the differences through which the idea of "Blackness" is expressed vis-a-vis those from Africa currently versus those from the African Diaspora that they miss the ways in which Blackness is transglobal. In essence, Asante and Pindi are interested in the ways in which Africa is portrayed on a larger global stage at the expense of understanding that, even in the post-colonial world. The ideation around Blackness does not change significantly whether one is arguing about the illegitimacy over the designation of delegitimized tribal system imposed on African culture or whether one is, like the director Ryan Coogler, an African American interested in reifying "Blackness" into a more positive and wholesome force than had been done so in the past. Ricardo Guthrie posits, in "Redefining the Colonial: An Afrofuturist Analysis of Wakanda and Speculative Fiction," that *Black Panther* offers a chance to challenge the hegemonic assertions of what it means to be Black, replacing long-held racist attitudes and ideas with ones created by Black thinkers, such as Du Bois and Carver (Guthrie).

The scene where T'Challa, Nakia, and Okoye pierce the hologram of mountains in Wakanda creates a metaphorical parallel with Du Bois's seminal work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, in which Du Bois discusses the concept and ideation of "The Veil":

Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their

world by a vast veil. I had thereafter no desire to tear down that veil, to creep through; I held all beyond it in common contempt, and lived above it in a region of blue sky and great wandering shadows. That sky was bluest when I could beat my mates at examination-time, or beat them at a foot-race, or even beat their stringy heads. Alas, with the years all this fine contempt began to fade; for the words I longed for, and all their dazzling opportunities, were theirs, not mine. But they should not keep these prizes, I said; some, all, I would wrest from them. (Du Bois)

For Du Bois, the idea of the veil is not a concrete or tangible thing, but rather a *perception* that the *idea of race* through its *social construction* keeps humans from engaging with each other on a one-to-one level. This social construction of race creates artificial hierarchies that privilege and enable one class of humans while demonizing and dehumanizing another class. Basic humanity is discarded for other social drives such as avarice and greed, the need for control, and/or the need to classify and group, such as in an “us vs. them” paradigm. While the prejudice and discrimination could technically occur through any vector, creating the idea of “race” as it pertains to the color of one’s skin and certain phenotype characteristics became the construction through which racism took hold in the Western world.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel offers a representative example of the ways in which “Blackness” is conceptualized in not only in the colonial era, but also by those

with a vested interest in protecting the hegemonic dominance in which “Blackness” is debased, devalued, and dehumanized. In *The Philosophy of History*, Hegel states:

The Negro, as already observed, exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state. We must lay aside all thought of reverence and morality—all that we call feeling—if we would rightly comprehend him. There is nothing harmonious with humanity to be found in this type of character . . . the Negroes indulge, therefore, that perfect *contempt* for humanity which in its bearing on Justice and Morality is the fundamental characteristic of the race . . . among the Negroes, moral sentiments are quite weak, more strictly speaking, non-existent. (111-114)

Hegel continues on with this damning critique of the Negro situation, but to Hegel, the issue is endemic with anyone who is a part of the “race,” unbounded by geographic location. Hegel casts his aspersions and depredations far and wide, asserting that slavery is appropriate for Negroes due to their “physical” properties or that it is the African culture (or lack of one for Hegel) that is the cause of Hegel’s deep-seated animosity. For racists like Hegel, a different culture, or more precisely, a culture different from one’s own—an Other culture—is not to be examined or studied, except in relation to one’s own culture. Hegel *denies* the culture of those who are Black—African or from the African Diaspora—for the very reason that it does not conform to *his* culture. Hegel, and those like him such as Jefferson, believed (and unfortunately, still believe) that because European culture allowed the first great exploration of the planet, that they were superior

to any other people that they met because those races and people did not possess technology akin to their own.

Ricardo Guthrie, author of “Redefining the Colonial: An Afrofuturist Analysis of Wakanda and Speculative Fiction,” asserts that Afrofuturism has the power to refute the racist hegemonic narrative formulated during the colonial period. He argues that Coogler’s success in formulating the film stems from the director’s ability to tap into the broader success of Black thinkers, artists, entertainers, and writers throughout the past years to create a film that looks to the future and not to the past. Rather than focus on the differences that Blackness means to the two various competing cultures of Africans and African Americans, Guthrie believes that the movie makes it appropriate and meaningful for all those to whom *Blackness* is an identifier. Guthrie argues:

Black culture and consciousness provided flexible pathways for uplift beyond conventional battles for rights-based progress. Black singers, musicians, athletes, artists — as well as spokesmen and women for justice — used every venue for achieving acknowledgement and moral hegemony. Blackness, as a “superhuman” trait leveraged within national and international imaginations , re-emerges in twenty-first century cultural realms through the dream visions, music, art and culture reflecting African-descendent life and struggles around the world . . . Black Panther’s [sic] achievement, in many ways, depended upon the steady development of Black Spatial Imaginaries . . . as well as on the professional skills and experience of Black artists, writers and filmmakers who

proved their worth, and the value, of Black-themed commercial products. In this way . . . Ryan Coogler could take the Marvel Comics universe and re-invent it through the experiences of Black people who were not circumscribed by pain, suffering and ‘abject Blackness’ — but who were inspired by ‘dark speculative’ art forms embodying multiple aspects of Black life. (17)

Guthrie argues that *Black Panther* “concretizes Du Bosian double consciousness and, in some cases, triple consciousness—by including African Indigeneity” (18). Colonialism and its effects are real as Guthrie makes clear, but the divide between T’Challa and “Killmonger” allows the audience to see a story that moves beyond “victim narratives and continued oppression” (18). Also, much like the disagreement between T’Challa and Killmonger as to the best way for Wakanda to proceed in the world, Guthrie stands in opposition to Asante and Pindi in noting that Coogler’s creation does not go far enough, but that it draws upon uniquely African American thought to push forward the conversation in a way that does not confuse the audience with too many elements to follow or elements that could potentially inhibit empathy.

The Women of Black Panther

The “piercing the veil” scene is also important as it sets up T’Challa and his relationship to his country for the purposes of the plot of the film, however, it is T’Challa’s relationship to the women of the film that is of prime importance. *Black Panther* allows for those from the African Diaspora to play important roles in both the

storyline as well as presenting a side of them that is not often found in media portrayals—especially films. Gone are the pervasive “angry Black woman” stereotypes that are endemic in media portrayals. T’Challa has four strong women in his life—Nakia, his girlfriend; Ramonda, his mother; Shuri, his sister; and Okoye, captain of the Dora Milaje, a group of warrior women who are dedicated protectors to the occupant of the throne of Wakanda. T’Challa himself is allowed to be more than just a “protector” of the women that he loves and are a part of his life—he is allowed to be a king, a warrior, and a politician. While failing initially, T’Challa is able to put down insurrection and civil war inside Wakanda caused by Killmonger. Once this threat is dealt with, he becomes the King that his people needs him to become—decisive and bold, daring to risk Wakanda’s technological advances for the hope of both impacting and inspiring the lives of Black and brown people all over the globe.

Claudia Bucciferro, author of “Representations of Gender and Race in Ryan Coogler’s film *Black Panther: Disrupting Hollywood Tropes*” (2021), discusses this dearth of strong representation of those from the Black and brown communities in media representation when she remarks that “previous scholarship centering on identity and representation within the superhero genre has identified conceptual tensions to both race and gender, appearing in comic books and cinematic adaptations” (172). She identifies Black males as “appearing mostly as unidimensional characters in secondary roles” (172). Unfortunately, the situation is even more dire for the representation of females, where Bucciferro has discovered that their representation is “skewed, with characters

being sexually objectified and disempowered, and with women of color and queer women being tokenized or symbolically erased” (172). These representations, she argues, are pervasive throughout cinematic representations and are even a part of the superhero movie genre where she argues that “femininity tends to be associated with sexual desire and fragility; masculinity is represented in hegemonic ways, with only certain kinds of men (e.g. muscular, cisgender, heterosexual, white) being shown consistently in positions of power” (172).

However, these are not the plans that Ryan Coogler follows for *Black Panther*. T’Challa and the Black Panther are the same person, but their motives are not necessarily always the same. T’Challa is king and must navigate the political waters, but as his alter ego, he is free to act as a vigilante, freedom fighter, spy, and foreign agent on behalf of his country. This reading of the T’Challa/Black Panther identity is backed up by Bucciferro’s reading as: “Black Panther’s character embodies a powerful representation of an African man, yet unlike other superheroes, his not simply a vigilante with a secret identity: as a king entrusted with affairs of the state, he is involved in political and international issues” (174). She finds the “depth and complexity” of his character “notable” given how Black men in Hollywood movies are normally portrayed (175). The rest of the section focuses on Ulysses Klaue (whom she sees as an instrument of colonialism), and Erik “Killmonger” Stevens, whom she sees as “referencing deep fissures that override racial solidarity and familial kinship” (175).

However, it is the section of the article that looks at the importance of Shuri, Okoye, Nakia, and Queen Ramonda, where we find Bucciferro's argument: women form an important and interdependent relationship inside the movie's narrative. Bucciferro argues that "*Black Panther* stands as the only superhero film to date featuring *several* women of color and affording them a prominent place within the narrative. These characters reference progressive ideas regarding gender equality and disrupt stereotypes commonly found in popular movies, emphasizing key concepts such as agency and sisterhood" (177).

This argument is a powerful one for many women of color. Colonialism and its after effects have had a detrimental impact on Black women throughout the world, which are still reverberating through the African Diaspora. Shuri and the other women in T'Challa's life have an agency that does not revolve around T'Challa—a rarity in movies for women, but even more so for women of color. Marlene D. Allen argues, as discussed in her article "If You Can See It, You Can Be It: *Black Panther's* Black Woman Magic," that *Black Panther* represents a new paradigm for the way in which Afrofuturism can be used to reevaluate the ways in which women of color inhabit narrative spaces such as films. She states that the entire female presence inside the royal family represents an example of "'Black girl magic,' a term coined by CaShawn Thompson in 2013 'to celebrate the beauty, power, and resilience of Black women.' As with the case of imagined technologies, one can hope that these visions will also become reality for the futures of Black women" (20). Allen recognizes the rhetorical power of Afrofuturism to

change the way the audience perceives various elements in *Black Panther*. While Afrofuturism often focuses on technology and the way in which technology has the power to change, reform, and reshape the way society interacts with each other (as is the case of transforming technologies like the internet), Allen looks to the ways in which Afrofuturism can change how Black women are perceived in the future. Allen focuses her efforts on two characters in particular: Shuri and Nakia, both of whom have a close relationship with T'Challa, but who are also shown as capable people who have goals and motivations outside of T'Challa's, and who act decisively to accomplish their goals. Shuri is described as "a young dynamo with unlimited potential" (21). However, this Afrofuturistic move of allowing Shuri to be young and technologically gifted means that Black girls and young adults, who are often not a part of the burgeoning S.T.E.M. fields, now have an aspirational role model to inspire them should they choose to study in those fields. Likewise, Nakia's love for her native country, Wakanda, is shown to the audience from the initial scenes in which she saves the kidnapped women (and young boy who was conscripted by the terrorists). Allen notes that "metatextually, the film also protests the Nigerian government's underwhelming response to Boko Haram's crimes against these young women . . . [and] implicitly making the statement that our world largely ignores the appropriation [and] consumption of Black female bodies" (21). As Allen argues, in the real world, when there are issues that affect Black female bodies, they are often ignored and minimized. Afrofuturism, however, is able to (1) speak on the matter of racialized societal structures and (2) change the perception of racialized structures.

Afrofuturism anticipates this aspect of modern society and is able to offer an alternative to the problems that colonialism, racism, and prejudice raise in Western societies. Womack discusses this aspect of how the prejudice against Black and brown communities has been integrated deeply into Western laws and social structures:

A color-based, sex-based hierarchy was formed largely to regulate who had access to the world's resources and rights of self determination and who did not. The concept is a weird one. One of the most difficult ideas for descendants of enslaved Africans to swallow is that at one point in time, our ancestors were not deemed human. This wasn't just an opinion, but rather a legal status encoded in the first version of the US Constitution. By law, enslaved Africans were three-fifths human. None of the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness that we so proudly celebrate today were extended to women, Native Americans, or anyone who was not a white male. (30)

However, rather than seek vengeance or restitution, Coogler uses Afrofuturistic principles to redress this situation, especially in regards to Black females and Black bodies. Shuri, Nakia, and Okoye stand out among the several Black women. Coogler's *Black Panther* allows the audience to experience empathy with the women in the movie. The audience sees, through the movie's narrative, the ways in which the women of Wakanda, through the actions of Okoye, Shuri, and Nakia, are tantamount to the actions of Black and Brown women throughout the world, but specifically in Western society where they have often been stereotyped and diminished as humans.

Blankenship discusses how this subtle shift in an audience's viewpoint becomes possible when she illustrates the way in which Jane Addams used rhetorical empathy to try to enhance the lives of domestic labor in the late 1800s. Addams's: "rhetorical style is informed a great deal by her belief in mutual exchange rather than overt persuasion . . . similar to the idea that empathy involves feeling *with* rather than *for* an Other, Addams believed in *being with* people rather than *doing for* them" (68). Coogler uses the same rhetorical style for *Black Panther* for much the same reason as used by Addams to show how certain people in society face challenges that other people in society do not face and to create an empathetic connection between the privileged and the Othered.

Blankenship's argument is that Addams understood the power of empathetic rhetoric and that she "never worked as a domestic laborer [however] she knew women who had and was moved and changed by their stories. Her rhetoric invites the same kind of change in her audience, as they experience someone with whom they can identify—a socially acceptable, upper-class white woman encouraging them to think of the lower-class women in their homes, cleaning up their messes and helping raise their children, as equal to them and worthy of a better life" (73). The personal stories of the domestic workers that Jane Addams talked about in her speeches created empathy among the upper class women for whom they worked, and Afrofuturism also takes advantage of this empathetic storytelling in *Black Panther* to allow Ryan Coogler the opportunity to show the personal stories of three women linked to T'Challa's story, and their growth and potential.

Killmonger's Fury vs T'Challa's Righteousness

Ryan Coogler's Afrofuturistic film does not only come from a recontextualization of the ways in which women of color are depicted on screen, but also through his complex and complicated depiction of the African American male. Just as T'Challa is a deconstruction of the African male, someone who is at once smart, urbane, worldly without being callous or cruel, sincere, and dedicated, Erik "Killmonger" Stevens's introduction into the movie is one calculated to reset our understanding of what makes up the Black male psyche in the modern world. Erik is first depicted not through an act of aggression or physical prowess, although we see those character traits later in the movie. Erik is, instead, introduced in a scene in a museum where questions a White female curator about the African artifacts displayed in glass-enclosed exhibits. Coogler does two important things here: (1) he establishes Erik as someone who is capable of using his brain in addition to his brawn and (2) establishes him as a character who is akin to a chess player, planning two or three moves ahead of his opponents. While he does have physical prowess and is more than capable of handling himself in a fight, even against seasoned warriors like T'Challa and the Dora Milaje due to his C.I.A. training and combat experience, Erik is always scheming, always using his mind to push the situation to his advantage. Even his clothing, early in the movie, speaks to this ability to play mental games with his opponents. When Erik is introduced to the audience, we see him dressed as an African American "hipster" of sorts, with glasses, a blue-jean jacket, dreadlocks pushed up in a mock ponytail, long white t-shirt with beads of African design, and baggy

Black pants that “sag” (hang below his hips because he does not wear a belt to keep them from falling down). Nothing about this look is designed to appear threatening, and the way in which he asks his questions, makes it appear that he is eager to learn from the museum “expert.” His very demeanor is designed to allay the suspicion that he is anything different than what he actually is—until, he himself, is ready to reveal his true nature and purpose.

My reading of Erik’s use of intellectual camouflage is supported by the research done by Darius M. Benton in his journal article, “Hero or Villain? Character and Content Analysis of Erik Killmonger in *Black Panther*.” Benton provides a detailed analysis of Erik’s character, a “qualitative content analysis in order to best exegete [sic] the characterization of this character” (185). Benton believes that the best way to understand the actions of the character is to investigate him through four main considerations: “appearance, identity, conflicts, and faith” (185). One of the first topics that Benton discusses is the way Erik’s initial appearance helps to create a deceptive image of the character in the eyes of the audience in order to show that Erik Killmonger is not just a physical threat in the conventional terms of a narrative villain, but also a threat due his considerable mental abilities and meticulous planning. Benton argues:

One of the most fascinating things about this character is his appearance . . . as Killmonger was introduced, the most intimidating aspect about him was not physical but could arguably be his intellect, and the way he used it to stage a heist in the Museum of Great Britain, full of African artifacts that as Erik reminded the

curator and the audience were previously stolen from their countries of origin, as he told her, “Don’t trip. I’mma take it off your hands for you . . . How do you think your ancestors got these? You think they paid a fair price? Or did they take it, like they took everything else?” It was here that the audiences were able to absorb that his superpower was *mental just as it was physical*. Erik Stevens’ appearance was very similar to any other Black male you would find in any major US city today. Upon his introduction, Erik stood in the Museum of Great Britain with the backdrop of artifacts from an array of African countries, a dark skinned man dressed in a blue jean-denim outfit, white-tee, gold chain, glasses and well-groomed twist in his hair. Although this image is not very threatening to some, historically, in the United States, a young man appearing this way is considered by many to be a threat. It is this type of institutional villainization, which leads Black men to seek refuge in multiple outlets both healthy and unhealthy. (189-190, emphasis in original)

Benton’s argument reveals several crucial aspects about Black males in general and Erik in particular. It first illustrates the ways Black males are often viewed by society as primal and bestial, denying their mental abilities and classifying them as dangerous and threatening. Secondly, it shows how Western culture often dehumanizes Black males by overemphasizing the physicality while limiting the perceived mental abilities of Black males as a population. That Erik would have the mental wherewithal to conceive of, let alone execute, an intricate plan that involved misdirection and cunning is an element of

Killmonger's personality that raises his threat level: not only is he physically powerful, but he also has the intelligence to match his physicality.

Benton goes on to investigate other aspects of Erik's portrayal in the movie in order to challenge the prevailing narrative that Killmonger, despite his nickname, is a villain in the traditional sense of the word. Much has been made of Erik's point of view as one that makes the most sense in terms of the narrative. Erik Killmonger Stevens has been a surprisingly sympathetic antagonist that many find appealing in terms of his more militant views. Scholars as well as audience members often find that Erik's views on engagement are preferable to T'Challa's more hands-off approach.

In "Dark of the World, Shine on Us: The Redemption of Blackness in Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther*," George Faithful highlights this underlying tension between T'Challa's and Killmonger's representative philosophies. He argues that "Killmonger holds up a mirror before an unmasked Wakanda for its elders to behold what their nation truly is . . . billions of people of color in the world live under significant social, economic, and environmental oppression. Instead of liberating them, Wakandans have chosen the comfort of isolation" (Faithful 9). According to many scholars, Killmonger's indignation against the reluctance of Wakandans to help people of color rise up and throw off the oppression of the people from the African Diaspora is what fuels his anger and frustration against the Wakandan government. Faithful goes on to outline the key difference in mindsets between T'Challa and Erik: "At the outset, prior to the reckoning with Killmonger, T'Challa is an isolationist in the tradition of his forefathers, committed to

maintaining the national secret” (10). Faithful’s examination of the conflict recalls the ultimate argument of Asante and Pindi: that the journey of African Americans is different from the journey of Africans, and even though each are considered “Black” and each carry the banner of “Blackness,” the ultimate traumas suffered and solutions proffered are unique to each group. The narrative of the movie, along with the characters of T’Challa and Erik, evoke a way of engaging with these traumas and brainstorming solutions to the audience in a way that is both effective and non-threatening. This is where Afrofuturism comes to the fore.

Both Faithful and Benton find fault with T’Challa’s characterization as hero and claim that his failings are more detrimental to Wakanda, especially as an isolationist, than are evident at the beginning of the movie’s story. Faithful and Benton also argue that Erik Killmonger’s motivation to help his people overcome the oppression that they have suffered, and in many cases continue to suffer, is far more admirable than at first blush. Faithful and Benton admire Killmonger’s motives, if not necessarily his actions. Benton notes that while Erik is ultimately a villain because he “clearly displayed five of the eight characteristics of a villain . . . opposing the hero, being a deliberate scoundrel or criminal, [being] a tyrant-monster, [being] associated with dark[ness], and [having a] clear manifestation of real danger” (202), Erik’s motivation makes him a complex antagonist who should not be seen as a typical villain. Benton argues that while “it is clear that he was an antagonist . . . [he was also the one] with a cause and clear message that appears to be overlooked as viewers and critics take the dominant social perspective without

tuning in to underlying messages presented through the presence of this character” (202). Benton believes that it would be “problematic and misleading” (202) to only consider the villainous aspects of Erik’s characterization without looking into the root causes of Erik’s motivations. Faithful offers a more nuanced reading of Erik’s characterization and the reason he is such a compelling character. Faithful outlines Erik’s ultimate goal: “He [Killmonger] identifies the fundamental geopolitical problem as the question of who is in power, rather than as the problem of imbalances of power themselves. Killmonger wants the oppressed to become oppressors, so long as they are Black” (9). Erik does not care about fairness or the innate humanity of people: Erik cares for power, specifically who has it and who does not have it. Erik is not interested in fixing institutional racism, poverty, or any of the other problems endemic to those of the African Diaspora, so long as it is those who are Black who no longer have to suffer under the depredations of colonialism and its after-effects. Faithful sees through Erik’s intoxicating reverse-racialized thinking in order to understand that T’Challa’s portrayal is the best hope for a more just, equitable, and balanced world. Central to Faithful’s argument is the understanding that reversing the power structure without addressing the inherent problems only recreates all the same issues, just with different tyrants at the head: “T’Challa becomes Christlike in his self-emptying and in his identification with all humanity. He passes from life into death, abandoning his pride, his power, and his crown, only to take them up again when he rises from the dead. Oppressors are oppressors, even if they themselves were once oppressed” (10).

Challenging Ceremony (M'Baku)

The scene in which M'Baku challenges T'Challa, also known as "Challenge Day," (19:00-28:21) is an important scene that establishes several concepts that will be important later in the film. First, and most importantly, it establishes that while a monarchy, it is not a dictatorship. There is an avenue by which those of royal blood might challenge the current ruler in order to depose the current ruler. This stands in direct contrast to the many examples of dictatorships and subsequent coups that have plagued many African countries since the time when colonial powers left the African continent and Africans have moved toward self-rule and self-governance. Erik "Killmonger" Stevens will use this path to gain power over Wakanda later in the movie. It also establishes Wakanda as a civilized country, using ritualized combat to settle their disputes, again breaking with the genocides and the use of child soldiers that often occur when disputes between various African countries or ethnic groups arise in the region. The film is remarkable as it illustrates so much of the setting within the cinematography of the scene. The vibrant colors and varied clothing of the Wakandan tribes illustrate the beauty and diversity of the African people. The waterfall and cliffs indicate that the people of Wakanda live in nature and harmony with their vibrant country, despite their obvious technological supremacy over the rest of the continent. However, in terms of both Afrofuturism and the way Afrofuturism and empathy coincide with each other, it is M'Baku's challenge to T'Challa's rule that makes this scene both impactful and important.

M'Baku takes issue with the fact that T'Challa has been chosen to lead the nation, feeling that Shuri is only a "child" and that Wakanda has been too focused on following her technological innovations rather than following tradition; however, M'Baku has a second complaint because he feels T'Challa "failed to protect his own father," with the insinuation being that a leader who could not protect his father would not be able to protect his country (22:56-24:28). T'Challa accepts the challenge (24:32) and they fight until M'Baku finally yields (27:30). While this scene establishes T'Challa's right to rule, we see that there are divisions even within this seemingly idyllic society. This scene, however, goes far beyond the plot of the movie as this one scene has taken on a life of its own, as discussed by Britni Danielle in her article for *Essence*, entitled "*Black Panther's* Winston Duke Breaks Down How M'Baku Helped Redefine the Hollywood Standard for Sexy Black Men on Screen":

Though he's been acting for years, Winston Duke mesmerized audiences with his commanding, yet humorous, portrayal of M'Baku, leader of the Jabari Tribe. At six-foot-five and 250 pounds in the film, M'Baku doesn't fit Hollywood's traditional definition of a leading man, but many Black Panther fans were drawn to the Yale School of Drama grad's performance. Dubbed "Mountain Bae" and "M'baeku" by some fans, Duke's standout depiction of the fierce warrior even sparked the #MbakuChallenge [sic] (Danielle "*Black Panther's* Winston Duke").

Amy Kuperinsky of *NJ.com* has compiled a listing of the most popular examples in her online article "The M'Baku Challenge is the 'Black Panther' Trend Fans Need to See," in

which she explains that the M'Baku Challenge “requires [one] to reenact the scene from the film in which M'Baku challenges T'Challa for the throne” and discusses the scene's popularity among adults, kids, and families (Kuperinsky “M'Baku Challenge”).

While we do not get deeply into M'Baku's particular worldview, we can infer that, at least at the outset, M'Baku is more a traditionalist/conservative than T'Challa and would like to see the country run by people whom he considers experienced, and with an eye toward Homeland defense. Yet, this does not hinder the character's popularity in the movie, nor does it harm the actor's reputation because even though M'Baku the character acts in defiance of the Afrofuturistic ideal that Shuri affords his nation, the very act of allowing the actor Winston Duke to shine in his portrayal of the character is what allows Afrofuturism to extend empathy to the character (and actor) so that a meta commentary such as the M'Baku Challenge could take hold on social media. In other words, it is the power of Afrofuturism to provide the platform for a story such as *Black Panther* that allowed such a thing as an “M'Baku Challenge” in the first place.

In the *Essence* article, Danielle argues that “despite being a classically trained actor, Duke admits having to deal with being typecast because of his brawny stature” (Danielle “*Black Panther's* Winston Duke”). She goes on to describe the fact that Duke, before being cast in *Black Panther*, was cast on a handful of TV shows, including CBS's *Person of Interest*, NBC's *Law & Order: SVU*, and ABC's *Modern Family*, and even though those roles allowed him to do something different with the characters he played, they still “fell within how people saw him (big and Black)” (Danielle “Black Panther's

Winston Duke”). From her time interviewing Duke, she notes that “[he] believes the success of Black Panther [sic] proves audiences are hungry for new projects that center Black people in interesting, complex stories” (Danielle “*Black Panther’s* Winston Duke”). Duke understands the role that Afrofuturism in particular provides for various races in order to see themselves represented in American society:

I started to realize that what people were reacting to wasn’t me . . . what they were reacting to was a feeling of deficit when it came to the images that they could consume in the media. A tall, broad-shouldered man with dark skin and a gap tooth—I wasn’t the image of ‘old Hollywood beauty’ . . . I need not be typecast as big, Black and dumb, but be seen as an intelligent, witty, bold and charismatic person . . . We need more opportunity to see more characters that have a fresh level of expression and that can only come—not just from me—[but] from people in positions of creative and financial power to support films and support films with characters who are multi-dimensional . . . People are deeply invested in rewriting the established narratives and challenging what we see as the norm in every way . . . I want all of the work that that I do to have a social justice footprint attached . . . I want it to move the needle forward when it comes to the perception of all people, but especially people of color (Danielle “Black Panther’s Winston Duke”)

However, as noted by Blankenship, empathy is not guaranteed to take place. Afrofuturism provides, what Duke would call a “position of creative power,” but there are still

instances where the call to empathy is denied. Winston Duke sat down for an interview with *EW.com* (*Entertainment Weekly*) in 2018, near the end of the year when *Black Panther*'s financial success had already been assured, and there were whispers of critical success in the upcoming Oscars. Christian Holub, in the 2018 article “*Black Panther* Star Winston Duke Says Film Shows that Representation Makes for Better Stories,” briefly describes the movie and includes two salient quotes from Duke about why he believed it was successful. Duke echoes his later statements in this interview. “I think it’s showing us that there’s room for all of us. I think it will and should impact the way Hollywood views the creation of their lead characters When it comes to oppressed peoples who throughout history have found culture and all these different things to be edifying and a big part of who they are, you need narratives that reflect that” (Holub “*Black Panther* Star Winston Duke”).

However, unlike *Essence*, *EW.com* allows for comments on the site, and the comments paint a far bleaker picture in terms of actively resisting. A couple of the comments even go so far as to deny the Afrofuturistic formulation of empathy, in order to focus on preserving the dominant hegemonic practices in Hollywood. For example, a user with the handle “nerwen_aldarion” writes: “Ummm no, a good story is a good story, the diversity of the cast doesn’t affect the quality of it. You can have great stories with as little as two characters or you can have crappy stories with tons of characters of all backgrounds. Its [sic] this kind of statements [sic] that actually bring down progressivism, [sic] by putting everything in shades of color you are ignoring the actual

aspects and individualities of everyone” (nerwen_aldarion). This comment has 4 up-votes on the site, yet it willfully refuses to extend empathy to Duke’s statement. Challenging Hollywood’s undeniable preference for White male leads, Duke argues that “the power of *Black Panther* came from seeing each of these actors get to highlight their characters’ different skills and personalities” (Holub “*Black Panther* Star Winston Duke). The commentator, nerwen_aldarion, uses circular logic to define “a good story,” but even if one chooses to ignore the fallacy inherent in his comment, it is all but impossible to ignore the implicit racism. The “two” characters the commenter almost certainly consist of characters of the dominant culture as the author only chooses to associate diversity with “tons of characters of all backgrounds.” To nerwen_aldarion, any story with diversity or diverse characters is “crappy,” as the author does not include the negative of the argument, namely, that there can be “crappy” stories with two characters. For hostile commenters like nerwen_aldarion, diversity equates to stories that are inherently bad because one must learn about different characters “of all backgrounds,” which implies that the author only finds stories about his own culture interesting. No one else would be interested in different viewpoints, and worse yet, those with differing perspectives would not be interesting to others who are not of the same race, gender, or cultural background. In denying the fact that stories can allow for empathy, this commenter denies the very strength of stories: to present imaginary viewpoints of characters who are not ourselves, and learning from those characters and seeing our lives through their lives.

Unfortunately, nerwen_aldarion is not the only commentator to deny the empathetic connection of the movie. The commentator who goes by the handle “Russian Bot” offers a more complete definition of what makes a good story, but still denies the empathy inherent in Afrofuturistic texts as a successful component. The Russian Bot says, “Diversity is irrelevant to storytelling. Just read *Hamlet*, and *Wuthering Heights* or watch *Casablanca* and *Citizen Kane* [sic]. It wasn’t important to Greek and Roman playwrights and doesn’t matter now. Stories depend on plot, character, and dialogue. Diversity is something else completely and doesn’t affect the quality of art one iota” (Russian Bot). Russian Bot is much more conversant in the idea of Aristotle’s formulation of plot in his *Poetics* than nerwen_aldarion, and has a passing knowledge of the elements of story proposed by modern creative writing scholars. However, the examples chosen by Russian Bot reflect the monolithic culture that Duke called restrictive. *Hamlet* and *Wuthering Heights* reflect a particular racialized heritage of Denmark (*Hamlet*) and England in the 1800s (*Wuthering Heights*). Traditionally, there would be very few, if any, Blacks or people of color cast in those stories in adaptations. Worse yet, for the movie examples chosen *Casablanca* and *Citizen Kane* exemplify some of the most egregious forms of racism and erasure of African Americans. *Citizen Kane’s* erasure of African Americans has been made into a website, *All the Black People in Citizen Kane - Film Stills*, that features stills from the movie with all the twenty-three African Americans portrayed from the film shown in context of their appearance in the film and with everything else erased from the film (Damrauer). This level of erasure is

hard to take. As for *Casablanca*, Richard Godden and Mary A. Mccay take issue with Sam's characterization in their article "Say It Again, Sam[bo]: Race and Speech in *Huckleberry Finn* and *Casablanca*," noting that "the reception of Sam in *Casablanca* (1942) lodges him firmly in a white tradition of Black face" (658). Godden and Mccay's harsh words underscore the representational racism that underlies Russian Bot's comments. Not only does Russian Bot not choose stories that reflect the diversity of the West (White, Black, Native American, Hispanic & Latinx, and LGBTQ+ to name several cultures present within Western society), but the commenter also chooses narratives in which cultures of diverse heritage are either minimized or consigned to play roles that under-utilize the talent of diverse actors, or that leave diverse actors to play roles that conform to outright racist stereotypes. In other words, Russian Bot would like to see stories (and perform empathetic identification with characters) that conform to his or her own culture, not the culture of anyone else.

Lisa Blankenship would argue that Russian Bot's comments are typical of the rhetoric of Classical Greece formulated by Aristotle and Plato. Blankenship argues that "Classical Greek epistemology, centered on Plato and Aristotle and hierarchical in nature, has promoted the idea of one right answer. Within this way of thinking, the purpose of rhetoric has been either to find an objective truth or convince the Other that one's view of the truth (or even the best truth) is the one they should accept" (29). Russian Bot embraces a Classical Greek formulation to argue that there is only one set of "good" stories—ones that conform to traditional narrative structure (round characterization, a

plot structure that emphasizes exposition, rising action, climax, resolution and falling action, and dialogue that reveals character rather than moves the plot forward). However, as noted by the reference to “Greek and Roman playwrights [sic]” in Russian Bot’s comments, there is only one “right” way to perform stories, and that is to use characters and stories that are of the dominant canon, by those in the dominant culture, and for those of the dominant culture. Russian Bot and other commenters reject Winston Duke’s comments because they believe there can only be one “truth” to storytelling, and that truth must reflect the dominant culture and only the dominant culture, and the Other—to which Duke is assigned—must conform to their way of thinking. To them, Duke is challenging the very structure, not only of their own culture, but the structure of the narrative itself by daring to ask for stories that include rather than exclude. Duke, by arguing for multiple stories, is in complete defiance of the idea of a monolithic narrative that describes the world for the dominant culture. However, for many, like Russian Bot, a plurality of voices is actively discouraged. To these people, plurality leads to division and chaos and does not allow those in the dominant culture to take center stage in the mythologizing process. In other words, the dominant culture only wants to see itself reflected as heroes and as protagonists in stories. Having protagonists from cultures other than the dominant one creates disharmony that must be curtailed or eliminated.

One can see this sentiment echoed by the majority of commentators on the article, suggesting that Afrofuturism, by itself, is not a panacea to this very limited, and limiting, way of thinking. For example, a commentator by the handle of Handsome Smitty remarks

“I’ve liked Duke in his performances on television. He has a presence. He could go for if he [sic] can carry some serious dialogue given the opportunity. Sad to see him proclaim his racism, though. Color - the inclusion or exclusion of - has nothing to do with a good story [sic]. Oh, and I put BP [*Black Panther*] just above the first two Thor films . . . it was that ‘not that good’ [sic]” (Handsome Smitty). Handsome Smitty tries to establish goodwill with the audience of the site by suggesting that the commentator is familiar with Duke’s work. However, Handsome Smitty also intimates that Duke is not capable of (or has not had the opportunity to) deliver dramatic dialogue consistent with the best actors. Unfortunately, due to Handsome Smitty’s grammar, it is difficult to parse out which meaning is preferred. However, even if one were charitable and chose the latter meaning, the problem of Handsome Smitty’s protestations against racial representation are still problematic, nor do they attempt to actively listen to the stories of “Others,” which is a key feature in rhetorical empathy according to Blankenship. Not only does Handsome Smitty’s final comments, while subjective, call into question the competence of the director, cast, and crew of the film by calling it “not that good,” thereby continuing a tradition of demeaning the efforts of Blacks without providing evidence for one’s assertions, but nowhere does Handsome Smitty, nor any of the commentators, mention the historical precedence of racism in the entertainment arena that Blacks have struggled against for decades, even though they feel more than qualified to discuss the ways in which the stories of “Others” are in some ways lacking. As commenters, they espouse a viewpoint online that favors stories that only discuss their point of view and are not

willing to try to listen to any story that does not advance their own culture—thereby, replicating the prejudicial historical patterns that the US continues to confront.

J. Fred MacDonald, author of *Blacks and White TV: African Americans in Television Since 1948, 2nd Edition* (1992) notes that historically African Americans have been subjected to discrimination and racism in the entertainment industry:

Despite the argument that the specter of the “white southern market” was actually a myth, to the entertainment industry it was reality. TV executives and advertisers feared alienating the white consumer in the South. They avoided programs that might be too flattering or egalitarian toward Blacks. And there was evidence to support their trepidation. When the networks in 1957 moved to censor racially objectionable words like “massa,” “darkey,” and “old Black Joe” from the songs of Stephen Foster, southern politicians reacted with hostility. Governor Marvin Griffin of Georgia became a spokesman for the protestors . . . [but] even more threatening was the reaction in 1952 of Governor Herman Talmadge of Georgia (later a United States Senator) who blasted network TV for racially integrated programming which, he felt, propagated a “complete abrogation of segregation customs” in the South . . . and Talmadge fired what to television executives was the ultimate weapon. In order to “clean up television now before the situation grows more offensive,” the governor threatened a massive boycott by whites of productions sponsoring such programming. (8-9)

African American actors of the time, much like Duke in today's world, did not simply sit by passively and allow prejudice to go unchallenged in the entertainment industry. They formed, what MacDonald terms, "special interest pressure groups" such as the Television Authority Committee on Employment Opportunities for Negroes, The Committee for the Negro in the Arts, the Harlem Committee on Unemployment in Television, and the Coordinating Council for Negro Performers (9-10). These organizations, with the auspices of the NAACP, were tasked with the goal "to secure representation of Negroes on television programs," and to make certain such representation matched "their role in everyday life" (10) even as early as the 1950s. Admitting that this was, at the time, an "idealistic statement," MacDonald argues that this assertion helped to challenge the hegemonic dominance of television executives of the era by highlighting glaring inconsistencies between content aired and the lack of Black representation on-screen, even when the historical component of the content demanded it (10).

MacDonald's work on documentaries during the civil rights era helps to explain the relationship between race, representation, and empathy that I am arguing occurs in Afrofuturism and *Black Panther*. For MacDonald, television was a key factor in the discussion of race relations, and the documentary became the perfect tool for examining the concept of race in America in the 1950s and 60s, offering perspective on the way in which empathy was engendered in the populace to foster engagement on the topic of civil rights. MacDonald notes the fact that TV became the primary means by which US citizens learned about the nature of the problem of race:

TV coverage of the daily news by the early 1960s dealt forcefully with protests for racial desegregation. For a nation grown used to lily-white communities set apart from pockets of Black people, television transcended residential boundaries and brought the civil rights movement directly into the living room of white America. Because of TV, nonviolent demonstrators, brutal police responses, heckling bigots and white officials exploiting ignorance and intolerance to gain election [votes] became commonplace images on the evening news. Perhaps better than any fictionalized drama, these actualities brought home the necessity for, and the intensity of, the Black social movement. The most fully developed presentations of the civil rights issues were to be found in network documentaries. (98)

MacDonald investigates several documentaries from the time period and claims that the documentaries of Edward R. Murrow and Fred W. Friendly were particularly effective in creating empathy for the plight of Blacks because of Murrow's "refusal to take sides" and for allowing the cameras to capture viewpoints "from all sides to tell the nation of the sincerity of their convictions" (100-101).

While ostensibly arguing for a "color blind" approach to storytelling, commenters like Russian Bot and Handsome Smitty (1) ignore the historical precedent in which Blacks and other minorities were under-represented in the entertainment industry, a situation that was only rectified with sustained outside pressure from concerned groups, and (2) privilege the Classical Greek hierarchy that asserts that there is only "One Truth" — the one conveyed by the dominant group. Except for one, all the commentators on

Holub's interview with Duke subscribe to a hegemonic ideal, in which only one group is privileged and gets to speak. All other voices, to these commentators, must either remain silent and unheard, or must become the Other, whose voices are constantly minimized and, if not ignored completely, shunted to a "ghetto" where only those who are part of the hegemonic ideal are able to decide what value their voices have in the broader cultural landscape.

To explain the rhetorical perspective, Russian Bot, Handsome Smitty, and the other commentators on Duke's interview, use what Wayne Booth would describe as "win-rhetoric: rhetoric as persuasion and winning at all costs" (qtd. in Blankenship 50). They have no intention to extend empathy to anyone other than themselves and those who comprise the "majority." To these commentators, all that matters is that they "win" the argument and keep movies like *Black Panther* from being made, finding an audience, finding critical and commercial success. For them, every *win* by an Afrofuturistic text, or a text that is not necessarily Afrofuturistic, but allows for diversity, is a *loss* for movies that glorify the dominant culture. As the mindset is clearly win-at-all costs, the offending text must be made to suffer and cannot exist in any meaningful way in the eyes of the critics. Duke appears to be using what Booth would call "listening-rhetoric: rhetoric as a deep probing for common ground" (qtd. in Blankenship 50). Duke, unlike the commenters, does not argue that stories from the dominant culture are not good, but rather that diverse audiences should be allowed to see themselves reflected in stories that are written by them and for them, so they can enjoy them, but so too can others who

might not be of the same culture. Duke categorically does not dismiss the stories of the dominant culture (unlike Handsome Smitty's dismissal of *Black Panther*) but invites those who are not of the same culture to find common ground within the work. As he says quite concisely in the interview, "there's room for all of us." (Holub "*Black Panther* Star Winston Duke"). For Booth, this is an important rhetorical move:

At its best it [listening-rhetoric] is the quest by the listener for some topics, topoi, warrants, to be shared with his or her opponent—agreements from which they can move as they probe their disagreements. It is the rhetor practicing rhetorology in the effort to discover, in the "other," some ground or platform where, as a community, they can move from some understanding toward some new territory" (qtd. in Blankenship 50).

Blankenship's understanding that storytelling is rhetorical empathy's greatest strength toward initiating "listening-rhetoric" is the rationale for Afrofuturism. Afrofuturism asks the audience to engage with the Other, in this case Blacks from all across the African Diaspora, with a focus on African Americans, to draw all cultures into the African American/African Diasporic experience, including its high points and its low points. Afrofuturism uses the genre of science fiction and its trajectory of hope that the future will bring about positive changes for all, but especially for the historically disadvantaged, such as the African or the African American to push forward this idea of a "listening-rhetoric."

The character of M'Baku, and more explicitly, the challenge that Winston Duke's character initiates, both invites and challenges the audience to envision the world through a different paradigm. For example, a user with the handle Roger Stark (@RoRogerThat) on Twitter commented: "I may be Hispanic, but that sure doesn't stop me from doing the #MbakuChallenge! [sic] @Winston_Duke I hope I've made you proud lol big fan of your work. #Mbaku #WakandaForever @chadwickboseman" (Roger Stark "The M'Baku Challenge"). Here, Duke as M'Baku does the very work that both he and Blankenship feel is necessary for listening-rhetoric to occur. M'Baku inspires another minority, not African American, to inhabit the role of M'Baku. The user identifying as "Roger Stark" is, thanks to *Black Panther*, not only allowed, but encouraged to take an active part in imagining himself or herself as part of the narrative of the movie. This affinity stands in direct contrast to commenters like Russian Bot or Handsome Smitty, who feel that diversity is irrelevant to the telling of a good story. Without the inclusiveness of *Black Panther's* storyline and the diversity of characters, it is entirely possible that Roger Stark would feel alienated and not invited to participate in the collective experience that is the M'Baku Challenge.

However, it is the entry to the M'Baku Challenge by Jordan Rae Bascombe-Ralph, a seven-year-old, whose post on Twitter had over ten million views according to a 2018 *Good Morning America* interview, who underscores the film's potential for empathetic connection ("Meet the 7-Year-Old"). The *G.M.A.* interview itself has been viewed over one million times on YouTube. In the interview, the young man's mother

said that, for her, “it is not a movie, but a movement” (“Meet the 7-Year-Old”). Jordan, who is African American, was very shy during the interview, but became animated when asked to perform the M’Baku Challenge on air. *Black Panther* made it possible for Jordan to see himself, not only as a young Black male, but also as multiple characters in the movie, including a leader like T’Challa, and a man with both convictions and honor like M’Baku. Perhaps, even more revealing, are the encouraging and positive comments section under this video. Two, in particular, serve as a rebuttal of nerwen_aldarion’s, Russian Bot’s, and Handsome Smitty’s comments, and validate Winston Duke’s assertions. The first comes from a user with the handle “EvErMoRe,” who states:

As a mother to not 1 but two Black boys this made me cry with pride that my sons, our sons get to see and fully ingest a true representation on screen of themselves m'baku [sic] was my favorite character to so it tugged at my heart strings something fierce . . . my 4 year old is also heavily inspired by the movie at 4 he understood and it held his attention the whole 2+ hours which is a huge feat lol #wakandaforever #mbuku [heart emoji]. (EvErMoRe)

For this commenter, who identifies as a mother, representation is important in films because it allows her children to see themselves in roles other than traditional Hollywood stereotypes, such as Sam in *Casablanca* or as gangsters and thieves in television and film roles. For her, the film’s presentation of another side of African and African American culture than what is mostly portrayed in films is a positive step forward. Also, this commenter is impressed that *Black Panther* holds the attention of her four-year-old, a

sentiment that Jordan Rae Bascombe-Ralph's mother also echoed. For these two young boys, there is something captivating about *Black Panther* far beyond what other movies seem to exhibit, and it is this idea that they can be a part of the experience, rather than excluded from it, that helps to inform their interest.

A commenter who goes by the handle Herman Carter sums up Winston Duke's argument most persuasively, specifically noting that "Representation is key . . . this shy little man just lit up when doing this, and when he had two of the main actors chime in . . . lol . . . I'm sure he's on cloud 9. I know I was just watching and Imaging [sic] how that would feel if I was still a kid . . . this was awesome . . . (Herman Carter). Herman Carter underscores Duke's comments that movies like *Black Panther* allow for others to see a representation of themselves on-screen. Herman Carter sees this as a potential avenue for affecting change in some positive way, perhaps the arenas of speech, acting, and/or drama, that might not have been opened had the young man not seen or had a chance to interact with *Black Panther*. For Carter, representation does not close doors, as argued by nerwen-alderion, Russian Bot, and Handsome Smitty, but rather opens doors for more people. Rather than being told that he must be "Sam," in *Casablanca*, a racist stereotype who is subordinate to the main (White) protagonists, Winston Duke, EvErMoRe, and Herman Carter argue that, with *Black Panther*, a wider door has been opened. EvErMoRe's sons along with Jordan Rae Bascombe-Ralph now have the potential, and the opportunity should they choose, to explore new roles and new protagonists.

Nakia's Vision

Bucciferro's research suggests a reason as to why Afrofuturism is such a compelling ideology to help rectify racial and gender inequities promoted by traditional Hollywood practices. Bucciferro's ideas can be seen clearly in *Black Panther* after T'Challa wins his challenge against M'Baku and the audience sees him rise from the sands after visiting the spirit of his father in the ancestral plane. T'Challa and Nakia walk the street, discussing personal matters, not as royalty, but as any boyfriend and girlfriend might, with only the watchful eyes of two trailing Dora Milaje, underscoring T'Challa's status. T'Challa, speaking his heart, is trying to convince Nakia to stay and, perhaps, marry him and become Queen of Wakanda (33:34). While flattered, she turns him down because she says: "I found my calling out there. I've seen too many in need just to turn a blind eye. I can't be happy here . . . knowing there's people out there who have nothing" (33:47-33:58). When T'Challa asks her what she thinks that Wakanda's response should be, her reply is immediate: "Share what we have. We could provide aid . . . and access to technology and refuge to those who need it. Other countries do it, we could do it better" (33:50-34:10). While T'Challa does not necessarily think that it is a bad idea, he does question the wisdom of letting others know of the provenance of Wakanda's success and resources. He worries that others will try to take it by force. Nakia, while obviously disappointed, still presses her argument: "Wakanda is strong enough to help others and protect ourselves at the same time" (34:21).

According to Bucciferro, Afrofuturism offers the chance for positive disruption. Just as “Blaxploitation cinema from the 1970s . . . provided an opportunity for African American creators and actors to produce narratives challenging Hollywood canons” (177), so too does Afrofuturism allow Black creators to challenge “the legacy of colonialism and slavery” (178). However, Bucciferro highlights one of the most important aspects of Afrofuturism, in general, and Nakia’s scene, in particular:

Afrofuturistic fiction offers a space where new embodiments of Black womanhood can be explored. Suggesting that Black is beautiful, Black aesthetics—often marginalized in Western society—are recentered and reimagined.

Afrofuturistic aesthetics convey meaning through visual cues: in *Black Panther*, costume designs, hairstyles, and props such as modern weapons help portray Wakandan women as powerful and capable. (178)

While Bucciferro specifically comments on the women and their role in *Black Panther*, her point is that *mise-en-scene* plays a large part in redefining how Black culture is imagined. As Nakia makes her argument, Ryan Coogler pans the camera around the crowded street. Vendors of all types are selling their wares or cooking food. There is a variety of colors, of dress and garb, of different people from a multitude of Black cultures in the scene. Those who identify as African with tribal clothing and piercings coexist with those who have traditionally Jamaican hairstyling in terms of dreadlocks and beards. These cultures co-mingle with those dressed in dashikis along with those dressed as contemporary African Americans. Afrofuturism, as it exists in this scene, is a “melting

pot” of Black culture. The difference, as articulated by Nakia, is not that race is the defining factor, as it is traditionally in the West, but rather, the “Haves” (Wakanda) and the “Have-Nots” (the rest of the world). T’Challa understands this, but his goal is not to lose what, for him, is the essence of Wakanda. T’Challa sees the world, not in race, but rather as those who are “insiders” and “outsiders.” Nakia’s vision is to get T’Challa, and by extension, the audience, to see that it is not “White” people specifically that is at the heart of T’Challa’s reluctance to become less of an isolationist. Rather, it is a tendency of the West towards colonization and the capitalistic drive that fosters a need of supremacy that troubles T’Challa. Colonization strips value, resources, and talent from the colonized place, and imposes Western hegemonic thought and practices that disrupt and alienate. Capitalism asserts that there must be a winner and a loser and the winner is the person or culture that accumulates the most wealth or capital. Through the dynamic *mise-en-scene* that plays out behind the couple, we see that the insiders, the people living in Wakanda, value their way of life which is based on more egalitarian principles than pure capitalistic “winners” and “losers.” The people of Wakanda are shown to value their lands, their technologies, their resources, and their freedoms. T’Challa wonders if sharing Wakanda’s resources will make Wakanda lose the very things that make it what it is as a country. This concern is born out when, later in the movie, Erik takes the throne and causes a civil war.

Indeed, *Black Panther’s* greatest strength argues Bucciferro is that the Afrofuturistic elements portrayed in *Black Panther* demonstrate that: “Westernized social

structures are not transposed upon the fictional space of Wakandan society, so new mappings of power are implied. Within this social landscape, women and men are powerful and work collaboratively . . .” (178). Nakia and T’Challa both want what is best for Wakanda and the world at large, but each has a different goal in mind. Nakia wants to share Wakanda with other African countries and the world at large, and she acts as a progressive model. T’Challa has reservations about the way the world would react, and he acts with a much more conservative mindset. However, unlike current Western society, America in particular, there is no animosity or hatred between their two ideological positions. Each one calmly explains their point of view. While disappointed that T’Challa is reluctant to act on her point of view, Nakia does not argue, scream, or shout at him, as is common in many Western political confrontations. Both Nakia and T’Challa come to understand that Nakia’s world view is ultimately the best way forward after they both see the damage that a radicalized worldview like the one held by Erik Killmonger causes to Wakanda. Nakia’s “vision” is an example of this idea of men and women working together to explore solutions to complex problems facing Wakandan society. As noted above, Bucciferro observes that men and women both embody power within Wakanda, and both are necessary to solve problems in a collaborative manner (178). Indeed, it is this “shared space” for men and women that is at the heart of Afrofuturistic narratives such as *Black Panther* (178). The Other’s experience is important to T’Challa. He does not want his people harmed as other African nations have been harmed so often by foreign powers. Nor does T’Challa want to see the hegemonic practices, such as

patriarchy, come to disrupt the harmony of his nation. Wakanda is a space in which both men and women thrive and to allow the outside world to know of Wakanda's riches risks the equality shared by both genders.

Shuri's Lab and Shuri's Vision

The scene that takes place in Shuri's lab is short, approximately four minutes in length (37:40 - 40:57). Yet, in that small amount of time, Coogler challenges, in dramatic fashion, the dominant images of Black women in the US popular imagination. While Shuri was introduced earlier in the film during T'Challa's first arrival in Wakanda (13:42-15:01), it is this scene that characterizes Shuri for the audience. T'Challa's and Shuri's first interaction hints at the brilliant mind of Shuri and the playful attitude both brother and sister display with each other, but it is the scene in Shuri's lab that cements the "brother/sister" dynamic in the minds of the audience. The scene shows Shuri's keen mind at developing technological devices designed to help her brother in his role as Black Panther.

Marlene D. Allen, author of "If You Can See It, You Can Be It: *Black Panther's* Black Woman Magic," argues that *Black Panther* allows audiences the chance to see Black people in roles that challenge stereotypical perceptions. Key for Allen is the idea that movies, especially movies that allow Black people to be seen as competent and in positions of power, help lead to a future time in which those positions may become a reality. Her examples are the roles played by Morgan Freeman, Tom Lister, Jr., and Louis

Gossett, Jr. Each of these actors play the president in their respective movies. Allen claims that seeing an African American male in the role of Commander-in-Chief helped to prepare the country to accept African Americans as valid candidates for the highest office, something unattainable by African American politicians such as Jessie Jackson of an earlier generation. Allen contends that these actors “arguably set the stage for Barack Obama’s presidency” (20). Allen does not actually choose to defend this argument in any sustained way, but instead argues ““if you see it, you can be it””(20). This is important to Allen’s argument because she focuses more on the idea of “Black Woman Magic” and the ways in which the characters inside *Black Panther* help “us envision a technologically and intellectually advanced African nation in Wakanda, one in which Black women play important roles” (20).

Even though Allen does not provide the rhetorical framework for her argument, Fantasy-Theme Criticism is an important component to understanding Allen’s argument. Fantasy-Theme Criticism also provides an understanding of why the movie *Black Panther* and characters inside the movie, such as Shuri, create an identification with the Other through empathetic connection. Sonja Foss describes Fantasy-Theme Criticism as theory created by Ernest G. Bormann who drew on the work of Robert Bales from the “study of communication in small groups” (121). Bormann merged Bale’s theory, called symbolic convergence theory, with his own method of fantasy-theme criticism to illustrate how rhetoric operates, not only on the individual level, but also at the small

group level (121-122). For the purpose of this study, I am interested in how a small group, like a film-going audience, might perceive a character such as Shuri.

It is important to note several key points about symbolic convergence theory and fantasy-theme criticism before delving into Shuri's first action scene where she helps her brother, T'Challa in his guise as Black Panther, track down Ulysses Klaue from her lab in Wakanda. Foss describes symbolic convergence theory as being based on two major assertions: "one is that communication creates reality . . . [and] a second assumption . . . is that symbols not only create reality for individuals, but that individual meanings for symbols can converge, to create a *shared* reality for participants" (122). Foss describes the process of Fantasy-Theme Criticism as articulated by Bormann and others as the process of creating a shared sense of reality through the very act of communication. Specifically, this is done through "*rhetorical vision* [which is] a 'unified putting together of the various shared fantasies' or a swirling together of fantasy themes to provide a credible interpretation of reality" (Foss 125). Much of Fantasy-Theme Criticism relates to storytelling and dramatizing, as evidenced by the use of *setting themes*, *character themes*, and *action themes* (123). These smaller themes join together in a larger narrative to form the rhetorical vision of the group. Foss uses the example of "battle" as a rhetorical vision concerning the Equal Rights Amendment. Women had to fight, like warriors or soldiers, in order to attain equal status. While metaphorical in nature, the rhetorical vision of a battle taking place illustrates the power to inspire women in the US "to fight" for equality and equal rights (125). As with stories, heroes and villains can be associated with a

rhetorical vision. Foss believes that “the people who participate in a rhetorical vision, then, constitute a rhetorical community. They share common symbolic ground and respond to messages in ways that are in tune with their rhetorical vision” (125).

Foss summarizes Bormann’s argument, in particular noting that those taking on heroic personas in the rhetorical vision will be applauded while those who are antagonistic to the vision will be denigrated (125-126). Shuri, according to Allen, becomes a rhetorical vision for young African American girls and women as she is a pivotal character in helping T’Challa confront his struggles in the movie. Allen describes Shuri’s appeal to the audience of young Black women, and while not directly acknowledging Shuri’s status as a rhetorical vision, gives evidence as to why Shuri is such a touchstone for the Black female audience:

Shuri, T’Challa’s younger sister, also displays the “Black woman magic” that makes her a role model especially for young Black women. She plays the archetypal character of the technological wizard whose creative inventions fuel the science fiction hero’s fight against evil. The futuristic marvels that assist T’Challa at crucial moments are all her inventions: from the new Black Panther suit that is a more nondescript disguise to the flight simulation system that allows CIA Agent Ross to defeat Killmonger’s attacking space ships, to the medical system that allows her to heal Agent Ross after he is shot. Young girls watching the film get to see Shuri as a confident creator of advanced technologies, a young dynamo with unlimited potential. (21)

Shuri defies the stereotype and convention of what a woman is supposed to be inside the film, much less what a young Black woman is supposed to be, at least according to most contemporary movies, including ones in the superhero genre. Bucciferro also takes up this line of argument, citing that, in many cases, “women’s representation is so limited within superhero movies that most do not pass the simple ‘Bechdel test’” (177). Here, Bucciferro refers to the Bechdel-Wallace test that examines narrative content, particularly that of movies, by three specific criteria: (1) must have at least two [named] women in it, (2) the women must talk to each other, and (3) they must talk about some subject other than a man (“Bechdel Test”). Bucciferro points out that the fight scene, in which T’Challa apprehends Klaue, is a product not of T’Challa alone, but rather a collaborative effort between T’Challa’s fortitude and tenaciousness, Shuri’s technological advancements, and Okoye’s fighting prowess (177). This is important because not only does the film set up a collaborative space between the men and women of Wakanda, challenging the traditional patriarchy of superhero films, but it also allows women of color a place in films where they have mostly been excluded. Bucciferro says that “when inquiring about representations of *women of color* in superhero movies, the results are perplexing: they are mostly absent, symbolically erased” (177). Shuri becomes a major rhetorical vision that young Black women can identify with, and they can see themselves pursuing science or technology because of Shuri’s aspirational impact. Shuri becomes an “image” of possibilities communicated in one larger idea/character and because she is delivered into the minds of Black girls and women, Shuri becomes an image or touchstone that can

spread out into a much larger group of people until those set of traits that are endemic to Shuri become something that others want to strive for and attain. Bucciferro sees Shuri as a counter to D. W. Griffith's "demonized" depiction of Black characters in *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and as a corrective to the way the movie "reified white femininity" (177). Allen concurs, noting that for people of the African Diaspora, magic and science (or perhaps more precisely, spirituality and science) do not necessarily collide as they seem to in Western cultures (22). Rather, they can exist in a more harmonious relationship that can influence other socio-political structures, such as gender relations. Allen hopes that "the films' [sic] sociopolitical critiques of how Black women have been treated and [its] simultaneous spotlighting of Black women's strength and resilience is a message that will have long lasting effects in the future" (22).

Pretender to the Throne: Killmonger's Excessive Use of Force

As elaborated earlier, T'Challa and Erik "Killmonger" Stevens act as not only foils to one another, but as two distinct voices in the debate on the role of Blacks in the modern world. They articulate two very different ways of dealing with the hegemonic culture that sees Blacks as inconsequential to the future. The final scene between T'Challa and Killmonger epitomizes this tension between integrationist philosophies warring with more militant and radical responses to the trauma of post-colonialism and slavery. I would argue that the final confrontation between the two "Black Panthers" of

T'Challa and Killmonger embodies a visual representation of W. E. B. DuBois's "Double Consciousness":

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face. This, then, is the end of his striving: to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation, to husband and use his best powers and his latent genius. (DuBois "Souls")

The scene is set for the ultimate confrontation between T'Challa and Killmonger: how does one who has melanin in his/her skin navigate a world that does not attach equal

values to them? How does a Black person, no matter the nationality, live in a post-colonial world?

While this is a question that would be revisited in Marvel's *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*, which investigates Blackness taking on the iconography (and power) of the US, *Black Panther* deals with the very real trauma of the past and how the Black community moves forward. Honor and reconciliation that drives T'Challa forward, and he despises the notion that his father killed his brother and left his brother's son, his cousin, to fend for himself in America. To T'Challa, that action was not the action of a "good king." While expedient, it lacked empathy for the child, and displayed a callousness that T'Challa is loath to repeat in his own life, be it personal or political. We see this reluctance in *Black Panther* when T'Challa acknowledges Erik and allows his challenge to go through, even though "Challenge Day" has already passed. Erik argues that because he is of royal blood, "he is exercising [his] blood right to challenge for the mantles of king" (1:16:08). T'Challa, by right and law, is under no obligation to allow such a challenge. The kingship is his until such a time as the next Challenge Day takes place. Had T'Challa been more of a "politician" as his father had been, T'Challa might have sheltered under this law and rejected the challenge. Presumably, T'Challa knew there would have been strife, division, and discontent with that decision, perhaps even leading to a Wakandan civil war, but as king, he could have enforced his will—at least, until the next challenge ceremony. However, that is not what T'Challa chooses to do because honor is a key component of T'Challa's make-up. T'Challa wants to do what is

right, not what is expedient, and this is the true differentiator between father and son as well as T'Challa and Killmonger. Killmonger is a nickname given to Erik because of his many kills as a operative of the U.S. In the movie, Killmonger scars his body to mark the tally of each of his kills. While this act recalls the ritualized scarring of some African tribes (Hadithi Africa), it is also used to show the ruthless nature of Erik's single-mindedness. Many critics have displayed glowing praise for Killmonger's complex characterization, without seeming to realize that it is T'Challa's desire to be a better king, and a better person, that elucidates the film's message of empathy and unity.

Salim Washington's "You Act Like a Th'owed Away Child: Black Panther, Killmonger, and Pan-Africanist African-American Identity" analyzes *Black Panther* through the lens of Stuart Hall's Reception Theory, which analyzes the communication act of "producers" of media and the "reception" of messages contained within the communicative act (1-2). For Washington, even the audience could become producers or "reproducers" of communicative content (2). Washington situates his analysis of both Killmonger and T'Challa firmly in Stuart Hall's reception theory:

Killmonger as an African-America[n] embodies the well-worn tropes throughout Africa and even the Caribbean in which African-Americans are considered spoiled, rude, and culturally impoverished. African Americans are widely considered to be bastard children consumed with "attitude" and anger . . . [Killmonger] wants the liberation of Black people throughout the world [and] African-Americans are the ones who were defenceless [sic] against their

incarceration and enslavement; those who managed to thrive in bleak conditions designed to reduce humans into chattel, and a people who have overcome centuries of suffering only to be seen as uncouth thugs without the necessary grace or cultural aplomb to be respected as Africans. (16-18)

Washington looks at Killmonger and sees an “anti-hero” (21). Killmonger rejects the future, and instead, chooses to reference the past to see grievances and injustices piled on to the Africans and African Americans—in essence, Killmonger sees the past as the defining characteristic of what it means to be Black. Washington refutes this statement by referencing “heroic . . . African Americans,” of whom he names “WEB DuBois [sic] and George Padmore . . . Marcus Garvey . . . Tommy Smith and Juan Carlos . . . Muhammad Ali . . . Randy Weston, Bob Marley, and Katherine Dunham,” as having a role in “Pan-African thought and action” (18). Washington takes a very dim view of Ross, one of the few White characters in the movie, and uses Ross’s affiliation with the CIA to underscore the “coloniser [sic]” motif used throughout the movie for comedic effect.

However, Washington seems to make the same mistake that Killmonger makes in the movie: an unconscious, or perhaps conscious, de-valuing of the forward-moving trajectory of the Black community. Like Killmonger, Washington uses the principles of reception theory to revisit past grievances rather looking forward. T’Challa, like Afrofuturists, looks to the future and how the future can be better than the past. T’Challa is not beholden to the past as Erik seems to be based on Erik’s retaliatory behavior.

For example, when the final conflict begins, T'Challa—unmasked so that all on the battlefield may see his face—calls out to Killmonger and proclaims, “I never yielded. And as you can see, I am not dead.”(1:42:48-1:42:55). Erik responds with a shake of his head and a denying gesture with his hands, replying “All that challenge shit is over with! I'm the king now! Get those planes in the air! Carry out the mission!” (1:42:56-1:43:02). Washington and other critics who sympathize with Killmonger overlook this element of Killmonger's character. Honor, empathy, and humanity are the character traits missing from Killmonger, and yet those same traits are in abundance in T'Challa's character. Killmonger does not follow through on the idea of the challenge when it works to his disadvantage, but he is more than willing to allow the challenge to work so long as he is to take T'Challa's throne when it works to his own advantage. This is reminiscent of the capitalistic colonization influences that T'Challa worried against when resisting Nakia's suggestion. The very fact that T'Challa's cousin would not act honorably and within the bounds of Wakandan tradition is the cumulative effect of colonization on Killmonger: that power comes to the winner, not the honorable. Yet, without honor, there can be no respect, for either oneself or for one's critics. Killmonger, like the hegemony that created him, works to destroy rather than build. T'Challa, though bound by the traditions of his country and people, perceives that the future is malleable and can be changed. Unlike Killmonger, T'Challa envisions an end to strife and hopes that true reconciliation between humans of all races and creeds can be established as long as each side is treated with dignity and respect.

For Ytasha Womack, T'Challa becomes an embodiment of "hope," which is the very same hope that Obama often spoke of during his campaign and presidency. While Killmonger is "linear," T'Challa is "cyclical," to use Womack's formation of time. Womack takes her concept of time from Shawn Wallace, a musician who posits African/African American music and culture does not reveal a clear linear progression in time, but instead that "we're always going back to go forward" (qtd. in Womack 158). More importantly, for T'Challa and for Afrofuturism is the fact that Womack connects his idea with historical models of Black leadership, linking movements for social change with Afrofuturistic narratives:

Afrofuturists are constantly recontextualizing the past in a way that changes the present and the future. Sometimes seemingly distant occurrences are linked as an evolution of liberation consciousness. President Obama's election is recast as a manifestation of Dr. Martin Luther King's legacy. Hope is a deep-rooted catchphrase anchored by President Obama that was echoed with as much fervor by Rev. Jesse Jackson and Dr. King before him. If you read passages by Malcolm X, Marcus Garvey, and Frederick Douglass, you'd think you're reading the same person. (158-159)

Killmonger, while "want[ing] the liberation of Black people throughout the world" (18), is not willing to look to the future and ignore, discuss, or mediate past injustices in any way, but chooses rather a perpetuation of the worst atrocities visited on humanity, at the expense of a group different from his own. For Washington, the fact that "the

underdeveloped character of Killmonger is killed before we can mine the depths of his potential, that the family is not able to overcome the problems represented within, is perhaps the most damning flaw of the movie” (18).

To Washington, as with Killmonger, there is no hope of redemption, no hope of moving forward, unless the anti-hero has a chance to enact his retribution. Washington acknowledges the strength of the female characters in *Black Panther*, yet refuses to note the way in which General Okoye recognizes Killmonger’s fatal flaw. Killmonger has no desire for equilibrium or for hope. Killmonger merely intends to liberate through subjugation; only this time he intends to visit the injustices suffered by Blacks to others. When Okoye leads the Dora Milaje against Killmonger, she finally recognizes that his interests do not align with the best interests of Wakanda and its people. Rather, Killmonger’s interests align with his pain, his rage, and his resentment. Okoye says, “You! Your heart is so full of hatred, you are not fit to be a king” (1:43:48-1:43:53). It is this fight that brings Killmonger into conflict with Wakanda proper as he fights against General Okoye and the Dora Milaje. He then must battle T’Challa’s inner circle when he fights Shuri and Nakia. Killmonger’s fight with T’Challa begins the final battle and moves the movie to its resolution.

T’Challa’s Hope for the Future

Once the final fight begins, what drives T’Challa is not vengeance, nor rage, but an understanding that there must be change. T’Challa realizes that, without change, the

future will simply be a repeat of the past. There must be an expectation, a hope, that the future will be better and brighter than the past. Womack's analysis shows that T'Challa embraces Afrofuturism and is able to see the connection that shared humanity affords:

Hope, much like imagination, comes at a premium. The cost is a life where more is expected. Where more is expected, new actions are required. The audacity of hope, the bold declaration to believe, and clarity of vision for a better life and world are the seeds of personal growth, revolutionized societies, and life changing technologies. Desire, hope, and imagination are the cornerstones of social change and the first targets for those who fight against it . . . Imagination, hope and the expectation for transformative change is a through line that undergirds most Afrofuturistic art, literature, music, and criticism . . . It is the prism through which some create their way of life. It's a view of the world. Where there is no vision, the people perish. (42)

As powerful as Killmonger's desire for retribution and militant liberation are for him, this desire stunts his growth. Killmonger is incapable of looking to the future, and his dreams all rely on replicating the past. T'Challa is able to look with empathy on the people of Wakanda, the people of the world, and even Killmonger himself because T'Challa understands the pain that has been inflicted and refuses to inflict it on anyone else, no matter their color or creed.

Arthur Whaley examines how identity conflict is expressed during the adolescent and early adult years, in the study "Identity Conflict in African Americans during Late

Adolescence and Young Adulthood: Double Consciousness, Multicultural, and Africentric Perspectives.” Whaley studies the role that three perspectives—Double-Consciousness, Multicultural, and Africentric—play in the formation of identity and conflict that arises from identity formation. Each of these perspectives has been developed into theoretical models that can be tested through the use of participants in research studies and “meta-analytic review” of studies of Blacks. Whaley’s research is important because it bears out Womack’s assertions by providing useful quantitative data that help to mitigate Washington’s reliance on Hall’s Reception Theory. Whaley’s study shows that humanist philosophies move away from racial characteristics and focus more on the individual—meaning that identity formation for African American adolescents works when focusing on the “Africentric” [sic] perspective because they normalize the “Other” and help members of minority communities to feel more like a person rather than a “type” (120). While Whaley makes it clear that much more research needs to be done in this area, the research thus far seems to bear out the ideas that Womack expresses in her book. Even more importantly, however, is the fact that while Killmonger raises some excellent points in *Black Panther*, it is T’Challa who must ultimately show the audience the power of empathy and the value of looking forward to the future rather than the past. Afrofuturism is key to empowering empathetic formation while watching an Afrofuturistic movie like *Black Panther*.

This, then, is the end of his striving: to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation, to husband and use his best powers and his latent genius. These powers of body and mind have in the past been strangely wasted, dispersed, or forgotten. The shadow of a mighty Negro past flits through the tale of Ethiopia the Shadowy and of Egypt the Sphinx. Through history, the powers of single Black men flash here and there like falling stars, and die sometimes before the world has rightly gauged their brightness.

—*The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois

Chapter 3: Afrofuturism in Video Games — Futuristic and Interactive Narratives

As the “new kid on the block” in scholarly circles, video games often represent many disparate disciplines integrated into one unified product, and this synthesis is transforming the popular culture landscape. Much has been made in news reporting and other venues of the enormous financial and popular success of video games. As late as January 2019, the Entertainment Retailers Association (ERA) for the United Kingdom noted in its yearly report that video games were an important part of driving the growth in the UK market. ERA CEO Kim Bayley argues that “The UK games market is more than

double the size it was ten years ago, a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 7.8% which is extraordinary by any standards,” (D’Angelo).

Even scholars in more traditional fields of study, such as film criticism and narrative studies, have begun to notice the ways in which video games, particularly mainstream video games designed for mass market appeal, have incorporated traditional narrative structures. More interesting, however, are the ways that the narrative can be broken or manipulated because of the interactive nature inherent to video games. Graham Roberts and Heather Wallis, in their Introduction to *Introducing Film* (2009), indicate that “the ‘art form’ which [sic] might conceivably challenge film in the twenty-first century — .i.e. computer games — is completely reliant on the forms and language of cinema to engage the audience. The oft-predicted great art form of the future is in essence a more interactive version of ‘movies’” (1-2). Roberts and Wallis freely acknowledge that interactivity is a key differentiator of the two entertainment mediums and require the language of movies to tell their stories. Video games featuring Black characters and storylines present opportunities for scholars of Afrofuturism to investigate how these games can be used by Afrofuturists to reach a wider audience in the future. Interactivity helps to promote the rhetorical transmission of empathy to Black characters in games.

The scholarly study of video games, as a form of popular culture and as rhetoric, is in its nascent stage. Notable video game scholars, such as James Paul Gee, focus on video games and the interaction of learning and gaming, while Ian Bogost studies the rhetorics underlying technological and computational structures. Other scholars have also

begun to do deep research in video games. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, authors of *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (2004), inspired the theoretical exploration of video games as cultural rhetoric. While they are not the first authors to apply theory to games, nor to investigate how video games achieve their desired effects, it was their simple and concise articulation of the idea that games have the power to affect a population on the cultural level that helped to situate my understanding of the rhetorical power of games to help inspire empathy. As Salen and Zimmerman state: “[Games] reflect culture, depicting images of gender . . . as well as portrayals of race and class.” (506). They argue that “games have the potential to transform culture . . . transformative play occurs when the free movement of play alters the more rigid structures in which it takes place (507). They claim this idea of *transformative play* that is at the heart of the power of video games and the ability of using cultural rhetoric to study them. While it is possible to look at how culture is represented within a video game setting, the true power inherent within video games lies in that fact that unlike traditional narrative genres, which ask a person to watch and/or absorb the narrative, video games ask you to *participate* in the narrative.

Salen and Zimmerman reference *The Ambiguity of Play* (2001) by Brian Sutton-Smith, who defines seven “rhetorics of play” (518). While they are all interesting, I will cite only three for the purposes of this study: “Power as Identity [in which] play is a means of confirming, maintaining, or advancing the identity of a community of players . . . Play as the Imaginary, [in which] the essence of play is imagination, flexibility, and

creativity [where] play is synonymous with innovation . . . [and] Play as Rhetoric of the Self [in which] play exists to evolve the self, by providing intrinsic experiences of pleasure, relaxation, and escape, either through play itself or through the aesthetic satisfaction of play performances” (518). Each of these rhetorics of play describes an element in which the player interacts with the game and the game’s avatar, and, in the process, is acted upon by the game itself. In some ways, this interaction is not new. The whole confrontational idea in which evidence has been sought to link aggression and video games is founded on the transactional nature of video games--the idea that playing is equated with interaction and that interaction provides negative consequences. In “Neural Correlates of Video Game Empathy training in Adolescents: Randomized Trial” (2018), Kral notes ”while this research is in the early stages, these initial results provide evidence that video games could be utilized to improve empathy-related brain function and connectivity in adolescents through skillful use of game mechanics that tap into processes underlying empathy, specifically perspective-taking and emotion regulation” Kral counters the idea of negative consequences and conclude that additional research is needed, especially in the areas of clinical trials and participant-adaptive game difficulty (6-7). Still, their work opens up space for a consideration of how video games might function in the same way film such as *Black Panther* acknowledges a strong link between video game characters and empathy.

So, how can we see the impact of cultural rhetoric in the video game space? And where does the burgeoning field of Afrofuturism speak to empathetic play? We can look

at particular games and game series that feature characters of color in order to get a sense of how interactivity and Afrofuturism engage the social and cultural components of the game.

For example, consider the *Assassin's Creed* series. This video game has solicited scholarship as a series that consists of multiple genres: science fiction, fantasy, historical fantasy, and multiculturalism (in both the creators and the characters). In “‘*Assassin's Creed* Reminds Us that History is Human Experience’: Students’ Senses of Empathy while Playing a Narrative Video Game” (2019), Lisa Gilbert links the *Assassin's Creed* series with the idea of “empathy.” “students repeatedly emphasized that *Assassin's Creed* helped them feel a sense of human connection to history, something they contrasted with their experiences in social studies classes . . . whereas reading about these figures in their history classes was something that felt abstract, interacting with a game character seemed to foster a sense of closeness with the historical figure on a human level” (121). While Gilbert focuses on the *Assassin's Creed* series as a whole and engages in the arena of social studies, my focus is on Bayak of Siwa, protagonist of the game *Assassin's Creed Origins*. Bayak is not the first character in the *Assassin's Creed* series with a dark skin tone. However, what makes Bayak so intriguing is that he is the first darkly complexioned protagonist in the series not affected by the ravages of slavery within the narrative of the game. Even more intriguing, Bayak is a medjay (med-jie), or protector, of the Egyptian people in the game. Characters who are Black or from the African diaspora are often negative stereotypes, such as the runaway slave or the drug kingpin. However,

playing Bayek as a protector means the player must solve problems, both his or her own and those of society. Bayek thus becomes a positive force in his community, righting wrongs and injustices done to Egyptians by other Egyptians and by the Romans, who represent the dominant caste in Egyptian society during the time the game is set. Bayek represents a shift away from slavery to dominate the narrative for a character of color as the dominant context within which a character of color operates. A forward-looking movement, Afrofuturism necessarily engages with the historical past. As Ytasha Womack states in *Afrofuturism* (2013):

The absence of Africa's contribution to global knowledge in history, science, and beyond is a gaping hole so expansive it almost feels like a missing organ in the planet's cultural anatomy . . . Afrofuturists love to anchor their work from the golden eras of times long gone, and there's no ancient culture that merges the heights of science and the esoteric like the Egyptians and the Nubians. Egypt's reign in the ancient world and Nubia's influence stand as proof that cultures of dark-skinned people ruled advanced societies and shaped global knowledge.

(80-81)

Womack explores how Egyptian myth, deities, and cultural relevance has shaped the Afrofuturism movement. Bayek, *Assassin's Creed Origins*, embodies/exemplifies the power of that mythic past to inform/create a more liberating future.

Video Games and Empathy: A Perfect Match?

Noted video game scholar Ian Bogost often writes about issues central to the study of video games. His work is both influential and highly regarded in the academic world for the study of this new media technology. In his book, *How to Do Things with Videogames* (2011), Bogost explains why video games (which he prefers to write as *videogames*) are so important to the cultural landscape. He argues that “videogames are a medium that lets us play a role within the constraints of a model world” (4) and that art (in all of its forms, not just video games) have “in the last century especially . . . tried to bother and provoke us. To force us to see things differently . . . its very purpose . . . is to change and to change us along with it” (11). This element of change and changing its players as they experience the medium of video games is very important to the concept of empathy and empathetic representation that Bogost argues occurs as players play various games, with a few notable exceptions. Bogost sets forth several clear properties of what he claims video games use to accomplish their goals: procedural rhetoric, introspection, abstraction, subjective representation, and strong authorship (13). While all five of these are important and play a part in the connection process of the player to the game, Bogost argues that procedural rhetoric is a primary driver in the player’s ability to empathize with game characters and the narrative of the game world. This is an important aspect of art and artistic work as Bogost asserts that games exemplify the requisite components of art. Key is Bogost’s understanding that:

a procedural rhetoric does not argue a position but rather characterizes an idea.

These games say something about how an experience of the world works, how it feels to experience or be subjected to some sort of situation . . . proceduralist games are orientated toward introspection over immediate gratification . . . the goal of the proceduralist designer is to cause the player to reflect on one or more themes during or after play, without a concern for resolution or effect. The use of identifiably human yet still abstract roles in these games underscores the invitation to project one's own experiences and ideas upon them. (14)

It is this introspective understanding that games provoke in the player and that allows the player to understand that there is meaning in abstraction, or as Bogost notes, that games are a set of “goals and aesthetics” (17) that the designer is trying to communicate to the player. These are the hallmarks of art and artistic expression that, for Bogost, that elevate video games as cultural (and rhetorical) artifacts worthy of scholarly study.

Why is this question important? For Bogost, the question whether games are art is important for game design because this means that, like other forms of art, such as literature, film, and painting, games allow feeling and emotional resonance with the game as it is played. Specifically, games allow for *empathetic* identification. It is the game's capacity for empathy identification that allows players of video games to feel emotions tied to vicarious situations that we may never experience in our lives, or situations that we may experience later in our lives. Bogost argues that many of our games simulate “power fantasies” (18). Yet, even power fantasies have their place as “one of the unique

properties of videogames is their ability to place us in someone else's shoes" (18). This, however, is not the only element of empathetic representation for players. Rather, games also allow us to experience weakness, such as in the game *Darfur is Dying*. Bogost uses this game to illustrate how the empathetic representation of video games enhances the players' understanding of real world situations, and more importantly, real world emotions: "if a game about the Sudanese genocide is meant to foster empathy for terrible real-world situations in which the players fortunate enough to play videogames [sic] might intervene, then those games would do well to invite us to step into the smaller, more uncomfortable shoes of the downtrodden rather than the larger, more well-heeled shoes of the powerful" (19).

Bogost discusses the ways in which game designers can subvert players' expectations by simulating the *lack of power* rather than overt power fantasies of most games. By making the player intentionally weak, the player is given a taste of what the Other has to face in day-to-day situations. This type of role-playing gives players an understanding of what it is like to perform without power, or to have power limited and circumscribed in specific ways that others, of the dominant society, often never have to face. Games that work to subvert power expectations (among other expectations, such as gender norms in games like *Horizon: Zero Dawn* or *Tomb Raider* which feature female protagonists) allow players, who traditionally have been male, to understand how and why people who are not empowered might feel undervalued and underserved by laws, structures, and institutions they encounter in everyday life. One of the games that Bogost

uses to illustrate this concept is, surprisingly, the early movie tie-in game, *E.T.* Bogost argues that many of the concepts inside the game helped to de-center the power of the character of the “extraterrestrial,” which had the knock-on effect of making the player feel as weak as the character. While Bogost claims that popular media has probably inflated the significance of this one game as the major contributing cause to the video game “crash” of the early-mid 80s, he argues that the reversal of the traditional power dynamics contributed to the game’s failure as a commercial enterprise. Yet, to Bogost, the game’s core structure helped to create an empathetic bond between player and character: “but when it comes to the world we inhabit today, it is the vulnerable—like E.T., or better yet, like the Darfuris or the Rwandans—who deserve our empathy” (23).

The Rhetorical Power of Video Games

This idea of “empathy” or relationship to player-to-game and then game-to-cultural significance is explained in terms of game design and game development by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman in *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (2004). They describe the elements of a system that Stephen W. Littlejohn formulated in *Theories of Human Communication*, as:

- 1) Objects—parts, elements, or variables within the system,
- 2) Attributes—qualities or properties of the system and objects,
- 3) Internal Relationships—an internal relationship between objects in the system,

- 4) Environment—systems are affected with their environment (qtd. in Salen and Zimmerman 51).

Salen and Zimmerman explain that first, there is the interaction of these four elements within the game itself, arguing that essentially, the game itself is its own system that has objects, attributes, internal relationships and an environment that all interact with each other to present the idea or concept of the “game.” The authors illustrate this idea with the game of Chess [sic] where they explain the interactions with the pieces on the board along with the rules set for the movement of the pieces (51). Salen and Zimmerman then looks at how players become part of the system and how they change the game based on “not just their strategic interaction, but their social, psychological, and emotional communications as well” (51). The authors also discuss how players change and interact with their environment when playing the game, a process they call “the context of play” (51). The most important element that Salen and Zimmerman identify is the way we can look at a game as “a cultural system” in order to discover “how the game fits into culture at large” (51). For example, Bogost argues that with a game like *Darfur is Dying*, the player engages with the *cultural aspects of power*—who has it and who does not. Yes, there is the element of what power *does* within the game, but there is also the cultural element of *who* has power, for what *reason or reasons* do they have power, and what can be *done* when one has power or what is *impossible* when one does not have power. Salen and Zimmerman make the same argument when they ponder the question of power within the game of Chess: “what is the gendered power relationship between King and Queen

implied in their visual design?” (52). Here Salen and Zimmerman question not only power relationships, but also gender relationships as it applies to power dynamics, as well as visual design and visual rhetoric.

In this one question posed by Salen and Zimmerman about the game of Chess, we find that it touches on three distinct categories of cultural significance that elevate the game into something more significant than a system of rules (game system) and responses to the players’ movements within the game (players’ interaction with the game system). It is this understanding that the cultural element is inherent to both the system of the game as well as to the players’ interaction that I examine when looking at the impact of Afrofuturism on video games. I also examine the effect that Afrofuturism might have on the interaction of empathy within video games. While one may not believe that a game may contain a racial component, Salen and Zimmerman remind us that race is part of the cultural system, and because of this, race can be investigated throughout the systems of the game:

In a game system, as in a human social system or biological system, hierarchies and interactions are scalable and embedded . . . the formal system constituting the rules of a game are embedded within its system of play. Likewise, the system of play is embedded in the cultural framing of the game. For example, understanding the cultural connotations of the visual design of a game piece [in Chess] still should take into account the game’s rules and play: the relative importance of the pieces and how they are actually used in the game. For example, answering a

cultural question regarding the politics of racial representation would have to include an understanding of the formal way the core rules of the game reference color. What does it mean that white always moves first? (52)

While an example for Salen and Zimmerman as to how culture can be used to investigate the playing of a game (in this case, chess), their example is also relevant to the discussion of the conflict evidenced in *Black Panther*. Even though the two protagonists of the movie never sit down to play chess, one could speculate about their views on power dynamics within the game based on their personal philosophies and the motivations as to what drives their actions. While purely speculative, this question feels like a question that Erik Killmonger would ask of the game, especially given his military training. He would most certainly have the racial dynamics of power firmly in mind. For much of his life, power and its expenditure has been of primary importance, to the exclusion of all else. Killmonger eliminates his potential love interest in the movie (1:02:40-1:02:46) because she is used as a hostage to keep him from killing Ulysses Klaue. Klaue, for Erik, represents a “chess piece” to be eliminated in order to further his plans (or to further his strategy for his greater “game plan”), which is to establish that T’Challa is incapable of ruling Wakanda because, unlike Erik Killmonger, T’Challa is unwilling to act in the best interests of the country, even when it contravenes moral law. T’Challa, on the other hand, would most likely question the status of the pawns in the game, wondering why they had so little power and why there were so many of them. T’Challa’s focus might also be on the racialization of power, but he would be more concerned with addressing the

imbalances where possible, rather than warring with those in power, as seems to be Killmonger's intent.

The reason we can investigate Killmonger's and T'Challa's motives in relation to the game, Salen and Zimmerman argue, is because the game is either an "open system" or a "closed system" (53). They define these two terms in the following manner: "a *closed system* has no interchange with its environment [while] an *open system* receives matter and energy from its environment and passes matter and energy to its environment" (53). They go on to explain that "as a cultural system, Chess [sic] is clearly an open system, as we are essentially considering the way the game intersects with other contexts such as society, language, history, etc." (53). Thus, before looking at video games as rhetorical texts, we see that games, even at their most fundamental levels, can be open systems which allows them to be investigated through outside means. This idea of opening and closure is essential to understanding why games merit exploration. Video games, like films and other media, hold a mirror to a culture and express values represented by the culture, but they also have the potential to influence and change culture.

Video games₅ have four major attributes that make them ideal to study: (1) they are representational, meaning that they can stand in for broader topics and ideas, (2) they display either or both narrative and simulation qualities, (3) they "embody cultural meaning" (Salen and Zimmerman 516), and (4) they are interactive, which is a key attribute to their popularity. Salen and Zimmerman underscore two important elements:

First, *games can represent*. Second, *games are representations*. *Games can represent* by creating depictions: of characters, stories, settings, ideas, and behaviors. Game representations gain meaning within the game universe, as they are experienced through play . . . *Games are representations* when we consider them as representational wholes . . . games are systems that give rise to representations of characters and events . . . meaning is emergent. When we use language, as when we play a game, we are playing within the limits that the rules allow . . . Representation in games emerges from the relationship between a rigid, underlying rule structure and the free play of meaning that occurs as players inhabit the system . . . As a game designer creates a system of rules, he or she is also creating a vast space of representational possibility, a space that becomes meaningful through player interaction. (364-367)

Salen and Zimmerman assert that each part of a video game, as well as the game as a whole, has a meaning. The authors rely on the work of scholars such as Jeremy Campbell and Neal and Jana Hallford to discuss emergent representations and the context of meaning (366). Salen and Zimmerman build on Campbell's work to note that meaning is "[created] through the interplay of system and context," while maintaining that this process is not unique to games and that "spoken or written language" also adheres to this idea (366). Meaning emerges when someone plays the game, but that meaning is dependent on context. Context matters when trying to decode meaning. The context helps meaning become "integrated and discernible, [which are] two requirements for

meaningful play” (367). If the context is not embedded within the game play structure (i.e., game world, rules, etc.), then it becomes arbitrary and makes it impossible for the player to discern the necessity, consequences, of actions associated with a particular action or task (367-368). Thus, meaning is something that emerges only while playing the game, but also requires help from the game designers in terms of creating rules and actions embedded into the game.

Games as Simulation

A video game can also create meaning via its presentation, either through narrative or through simulation. Using *Darfur is Dying*, Bogost shows how a simulation can be a compelling tool in the game creator’s toolbox for encouraging strong empathetic identification with an Other.

Salen and Zimmerman introduce simulation as “[the] third and final schema exploring the process of representation” and, drawing on the definitions elucidated by both game designers and scholars, they define a simulation as “a procedural representation of aspects of ‘reality’” (423). The authors take great pains to explain that “reality” is not completely definable and that there is debate between whether reality is actually “a fixed and known quantity,” or “something constructed by our senses, cognition, or cultural understandings” (424). Ultimately, however, they want readers to remember that when discussing reality within the world of a video game, especially the reading of games, there is no one model; there are only choices and decisions made by

game designers on what to include and what to leave out as they attempt to model a “reality” (424). So what, for Salen and Zimmerman, constitutes a “game simulation?” They argue that, while there are simulations that are not games, game simulations are an important part of gaming and offer opportunities for scholarship:

In the digital game industry, there is a genre of games called simulations, or “sims” for short. Sim City, [sic] for example, is a complex depiction of the process of urban planning, city economics, and the evolution of a human community; it is a simulation game. Other game simulations depict historical processes, natural ecosystems, or military vehicles. Although sims, perhaps more than other games, explicitly fulfill both components of our definition (a procedural representation of aspects of “reality”), all games can in fact be considered simulations. (424)

This aspect is important because games that heavily feature a narrative are also simulations. While focusing on the narrative aspects of the interaction between player and content, narrative games still feature a level of abstraction that purports to define “reality” in a way that is coherent within the narrative of the game and the ruleset that the designer uses to present the abstraction of the game world. It is important to note, however, that Salen and Zimmerman do see a distinction between narrative games and simulations in that “as simulations, games are dynamic systems that construct representation through play” (427). For the authors, this is called “*procedural representation*,” or all the “process-based ways that games can signify” (427). Procedural representation could

occur by the game's code expressing the rules and ruleset of the game, the AI of the game mimicking behavior (human or otherwise), or the actual mechanics of the game, such as how characters move through space, the rate at which characters or objects move, or other mechanical, procedural, or rules-based interactions that take place inside the game (427). "Procedural representation" becomes a "shorthand" for the ways in which the procedures or rules of the game can represent some idea or signify some deeper meaning or believed truth about the larger world. In other words, through procedural representation, it is possible to make inferences, or investigate the rules or procedures of a game impact player choice and what effect that has on the player. Procedural representation also illuminates what values or core beliefs that society or culture places upon a particular procedure, rule, doctrine, or process.

Warren Robinett, a game designer, highlights critical components when he says, "simulations are abstractions, simulations are systems, simulations are numerical, [and] simulations are limited" (qtd. in Salen and Zimmerman 439-440). Robinett explains each one in more detail. His idea is that a "simulation is a whole made up of smaller, interrelated parts" and that "meaning emerges from the interaction of the parts" (qtd. in Salen and Zimmerman 440) is crucial to understanding how Afrofuturism in the game space helps to engender empathy in players. *Assassin's Creed*, along with many other third person open world games, uses procedural representation to create systemic interactions that mimic many of the interactions between player and world in "reality," such as weather, time of day, the effects of temperature, etc. In fact, one of the major

“innovations” for the most recent game platforms of the PlayStation 5, Xbox Series X/S, and gaming PCs is a game development tool that will aid in “Dynamic Global Illumination.” This technique is “ray-traced lighting” where light rays bounce realistically in the video game scene. Dynamic Global Illumination, along with “truly virtualized geometry,” which allows artists to import high quality digital artwork into the game world without sacrificing quality, work to aid video game developers in increasing the “realism” of the game, drawing players deeper into the immersive nature of the game (“Unreal Engine 5”).

Games as Narrative

In *Digital Storytelling: A Creator’s Guide to Interactive Entertainment* (2008)

Carolyn Handler Miller discusses the importance of storytelling to human society. One of the strengths of her book is that it compares the narratives of the past and the ways in which “new media” have transformed the storytelling process (4). While a detailed look at narratology and the study of narrative is beyond the scope of the project, one should note the ways in which because distinguishing how “new media” storytelling differs from traditional, human-based, storytelling is important because that difference informs my exploration of Afrofuturism and rhetorical empathy:

Digital storytelling is narrative entertainment that reaches its audience via digital technology and media. One of its unique hallmarks is *interactivity*, back-and-forth communications between the audience and the narrative material . . . The biggest

difference between traditional types of narratives and digital storytelling is that the content of the traditional narratives is in an *analog* form . . . The old stories were conveyed by human voice and actors; later narratives were printed on paper; more recently, they were recorded on audiotape, film, or videotape. (4)

Miller argues that because “new media” is digitized, i.e., stored in ones and zeroes, it can be easily stored, quickly accessed, and transferred to a large number of devices, and goes on to theorize how *interactivity* in narratives may have been presented in older forms of media predating digital storytelling (4-9).

Salen and Zimmerman also delve into how a narrative transforms the arena of the play space. The authors synthesize multiple scholars’ and game designers’ interpretations of narrative to form “[the] schema [of] *Games as Narrative Play*” and they chose to limit themselves not by questioning whether games are stories or how to create better stories inside the game world, but rather, “how [games] are narrative” (378). Much of their articulation of the ways games exhibit narrative and the function of those narratives inside games comes from several important aspects of narratives identified by Jesper Juul, a game designer and researcher. Juul articulates three aspects that are shared between narratives and games: “(1) We use narratives for everything, (2) Most games feature narrative introductions and backstories, [and] (3) Games share some traits with narratives” (qtd. Salen and Zimmerman 379). As stories are pervasive to most everything we do, games, as a human-based activity, should mirror this fascination with storytelling. The authors argue that the second point, while not always applicable in every situation,

gives the game its “context” (380). Rarely does one do anything without a reason or rationale, and game playing is no exception. The introductions and backstories serve as a way to hook players into the game world or give them motivation to play the game. They use the opening expositional “crawl” from *Star Wars: Episode IV A New Hope*, as an example of a movie that utilizes the same idea. Finally, the authors want readers to understand that the underlying structure of games means that while games will usually have some elements of narratives, not all games will have the same elements of narrative, or will have them in the same proportions. Games, like humans, are unique, and while it should be possible to find narrative elements within a given game, those elements may or may not be replicated in other games due to unique variations in the game design process. Salen and Zimmerman further complicate the notion of narrative by borrowing from literary theorist J. Hillis Miller and explain that Miller’s model calls for three distinct characteristics inside a narrative:

- (1) Situation: A narrative has an initial state, a change in that state, and insight brought about by that change. This process constitutes the *events* of a narrative, (2) Character: A narrative is not merely a series of events through a medium such as language . . . This component references narratives not as just events that take place in the world, but as represented events, events that occur via *systems of representation*, [and] (3) Form: representation is constituted by *patterning and repetition*. This is true on every level of a narrative, where it is the material form of the story or its conceptual themes. (380)

Games, therefore, have an initial situation that provides context as to why the game is worth the player's time to play, and this situation often provides the player with the incentive to keep playing. The character component is not necessarily dealing with the fictional persona inside the game world, although many games do include a protagonist for the player to control, but rather the character is a representation of some goal or ideal. For example, in the game *Batman: Arkham Asylum*, the Batman represents order, stability, and a return to normalcy when he enters Arkham Asylum to put down a takeover of the asylum by inmates. The primary antagonist in the game, the Joker, who takes over Arkham Asylum represents, chaos, disorder, criminality, and mental imbalance as he lets the inmates loose to cause mayhem and bedlam in the Asylum as part of a grand plan to destroy the Batman. This representation of Batman clashes with the original vision of the Batman when he was created as a character designed to strike fear into the hearts of criminals. The movie versions of the Batman offer a third representation of the character of the Batman as a vengeful, brooding, often reluctant protagonist, jolted into action due to the inability of the police to control Gotham's criminal underworld and super villains. Three different media representations of the character offer three distinct and unique representational ideas attached to the character along with the character's action. The authors discuss Miller's use of patterning and repetition and how patterns and repetition reinforce the procedural aspect of games and help the player to orientate themselves within the game world. Returning to the *Batman: Arkham Asylum* example, one of the ways that we know The Batman is an agent of order is that he defeats hordes of nameless

goons in orange jumpers to get to the super villains who act as “boss fights” in the game. Upon defeating these super villains, he brings them to a special compound with a powerful electrical forcefield where the Gotham Police Department, under the command of Jim Gordon, returns these criminals to incarceration. The Batman must face multiple foes from his “rogue’s gallery,” but each one of them ends up captured and secured in an even more powerful cell than before. The repetition of defeating multiple foes and re-incarcerating them makes it clear to players that the super villains, along with the Joker, are agents of misrule and it is the Batman’s job to restore order.

This level of detail within the narrative component of the game (the story), along with the procedural nature of the game (the representational nature), leads to “two broad structural rubrics for understanding the narrative components of a game” (383). Players can either experience the game narrative as “a crafted story” or players can “engage with narrative as an emergent experience that happens while the game is played” (383). In other words, players can enjoy the story as the game designers intended, no matter how rich and detailed, or limited and abstract, that the story turns out to be for the player. Conversely, the players can also enjoy their *game play* and derive a story and meaning from the playing of the game. Unlike the first option, the players’ enjoyment is not limited to the skill of the storytelling in the game, but what opportunities there are for the story to be generated through the playing of the game. Salen and Zimmerman explain how games generate such opportunities: “emergent narrative is possible because of the way games function as complex systems . . . interactions in emergent narratives are also

context-dependent, which means the changes that occur are not the same every time. Instead, the exact outcome of an interaction depends on what else is happening in the system at a given moment” (383-384).

Character representation, along with narrative and emergent gameplay, are especially important concepts that I will return to when analyzing the *Assassin's Creed* series, and *Assassin's Creed Origins*. The *Assassin's Creed* series has always featured a rich narrative to support their game world and game fiction, but they have also featured a more systemic world interaction, especially in later games. As the games have moved to larger venues which include larger game worlds in addition to larger real world settings such as Egypt and Greece, they have also added more procedural systems that the player can interact with as they play. Thus, much of the challenge of the game for players now comes from interacting with systems, situations, and move sets (sets of actions that the character can take within the game world) that players might not have anticipated. The challenge of emergent game play, to many players, rivals the challenge of actually finishing the story and “beating the game.” In fact, there are many “open world games” where the procedural systems are the draw, such as the *Grand Theft Auto* games, *Assassin's Creed* games, *Red Dead Redemption 1* and *2*, *Elden ring*, *Horizon Zero Dawn* and its sequel, *Horizon Forbidden West*, and *Zelda Breath of the Wild*, just to name a few popular examples. For many players of these games, the draw is to get out of the introductory areas or tutorial levels and enter the broader game world and explore; many do not return to finish the main storyline once they have access to the full open world

map and all of a game's various systems. Salen and Zimmerman are quite aware of this fact when they say, "in addition to the embedded narrative arc of the game, narrative play can occur on the moment-to-moment, emergent level as well" (385). They go on to elaborate on several more detailed elements that are common in both narratives and games, such as "Narrative Goals" and "Conflict," among others, but outside of acknowledging that there are goals in games and that designers must introduce conflict to keep players from achieving those goals as this is relevant to the *Assassin's Creed* series, further exploration of narrative might be useful to future researchers.

Assassin's Creed Origins

Popular culture media, including video games, attract a massive audience. In the article "Videogames as Tools for Social Science History," Vinicius Marino Carvalho states unequivocally that the appeal of video games and the rise of video game scholarship is due to the "growth in popularity of gaming and the concomitant urge by game-studies and public-history scholars to welcome new audiences . . . [and] the greatest strength of games and other popular culture media are the multiplicity of voices they attract" (795). Carvalho, then, understands the gaming industry in ways that the gaming industry does not often understand itself. Games promise fun and enjoyment with the patience to master their game systems, and they often invite players to delve deeply into the narrative of the story, the lore behind the story's narrative, or to create their own narrative and meta-textual cognition beyond the scope of the game world's narrative.

Bioshock and other games in a similar vein are rife with the narrative beats akin to tradition movies, yet all the while these games encourage players to look beneath the surface narrative structure (traditional narrative techniques such as exposition, rising action, etc.) to explore other gameplay systems, which include narrative enhancing audio logs. It is this use of traditional and non-traditional narrative structures that reveal a deep meta-textual interplay of between character, player, and game designer. *Bioshock's* utilization of the “Would You Kindly” phrase in the game is particularly innovative. The player realizes that the character’s actions, which once seemed to be the result of the character’s (and ostensibly, the player’s) free will, was, in fact, carefully and purposefully manipulated to follow the dictates of the antagonist of the game (and ostensibly, the game designer’s) wishes all along.

Carvalho, who references games studies critics in his discussion, sees video games as a way to represent a history and to illustrate the role that “power and culture” (Carvalho 799). Carvalho, always with the goal of understanding how games can function as “history” and as an *aid* to history epistemology, or the generation of historical knowledge, agrees that rhetoric and semiotics play a role, but focuses primarily on the interaction between history as a knowledge system and the idea of procedural rhetoric.

In other words, both the narrative of the game and the code that powers the game are intertwined in creating meaning for the player. In many ways, the *Assassin's Creed* game series has become the epitome of Bogost’s argument as articulated by Carvalho. Earlier games in the series were procedural in nature, but they were driven by a character,

Altair in the first game and Ezio Auditore in subsequent sequels, in which the narrative and gameplay elements took precedence over the procedural nature of the games as the series developed and matured. The *Assassin's Creed* games integrated more procedural elements into the mechanics of the game as more games were produced and as the technology has evolved from the more primitive technology of the earlier games. Finally, with the release of the latest “trilogy” of *Assassin's Creed* games—*Assassin Creed Origins*, *Assassin Creed Odyssey*, and *Assassin's Creed Valhalla*—not only were the characters fully fleshed out with skills, abilities, and motivations of their own, but so too were their worlds. Animals gained the ability to attack one another or even other non-player characters in the game world. Dynamic water and wave simulations helped to give the world a verisimilitude as travel on the water or beneath the waves was now an option and players no longer had to walk, run, or take other land-based locomotion such as horses or carriages to navigate the game world.

Yet, while the worlds grow ever larger and the systems grow ever more complex and dynamic, the *Assassin's Creed* series, and video games in general, are built for audiences. Just as the technology of films allows researchers to investigate the desires and goals of particular audiences, so too do video games. Lisa Gilbert, author of “*Assassin's Creed* Reminds Us That History Is Human Experience’: Students’ Senses of Empathy While Playing a Narrative Video Game,” argues that while research into the effects of video games and education is “fairly sparse,” it “has expanded dramatically in recent years” (108). Gilbert provides statistics that show a high percentage of teenage

youths, both boys and girls, engage in some sort of electronic gaming, although the research shows that teens often use games as a way to maintain their social friendships (109):

video games play a critical role in the development and maintenance of teenage boys' friendships. These social factors have significant effects on student learning. The Pew Internet and American Life Project concluded that the social component of gameplay means that video games serve as a ground for various forms of civic learning, from working collaboratively with others to exploring social, moral, and ethical issues in a virtual environment. Further . . . even violent video games whose mechanisms rely on cooperation rather than competition are regularly found to increase prosocial behavior and decrease aggression. (109)

Gilbert remarks on the mechanisms in play as learning occurs in a video game environment and ponders if this type of learning, also noted by James Paul Gee, in his book *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* (2003), might be suitable to the classroom. Gilbert looks for analogous media that educators are already using in the classroom posits the historical film is the type of media most closely associated with how video games and the acquisition of knowledge using video games is what Gilbert chooses to use as an analogue. While there are many video games that use history as a backdrop (or even have it as a primary purpose) for gamers, few games have captured the mainstream public's attention in the video game space like the *Assassin's Creed* series. Gilbert claims that this is due not just to the open world and complex

systems, but also due to the narrative of the games and the fact that “the stories that they tell happen in the interplay between the programming code and the user . . . [and] that video games are about *playing* stories rather than *reading* them” (110).

Assassin’s Creed Origins begins in the Egyptian village of Siwa in 49 BCE. We see our main protagonist, Bayek of Siwa, a Medjay along with his wife Aya, and a boy that we assume to be Bayek’s son. The day is of great import, as the Pharaoh, Ptolemy and his procession rides into the town. We can see contentment on Bayek’s face as his Pharaoh, whom it is the duty of Medjay to protect, ride into town. However, as Bayek stares into the uncaring face of his leader, we see concern and a growing hardness about Bayek. There is something troubling in the ruler’s demeanor that sets off an apparent alarm in Bayek. As an audience, we can infer from Bayek’s expression that trouble has come to his town, and the danger stands not from without, but from within.

After a brief flash of images, we are transported narratively in time to one year from that fateful meeting, and Bayek stands over his prey, Rudjek, also known as “The Heron,” like a vengeful demon. “The Heron” is incredulous and angry at Bayek for daring to strike him, but Bayek is beyond all care. Bayek removes an arrow from his side and carves what appears to be a sigil of death above “The Heron’s” name on Bayek’s brown skin. “The Heron” threatens Bayek and suggests that others in an “organization” will find him, hunt him down, and kill him in his sleep. While speaking, “The Heron” attempts to kill Bayek by throwing a concealed dagger. Bayek catches the knife in the mask of “The Heron.” Bayek’s next words reveal the anger and pain that he feels due to,

what we later learn, is the betrayal of his leaders and the death of his only child. Bayek says, “Sleep. I never sleep. I just wait. In the shadows. And I will kill you all. Everyone who sniffed the air that day in Siwa” (*Assassin’s Creed Origins*). In Bayek’s voice, the player hears the pain, the anguish, and the grief that all crescendo into rage that borders on madness. With his final pronouncement, Bayek slams the mask, with the knife still embedded, back onto the face of “The Heron.” Thus begins our initiation with our protagonist.

As we venture deeper into the prologue of the game’s narrative, we learn that we are participating in a tale of revenge. Apparently, we learn even before the introductory titles roll in the game, there is a shadowy organization, made up of rulers, governors, and powerful men and women all across Egypt who have banded together to impose their will on the land. They rule under the banners of cruelty, despotism and avarice, and their yoke increases the burden for the ordinary citizens all throughout the Egyptian world. Bayek vows to hunt down this shadowy organization and to kill its “heads.” Each one of these leaders has a colorful and fearsome name, such as “The Crocodile,” “The Snake,” and “The Scorpion.” They are named after animals associated with the Egyptian land, or they are named after various Egyptian gods. Narratively, these leaders function as major story arcs in the game where Bayek must overcome some narrative or story element to reach them. In terms of gameplay, each one of these leaders functions as a “boss battle” in which the player is challenged to defeat after overcoming waves of standard human enemies along the path to these leaders. In this way, both narrative and gameplay

requirements are fulfilled by the game in that Bayek's journey is the player's journey.

Bayek seeks to avenge the death of his innocent son, and to punish the cabal responsible for his son's murder. The player must assist Bayek in his quest. Without the help of the player Bayek is indeed powerless, even though he is portrayed as powerful within the game world. Empathy begins with a connection with Bayek's pain.

Just as these are "haunted protagonists" who can find redemption only through the expiation of their pain upon those who wronged them, so too does Bayek move beyond the "Angry Black Man" stereotype. We can see this as he overcomes an ambush meant to kill him and meets with an old friend, Hepzefa, who says, "I do my best to keep the villagers out of trouble" (*Assassin's Creed Origins*). He requests Bayek's aid. Bayek acquiesces, but makes it clear that he has his own agenda: "I will do what I can. But do not forget I have my own justice to pursue" (*Assassin's Creed Origins*). Bayek can be emotional, as when pleading for the life of his son, or when his raw emotions overcome him in the heat of the moment. However, Bayek, is remarkably "even-keeled" and "even-tempered" for a man with a singular purpose, bent on revenge.

In many ways, early in the game Bayek is very much like Erik Killmonger from the *Black Panther* movie—filled with rage at what was done to him and the people that he loved. However, unlike Killmonger, Bayek moves into a redemptive space through coming to understand and empathize with the hardships of the people that he helps throughout the course of the game. His personal quest, over the course of the narrative and the gameplay, becomes one to rid the people of a corrupt and immoral power

structure so that they might thrive. Bayek's personal desires become subsumed in a larger quest to help those affected by the corrupting power of the Order of the Ancients, the villains of the game.

Hepzefa explains the situation to Bayek and invites Bayek to his home. An old woman by the name of Rebiah, who Bayek knows and has not seen in a long time, comes to tell Hepzefa about the soldiers that plague the village, stopping when she sees Bayek and the two re-unite. Rebiah mothers Bayek until he sits so that she can tend to his wounds. Her words reveal her fond sentiment towards him (and Aya, Bayek's estranged wife). When Bayek remarks that Rebiah has not changed in the intervening years, Rebiah replies "You and Aya, I've always patched you two up, made excuses to your parents . . . Times have changed, but you, I can count on" (*Assassin's Creed Origins*). She then begins to hum contentedly and Bayek lays down as she begins her ministrations. The scene fades to Black to indicate that Bayek's weariness has finally caught up with him and he falls asleep. Rebiah acts as the surrogate of the people of the game world in telling Bayek that he is trusted by the people. He is their Medjay, their protector, and they believe in him. Although he is but one man, his outrage at the injustice done to his son drives him, but unlike Erik Killmonger, he will not become cruel or despotic. His strength of character has been proven and he is respected. Like T'Challa, the hero of *Black Panther*, even when Bayak is tried and tested to the limits, he finds a way to put the needs of the people over his own needs.

To illustrate how players might become more empathetic to Bayek during gameplay, we need to explore a quest line in the game. A “quest line” is a narrative element combined with gameplay elements. A quest line often flows through several segments (or story “beats”). These story beats may include plot points, different settings, and a multitude of characters. Often, the characters include a mixture of both dynamic and flat characters to aid in the immersion of the game and to simplify narrative elements for the player. Finally, a quest line often includes narrative highs and lows like a story, but they may be enhanced with combat with enemies inside the game, thereby merging narrative and gameplay. Like a movie’s plot line, a quest line usually follows the player’s actions along with the narrative’s flow of time in the game. In *Assassin’s Creed Origins*, there is a quest line that exemplifies the power of Afrofuturism to break down barriers between player and the character they are controlling. This quest line occurs a little past the middle of the game’s major story arc of Bayek getting revenge for his murdered son. Bayek is given the task of finding a ledger with important information inside that could cause serious problems for “The Crocodile,” one of the ruling cabals of the Order of the Ancient Ones. Bayek, on a mission to retrieve the important ledger, discovers that it has unknowingly been taken by Shadya. Earlier in the quest line, Bayek meets Shadya and presents her with a new doll as a present from her father. Bayek’s demeanor is warm, even affectionate, as it is implied that she represents a redemption of sorts for him. His quest to rid Egypt of the deadly Order of the Ancient Ones is so that young ones, like Shadya, who is portrayed as six or seven years old, can live and enjoy the land in peace.

After Bayek gives her a simple doll made of straw and painted cloth, Shadya exclaims “Oh, I love my new doll, Bayak. I will name her . . . Iset, and she will be the protector of all Faiyum” (*Assassin’s Creed Origins*). Shadya brushes Iset against Bayek’s face in a mock gesture of affection and then bounds off to play. Later, when tasked with taking Bayek to the location where the ledger is being guarded, Shadya exclaims, “Come on, uncle Bayek! You can see my house from the roof. Follow me! You are not afraid of heights, are you?” Bayek gives a short laugh and replies, “lead on little one. I will follow” (*Assassin’s Creed Origins*).

The game designers adroitly introduce the player to Shadya, and through Bayek’s considerate actions and demeanor, the player comes to understand the friendship that has been struck between these two characters. Shadya, thankful for the doll and wanting to play, is quick to drop her guard and wants to show her new friend around. Bayek, though a toughened, battle-hardened killer by this point of the game, sees in Shadya the same curiosity, the same child-like wonder at the mysteries of the world that his own child displayed. Bayek, and the player, through witnessing the interactions of the two characters and identifying with them on a human level, and despite their brown skin color, understand that, in Shadya, Bayek has found a balm to help ease the pain of his own lost child.

However, this feeling is soon ripped away. Shadya has inadvertently taken the ledger, and Bayek, without knowing that Shadya has the ledger and that her life is thus imperiled by “The Crocodile’s” forces, has sent Shadya back to her mother without any

of the family's guards. When Bayek puts the pieces together, his groan of despair is palpable and the player's heart aches. Can Bayek find her in time? "Gods. Shadya wrote this. She has the ledger! And I sent her back to her mother! I have to find Khenut [Shadya's mother] before the [Crocodile's] soldiers get to her! Oh Shadya. What have you done little one? You cannot play games with The Crocodile" (*Assassin's Creed Origins*).

There is rising horror and despair in Bayek's voice. Here the voice actor of Bayek, Abubakar Salim, conveys Bayek's persona. Bayek knows the depravity of the Order of the Ancients and is a man who has seen what lengths the members of the Order have gone to before in order to ensure their supremacy. Bayek knows very well that youth and innocence are no shield to the ambitions of one like "The Crocodile" and Salim's voice acting ensures that the player will *feel* the connection between Bayek and Shadya in the same way that there was a connection between Bayek and Bayek's son, Khemu.

Bayek sets out to find her, but as he nears the place where Khenut says that they've taken her daughter, he overhears mercenaries, who he later learns are gladiators in the arena, discussing Shadya's fate. One says, "What have we done? Gods! What have we done!" His brother answers, "Easy brother. The Crocodile did this, not you or me. Surely . . . it must have been necessary." The first man replies in a mournful tone, "Say that when the nightmares come! We watched and did nothing. We are not innocent" (*Assassin's Creed Origins*). After killing the guards around the lighthouse where both Khenut and Shadya were taken (but not the two gladiator brothers, who escaped), a

weeping Khenut points Bayek to the end of a pier where she last saw Shadya. When the quest marker appears over an empty space above the water, the player experiences dramatic irony and foreshadowing. Long before the player guides Bayek into the waters, the player suspects the unhappy resolution of Shadya's fate because of the specific iconography and its positioning in the game world. However, once that choice is made and the player swims out to where the "quest marker" takes the player, we see the true horror unfold in front of us. There is Shadya, underwater with a rope tied to a weighted barrel, drowned. Her body, though limp, has an arc to it, with her eyes pointed to the light at the surface of the water. In her hand, she still clasps the doll of Iset. Christ-like, she floats but twenty feet or so below the water, dead eyes to the heavens, in supplication. Around her are the drowned corpses of "The Crocodile's" victims. Like the thieves crucified with Christ, their bodies crumpled and curled away from the light, serve as a visual reminder of the innocence that was so cruelly stripped of life. The other bodies also serve a narrative function to imply that this is not "The Crocodile's" first time using this method of death to inflict their will on the people of Faiyum. There is a cutscene that plays after the gruesome discovery where Bayak resurfaces from the water. His face is a mask of pain and he grits his teeth, almost in agony as if he is in physical pain. The fact that Bayak, that Shadya, that Khenut have dark skin matters not at all in this painful scene. All humans understand the tragedy that has occurred in this quest line. All humans understand the pain courses through the veins of the mother and father of Shadya, as well

as through Bayak himself, as another young innocent is cruelly and unfairly silenced by a member of the Order of the Ancients.

Gamers, no matter their race, creed, or gender, do not simply watch this quest unfold on the screen: they are active participants in the narrative trying to prevent this unjust murder from occurring. As an open world game, players are free to turn in the other direction and go exploring, they are free to change quest lines from this one to a side-quest (although, since this is one of the main quests in the game, players will have to come back eventually to complete the story and the game). This quest is structured in such a way that it ramps up the emotional investment between Shadya and Bayek so as to keep players moving forward in this particular quest line. When Bayek promises vengeance to Shadya's father, the player tacitly agrees by not putting down the controller. The player, like Bayek, wants "The Crocodile" to pay. The players, as Bayek, track down the gladiators and force them to reveal the identity of "The Crocodile" before dispatching them both. Bayek is surprised to learn that "The Crocodile" is a woman instead of a man, as most suspected. Finally, when Bayek takes revenge on "The Crocodile," the player feels vindicated because it was through the actions of the player in the game world that Bayek was able to achieve his goal.

Scholars recognize the transformative nature of video games, the effect such role playing can have. She notes that other scholars, including James Paul Gee, have also seen this transformative nature of video games:

This combination of activities—absorbing a narrative while taking part in it—has particular impacts on the player, especially as players are known to experience a shift in their self-perception to identify with the characters they embody . . . When players inhabit a virtual world via an avatar (i.e., an on-screen character), they not only imagine a different life, but also take action as though they were, in fact, living this alternate life. (111)

Thus, while not able to truly appreciate the deleterious effects of a system not built for them, white players and those not of the African Diaspora might get a sense of the unfairness and injustice that pervades in the real world as they make their way through an imagined world in which their main character, a dark-skinned man, must fight against the injustices that pervade that made-up world. Gilbert goes on to directly quote Gee's assertion of this very fact: "[video games] have the potential to create empathy for other people's situation and perspectives in life" (qtd. in Gilbert 111).

Spider-Man Miles Morales

Like *Assassin's Creed Origins* and the many games in the *Assassin's Creed* series, *Spider-Man Miles Morales* is a video game that features a Black male as the central protagonist of the game, marking a shift from the typical white male heroes that normally dominate the video game landscape. Video games do feature diverse characters; however, this diversity is generally seen in the independent game genre, also called indies, this genre is very similar to the independent film movement, featuring

development that does not usually come from a large publisher/studio and not meant for a mass audience. However, much like Ubisoft, the company behind the creation of the *Assassin's Creed* series, *Spider-Man Miles Morales* was developed by Insomniac Games, a recent acquisition by Sony. The publication of this game by Sony represents a large potential audience for the game and the game earned positive reviews from critics. While diversity is much rarer in the major video game markets and among publishers of major video game releases (often termed “AAA” or “Triple-A” to denote their generally large development teams, immense budgets, and gigantic audiences), a few developers and publishers have taken risks in this area and *Spider-Man Miles Morales* represents one of those risks.

Miles Morales is an African Latino male whose origin story echoes that of Peter Parker in that Miles was bitten by a radioactive spider. Unlike Peter, however, Miles has additional powers beyond those normally ascribed to Peter Parker. First, he can summon an electrical charge that can stun or incapacitate his foes. He also can become invisible for short periods of time. While his base powers are similar to Peter Parker's powers—namely, the ability to stick to surfaces, enhanced speed, strength and agility, and the ability to use web shooters to swing through the city of New York—his additional powers ensure that he is not simply a one-to-one Black “clone” of Peter Parker, but a unique hero and individual in the Marvel Universe. The son of an African American father and Latina mother, Miles shares a rich African American and Hispanic heritage. The game often has Miles shifting between English and Spanish, thus normalizing what is often seen as a

problematic element of Hispanic culture—the refusal to be monolingual in a country that prides itself on its preference towards English. Miles, who does not display Peter’s aptitude towards technical wizardry, is still curious towards science and surrounds himself with people who can help him. Miles’ best friend, Ganke Lee, creates an app for the young super-hero so that people can post problems that they see around town. The players get to choose how many, if any, to interact with. Like *Assassin’s Creed’s* quest system, the app acts as a “delivery device” for the game’s side-quest structure, allowing the player to engage with optional quests. Miles also has a friend, who we learn becomes the Tinkerer, a “villain,” born out of a desire to take down Roxxon Corporation, the game’s true enemies. Roxxon is poisoning the city with its Nu-Form energy. Miles, as Spider-Man while Peter is away from the city, wants to stop Roxxon, but discovers that one of his friends, whom he has lost touch with also has designs on stopping Roxxon. Phin, the former friend and confidant of Miles, was an avid science student, and many of the game’s collectibles (items that the player can optionally collect and interact with in order to receive some background about the item found or the context of the item’s creation) relate to Miles’s and Phin’s friendship and friendly rivalry in all science matters. Miles, upon finding one of these items, routinely notes how Phin surpassed him in that particular endeavor or how she was always so interested in learning more about some element of science. As both Miles and Phin have a strong African American/Afro-Hispanic heritage, this focus on technology, on science, and on the future is exactly the

type of melding of forward-facing ideologies and the African Diaspora that Afrofuturism creates in society.

Afrofuturism allows those of color to find themselves, or perhaps more accurately, a more idealized version of themselves in a game world. This could be a version of themselves who, unfettered by the cultural disadvantages often imposed on those of color, are able to actualize the best parts of themselves in the game world, allowing them to discover and integrate parts of their internal selves that have been minimized or lost through the continual need just to survive or subsist. Adam J. Banks argues, in his book *Digital Griots: African American Rhetoric in a Multimedia Age* (2011), that technology is a democratizing force that Afrofuturism uses help Black people move forward:

We are witnessing an information revolution—a revolution that is leading global transformation. People of African descent have always played pivotal roles in the history of technological revolutions—sometimes innovators and inventors, more frequently as laborers—and their labor permitted the wealth that spurred further technological advances. The social consequences of today’s information revolution include the suffering and economic insecurity of African Americans and others in the African diaspora and also dislocations among others in society. Our communities have been digitally divided, but we are dedicating ourselves to serve as a bridge over the river of that divide. Our social values are cyber democracy, collective intelligence, and information freedom. We embrace the

information revolution and dedicate our scholarship to academic excellence and social responsibility. We welcome others to join us in this endeavor. (109)

Adam Banks is one scholar who understands that technological advancement is one of the most important and fundamental forces that push society forward. To him, African Americans have always been a part of the future, even when invisible, and even when suffering from the hardships imposed by the hegemony. Banks even created an Afrofuturism course entitled “Afrofuturism: Communities, Technologies, Struggles” in order to ask “people to consider how technologies can be used, reimagined and redesigned to meet the needs of African American communities and [it] challenged people to develop futuristic visions for neighborhoods, cities, and the broader African American community” (70-71).

The Cultural Imperative of Video Games and Interactivity

Assassin’s Creed Origins and *Spider-Man Miles Morales* are integral to the discussion of Afrofuturism and empathy because both games feature a player character (the video game term for characters controlled by players versus non-player characters or characters controlled by AI) of color that does not conform to stereotypical representations of African Americans. Games like *Madden 22*, *Grand Theft Auto V*, and *Street Fighter*, offer representations of African Americans and of “Blackness” that are not representative of the richness of the African American and African Diaspora according to the study by Williams, et al., entitled, “The Virtual Census: Representations of Gender,

Race, and Age in Video Games.” This study, which looks at the ways in which representation occurs in video games, describes the landscape of video gaming in 2009. The authors highlighted several troubling trends, chief among them the “systematic over-representation of males, whites and adults and the systematic under-representation of females, Hispanics, Native Americans, children and the elderly” (815). However, the study notes that the same under-representation occurs for Black characters, who like Hispanics, are often relegated to secondary character status in video games (828).

Williams’s study is not the only one to explore how African Americans and Blacks are dehumanized in the context of the video game space. Vincent Cicchirillo, author of “Priming Stereotypical Associations: Violent Video Games and African American Depictions,” also investigates how Blackness is contextualized in video games. He notes that “critical analyses have suggested that certain video games present highly stereotypical images and story lines of African Americans and Black culture” (122). This is in addition to several studies showing that video game “magazines and covers” depict African Americans as either being violent, or only athletically inclined, or both (122). Cicchirillo builds upon Yee and Bailenson’s 2007 study to define the concept of “Media Priming,” also known as “priming” and the “Proteus Effect”:

One way that researchers have come to understand how self-representations in video games impact an individual’s behaviors in gaming environments is through the Proteus effect. The Proteus effect is such that individuals ‘conform to the expectations and stereotypes of the identity of their avatars’. This effect further

assumes that character or avatar appearance affects [an] individual's expectations about the behaviors and attitudes of their character" (123).

In other words, the way the character looks and acts, has an impact on the expectations of the player who is playing that character. Cicchirillo points specifically to four different studies¹ that explain and justify media priming and the Proteus effect. This idea of media priming is important to Cicchirillo because of his next major premise: that further studies show that "specifically, Caucasian players displayed more violent thoughts when playing as an African American character . . . [and] studies have demonstrated that Caucasians' contemporary stereotype of African Americans is highly negative (violent, criminal, and aggressive)" (124). Cicchirillo argues that this negative behavior is primarily due to "priming stereotypes" (124). However, as this research is not correlated specifically with video games, Cicchirillo questioned how the participant race interacts with avatar race to impact stereotypical thought and believes there needs to be more research in this area, especially in relation to the third person perspective commonly found in video games (124).

Games exist inside their own internal "universes" as both story (narrative) and game world/process (mechanics), but they also exist in conversation with what is occurring in the broader world. Salen and Zimmerman describe culture in regards to games: "cultural design schemas do *not* directly derive from the internal, intrinsic qualities of the games; rather, they come from the relationship between games and the larger contexts in which they are played" (507). Just as these contexts, be they

“ideological, practical, political, or even physical,” exist outside of the game world (either narrative or mechanics and process) (507). Yet, the key point is that games can either “reflect culture,” which is what the Williams study from 2009 argues happens in video games in a negative way, or games can “*transform* culture” (507). Salen and Zimmerman understand that the ability of the player to derive meaning from the act of play and interacting with the game, through narrative and/or game mechanics, creates a new and independent meaning outside of what the game developer might have intended or created (507). This interaction of meaning-making through play is crucial to how Afrofuturism and Afrofuturistic texts in the gaming landscape can transform culture. Salen and Zimmerman note that games and culture relate because “the word ‘culture’ commonly refers to all of the knowledge and values shared by a society or group, and often is used to refer collectively to a society and its way of life” (506). They argue that culture exists outside the game and interacts with it. Players are changed through game interaction, either from the culture presented in the game world, or through the narrative shifting their perspective outside of the world of the game (506). While acknowledging that culture is important to the game and to those playing the game and that there may be a multitude of meanings that can be generated from a game. So, how do we articulate which meanings are more valid and which ones are less valid? How can we actually know how and when a game, whether it be a video game or a traditional game, has cultural significance in its interaction with the broader society?

These questions are a touchstone of video game studies as articulated by scholars like Salen and Zimmerman. For the authors, it is rhetoric that helps to give shape to the communicative nature of video games. The authors posit that cultural rhetoric reveals deeper meanings, unknown or intentionally hidden, that can be discovered through detailed and systematic investigation:

Rhetoric . . . is a method of discussion or expression that contains underlying values or beliefs, a method that attempts to persuade others that it is correct . . . [and] applied to games, the organizing principle of cultural rhetoric reveals how games represent broad patterns of ideological value. The design of a game . . . is a representation of ideas and values of a particular time and place . . . [and] creating games is also creating culture, and therefore beliefs, ideologies, and values present within the culture will always be a part of a game, intended or not. (517)

Central to the discussion of the idea that Afrofuturism can help influence transmission of values is the idea that, while cultural rhetoric can uncover the underlying beliefs that are present in a “text,” (such as in a movie, video game, or other piece of media), so too can cultural rhetoric be *deliberately* “incorporated into a game design” (517). In other words, it is possible to embed new ideas into games that change the way the player will interact with the game. It is also possible to intentionally parody or subvert the traditional structures of the game or the cultural representation. Games that parody or subvert call attention to the old paradigms to force a critical reevaluation of old structures. The key is to decipher the cultural rhetorics that the game is presenting to decide whether it has

hidden meanings that need to be uncovered, or whether it is acting as a subversive agent. Salen and Zimmerman borrow from the scholar Brian Sutton-Smith to illustrate the seven ways that play is actualized: (1) Play as Progress, (2) Play as Fate, (3) Play as Power, (4) Play as Identity, (5) Play as the Imaginary, (6) Play as the Rhetoric of the Self, (7) Play as Frivolity (Salen and Zimmerman 519).

Afrofuturism and Afrofuturistic texts embrace Play as Identity, Play as the Imaginary, and Play as the Rhetoric of Self. While the other structures of play are important, the way these three particular structures of play are defined makes it clear that Afrofuturism focuses on these specific cultural rhetorics. Play as Identity is defined as “play [that] is means of confirming, maintaining, or advancing the identity of a community of players” (519). Afrofuturism is concerned with the ways in which African Americans and those of the African Diaspora are represented, particularly in the future. Many games feature a futuristic or science fiction focus, and those that do not often feature some element of fantasy or the speculative. Games, then, become a cultural vehicle through which Black people can be seen as part of the future. Within the structure of the game, Blacks, be they characters or players, can exercise an agency that they might not have in real-life. Afrofuturism also plays an important part of the explanation of the element of Play as the Imaginary, with its focus on “imagination, flexibility, and creativity. Play is synonymous with innovation” (519).

Game design is often hard and difficult, with some of the largest games taking hundreds of people and multiple years to complete. While some games can be simple,

modern games that are considered the biggest and most successful, like *Call of Duty* and *Grand Theft Auto*, often require years from conception to development to release. Games, even from their earliest iterations, have been seen as a medium of technological innovation, and often push the envelope in terms of creativity and flexibility.

Afrofuturism is concerned with the ways Blacks interact with the future and how they focus on forward moment rather than continually focusing on the injustices of the past as both *Assassin's Creed Origins* and *Spider-Man Miles Morales* are science fiction games (despite the seeming historical bent of the majority of the *Assassin's Creed Origins* narrative). To the extent that video games immerse players in an alternative reality video games focus on the future and Afrofuturism also focuses on the future, we see a forward movement in both areas that are intrinsically linked. Thus, both video games and Afrofuturism offer those from the African Diaspora the ability to be a part of the progressive movement to the betterment of society.

Finally, Play as Rhetoric of the Self, “[is that] play exists to evolve the self, by providing intrinsic experiences of pleasure, flexibility, relaxation, and escape, either through play itself, or through satisfaction of play performances” (519). African Americans and those from the African Diaspora have well documented instances in which their life experiences do not necessarily correlate to those experiences of other cultures. For instance, “food deserts” are often prevalent in African American communities. This is where it becomes hard for some members of the African American community to obtain the very food necessary for their survival, without having to spend

inordinate amounts of time and money to secure transportation to stores outside their communities (Local 3 News). This would be one example of African Americans having to struggle more than other communities and where video games might provide the relaxation or escape from these worldly problems. James Paul Gee in *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Literacy and Learning* (2007) argues that “active learning” requires three things: “*experiencing* the world in new ways, forming new *affiliations*, and *preparation* for future learning” (Gee). Gee understands the power inherent in video games to aid both learning and empathy in that video games require three separate *identities* to be formed by players:

First, there is a *virtual identity*: one’s identity as a virtual character in the virtual world . . . a second identity in playing a game . . . is a *real world identity*: namely, my own identity as “James Paul Gee,” a non-virtual person playing a computer game . . . [and] a third identity that is at stake in playing a game . . . is what I will call a *projective identity*, playing on two senses of the word “project,” meaning both “to project one’s values and desires onto the virtual character” and “seeing the virtual character as one’s own project in the making, a creature whom I imbue with a certain trajectory through time defined by my aspirations for what I want that character to be and become (within the limitations of her capacities, of course).” (Gee)

The projective identity, for Gee, was the hardest to develop, but in relation to Bayak of Siwa, Bayak is limited by his class (Medjay) and his heritage (Egyptian). However, while

both could have been limiting, as long as players, the non-virtual selves are transported into the world of virtual self, in this case Bayak, then the projective selves want to push Bayak through the narrative to achieve the best outcome for the virtual character of Bayak. The projective self, Gee argues, “goes beyond the confines of the game world and [begins to] enter the realm of a world of my own creation” (Gee). This is the power of new media—the limitations of the real world are overcome. Change happens, but revolutionary change never happens as quickly as it seems, as the seeds of revolution are often sowed in a myriad of ways that may go unseen until they erupt to the surface. The same is true for game worlds as they, while born from the infinite imagination, are fixed to the finite capacities of the computer system that houses them and/or interprets their game code. Of the three identities, only the projective one, like imagination itself, is boundless. One can imagine a self, an identity that is not available in the real world or the game world, and this empathetic act of creating a projective identity has profound meaning for the player:

This tripartite play of identities (a virtual identity, a real-world identity, and a projective identity) in the relationship “player as virtual character” is quite powerful. It transcends identification with characters in novels or movies, for instance, because it is both *active* (the player actively does things) and *reflexive*, in the sense that once the player has made some choices about the virtual character, the virtual character is now developed in a way that sets certain parameters about

what the player can do. The virtual character redounds back on the player and affects his or her future actions. (Gee)

Afrofuturism and the Afrofuturistic ideal enhances this look to the future by creating a possibility in minds of players that may not have existed before and posits a future that is post-racial, where old racial demarcations and barriers no longer exist. Empathetic representations like those found in *Assassin's Creed Origins* and *Spider-Man Miles Morales* help to foster empathetic relationships with characters that have the potential to affect players in future actions, once they have put down the keyboard or gamepads and turn off the game. This is the power that Afrofuturism affords and the potential that it holds.

The Nation has not yet found peace from its sins; the freedman has not yet found in freedom his promised land. Whatever of good may have come in these years of change, the shadow of a deep disappointment rests upon the Negro people,—a disappointment all the more bitter because the unattained ideal was unbounded save by the simple ignorance of a lowly people.

—*The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois

Chapter 4: Lift Every Voice: Afrofuturism and Cultural Rhetoric

As the outcry over police brutality and the resulting protests in the United States in the summer of 2020 indicate, social concerns for people of color, specifically African Americans, have reached a tipping point where many, who might not have thought of themselves as politically active, have begun to speak out about the injustices that they witnessed in the US. The massive, worldwide adoption of cell phones and surveillance cameras that can potentially record every interaction between an African American or person of color and the police, or members of the public who harbor racist or bigoted perspectives, show the discrepancies between what America says are its core values versus the way certain segments within society choose to express those values. The rise of the cellphone camera and the structures that undergird the camera, such as the internet

and the twenty-four-hour news cycle clearly illustrate the hypocrisies that exist within American society today in regards to a host of social issues, including race and racialized hierarchies.

Rhetoric allows one to study the nature of communication through the lens of ideas. As discussed in *Rhetorical Criticism*, 2nd Ed. (1996) by Sonja Foss, ideologies are sets of “ideas, assumptions, beliefs, values, or interpretations of the world by which a culture or group operates” (291). Foss terms this overarching idea of studying how ideologies inform communicative acts as “ideological criticism” (291). Under the broader banner of ideological criticism are smaller sub-categories that Foss describes, including, but not limited to, structuralism, semiotics, Marxism, poststructuralism, and postmodernism (291-296). While Afrofuturism may impact most of these sub-categories in various rhetorical concepts, the one that seems most closely aligned with Afrofuturism is that of cultural studies, specifically cultural rhetoric (293) which is:

directed at uncovering oppressive relations and discovering available forces with the potential to lead to liberation or emancipation . . . some ideologies get privileged over others in a culture, and ideologies that present oppositional or alternative perspectives get repressed . . . in other words, one ideology comes to constitute a hegemony in the culture. Hegemony is the privileging of the ideology of one group over that of other groups; it thus constitutes a kind of social control, a means of symbolic coercion, or a form of domination of the

more powerful groups over the ideologies of those with less power. (Foss 293-294)

Foss argues that hegemony privileges the views of “certain interests” over the views of others, specifically focusing on the domain of power—who has it and who gets to exercise it. According to Foss, “hegemonic ideology represents experience in the ways that support the interests of those with more power” (294).

This ideology of a mono-culture versus a plurality of voices has broad implications for America in that race has often been at the forefront for determining power structures, even when legislation have seemingly removed such outmoded ideologies, such as enslavement or Jim Crow laws. Foss foregrounds this argument with a masterful example that seems insightful: “In a culture where the ideology of racism is hegemonic, for example, the privilege accorded to whites seems normal, as does the lack of opportunity accorded to individuals of other races; if practices in the culture concerning people of color are questioned, the questions are seen as abnormal” (295). Resistance to the dominant ideology, in Foss’s words, “is muted or contained—its impact is limited—by a variety of sophisticated rhetorical strategies” (295). Foss argues that in order to remain the dominant ideology, the hegemony asserts its dominance by continually and vigorously constructing, renewing, reinforcing, and defending specific “rhetorical practices and strategies” (295). In this way, the hegemony is perpetuated and all that question or challenge the dominant ideology become abnormal and subject to censure.

Foss argues that rhetoricians and critics are able to “make visible” the dominant ideology by discovering how the ideology gets “embedded in an artifact [along with] the ideologies that are being muted in it” (295-296). This work is vitally important to Foss who claims that “the ultimate goal of the ideological critic . . . is the emancipation of human potential that is being thwarted by an existing ideology or ideologies” (296).

Afrofuturism is uniquely suited to challenge existing ideologies and therefore emancipate human potential. to individuals or groups and allows this emancipation of human potential. Ytasha Womack, in *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (2013), notes that her induction into the concepts of Afrofuturism did not occur with theorists or curriculum, but through other college students who shared a love of both “Black history and science fiction and [who] were rooted in the belief that more art and critical theory on the subject could spawn social change” (20).

Foss asserts that critics of dominant ideologies are essential to lifting the silence of many of those who have no voice to speak out against the hegemony or who have been systematically “unvoiced,” their voices taken when they dared to defy the hegemony. Womack agrees with Foss, but sees that Afrofuturism is the tool of critique and the means by which the silenced and unvoiced in the African American and Black Diasporic communities might find a way to speak out against hegemonic practices that have affected them in the past and, unfortunately, continue to affect them in the present. The critique of Afrofuturism may shift social attitudes and prevailing ideologies so as to make hegemonic practices that have limited those from the Black Diaspora a thing of the past:

There's a burgeoning group of professors . . . who are dedicated to the study of works that analyze dynamics of race and culture specific to the experiences of Black people through sci-fi and fantasy works. They use it as a platform to assess humanity issues—including war, apartheid, and genocide, while also exploring class issues, spirituality, philosophy, and history. Others reevaluate the use of technology, its use in society, and its role in the creation of art as a process. Still others look to these analyses as methodologies to free people from mental blocks and societal limitations. But each . . . prioritizes the reenvisioning of people of color in a shared harmonious future free of race-based power issues . . . they create a future with people of color integrally involved—a demonstration that counters pop culture's relative failure to do so. (23-24)

Many scholars, not necessarily those who focus on sci-fi and fantasy, work to make ideologies of hegemony, including race, visible, and, if necessary, to undermine or deconstruct hegemonies. One such scholar is Adam J. Banks, whose book, *Digital Griots: African American Rhetoric in a Multimedia Age* (2011), discusses the progressive ways in which African Americans can use rhetoric. Banks articulates the idea of the griot, a catalyst, drawn from African American archetypes, like the DJ, or the Preacher, who can affect change on an individual, communal, and in some instances, societal level. As Banks articulates, “my goal in the writing classroom has always been to make students aware of the possibilities and responsibilities of writing as social actions” (Banks 64). Banks taught courses that relied heavily on community involvement and community

outreach in the Syracuse, New York area where he was teaching at the time. He focused on a topic that he felt would be relatable to the community that he wanted to reach, titling his course: “What’s Goin’ On? The Music, Culture, and Politics of the Soul Era” (67).

While community engagement and teaching interest aligned in the formation of the course, Banks expressed a desire to touch on deeper values and concerns for the African American community by using a paradigm with which they were already knowledgeable and comfortable in their daily lives:

I organized the course around the soul era to try to tap into this observation, hoping to use music as a bridge to engage larger issues of culture, politics, and activism . . . I rather consciously employed a rhetoric of nostalgia . . . tapping into the “old school” ethos that has operated over the last ten to fifteen years . . . as not only a reclamation of soul and funk music but also a search through that music for values, mores, and commitment of what now seems to have been a better time.

(63)

Banks consciously taps into how his community used soul music to fight prejudice, White supremacy, and the “Jim Crow” ideology. He quite explicitly says that corporations, who would be part of the new hegemony, have acted to “jack” this “old school ethos” through the manufacturing of Hip Hop into a corporate selling machine for their products and commercialism (63). People in the Black community who were older and knew of the music from that time responded to that hijacking by simply declaring themselves “old school” and standing by the music of their youth rather than embracing

the music of the younger generation because, to them, old school meant “a return to large-scale Black activism, for stable families, for a feeling of cultural unity, for a world before AIDS and ravages of deindustrialization” (64). Banks made a conscious choice to put African American concerns first, namely music, at the expense of the broader hegemonies, in order to challenge the dominant narratives about African Americans and to, as alluded earlier, make students aware that, through writing, they too have the capacity to challenge hegemonic (64). To that end, Banks developed several courses that enabled him to help students learn about African American rhetorical traditions, Black oral traditions such as folktales, work songs, spirituals and freedom songs, and “intergenerational” courses that merged hip-hop with the works of Civil Rights legends such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X (70-72). In addition, Banks created a class that was designed to show how Afrofuturism might help mitigate the power and privilege of hegemonic thought, particularly in the Western world. His class, “Afrofuturism: Communities, Technologies, Struggle” asked people to consider how technologies can be used, reimagined, and redesigned to meet the needs of African American communities and challenged people to develop futuristic visions for neighborhoods, cities, and the broader African American community (71). Here, Banks shows that Afrofuturism can be a force for confronting and ideally, overcoming the hegemonic barriers instituted by prejudicial practices such as redlining and the digital divide.

Afrofuturism, as an aesthetic, asserts that the future is “undefined” and is not subject to the same requirements and inertia of the past, nor the status quo of the present. The future is a mass of potentialities, and wrestling with problems and issues that affect us in the present may allow those without access to power to achieve a greater equilibrium so that all members have the *potential* to achieve. Womack, like Banks, argues that technology, a forward-looking and futuristic component of Afrofuturism, has the potential to bring about a more equitable landscape:

Suddenly, with the Internet [sic], the cost to reach an audience, sell services, and post information was minimized. Moreover, the use of technology, particularly social media in African American households, outmatched the general population . . . How could these tools be used to level the playing field . . . art and literature created in Afrofuturistic views were obvious inspirations for present-day social change, technology, and the reenvisioning of the future . . . Not surprisingly, the Internet and today’s technology are actually pushing the ideas in Afrofuturism forward. (48-49)

This idea that technology, rhetoric, social change, and Afrofuturism are linked is the rationale that Banks gives for developing and teaching the classes as he does. He hopes to show that writing is a “multimodal, rhetorically based” endeavor in which the oral tradition, the print tradition and the digital tradition are linked. Banks also hopes to inspire greater cooperation and participation in technology, education, and society for one’s self so as to encourage “resistance to orders of domination” (78-79). Each of these

elements is necessary to wage effective warfare against hegemonic ideologies that are still prevalent in society, despite legislation to alleviate the problem. Banks also believes that it is important to “build a community by using the writing, sharing and disseminating of stories that participants tell, write and collect” (79). The idea writing, sharing, and disseminating stories that interrupt the narrative of the hegemonic culture may be Afrofuturism’s greatest triumph. Returning to Lisa Blankenship’s argument in *Changing the Subject: A Theory of Rhetorical Empathy* (2019), namely, “when we decide to listen to someone’s stories and attempt to discern what is motivating them, we choose to be vulnerable” (121). While Blankenship argues that this is often problematic for those already marginalized as they are among the most vulnerable in society, she also notes that stories are key when empathy is involved. “Rhetorical empathy . . . forces us to engage with the Other in the form of real people with real stories . . .” (119). When combined with an image, especially a moving image (such as *Black Panther*), that force intensifies. Thus, the Other moves from the realm of stereotype and bias to a real human being with real motivations to explore. Afrofuturism gives us new stories to explore the condition of the Other and to alter the dynamic from misguided and hurtful narratives of the past, to a potential future that is much more equitable to all, based on achievement rather than hegemony.

Combating Afropessimism: The Call for Afrofuturism

Afrofuturism calls forth a timeframe for the audience, the future, and asks those in the present to imagine a time not defined by the past or past events, so that the future can have a better and brighter outcome for all of us than it might have otherwise. However, where Afrofuturism looks to the future, there is a movement that looks at present actions and wonders if things will ever change, or if we are doomed to continuously repeat the errors and mistakes of the past, just in different settings with different actors. This idea has become known as *Afropessimism* and one of its main proponents is Frank B. Wilderson III, author of *Afropessimism* (2021). *Kirkus Reviews* describes *Afropessimism* as “a compelling, profoundly unsettling blend of memoir and manifesto that proposes that —by design—matters will never improve for African Americans” (*Kirkus Reviews*). In “An Afropessimist: On the Year Since George Floyd was Murdered,” published in the June 14th, 2021, issue of *The Nation*, Wilderson advances the view is that the situation for African Americans is endemic to Western society, not to concepts as simple as racism or White supremacy or even capitalism, patriarchy, or colonialism (25). In the same breath, Wilderson argues that it is not even similar to other historical precedents of oppression, but rather it is “its own beast” and that there is a concept called “Anti-Blackness” that simply *is*, and he despairs that we will never rid the world of its ravages (25).

Wilderson argues that the various ideas that make up the concept of racism, such as class oppression, White supremacy, and the exploitation of the working classes, all do one thing: hide the underlying issue of “anti-Black violence” and “disguise” Black suffering and rage. For Wilderson, Anti-Blackness goes beyond mere racism, but says that there is a part of society that believes that Black bodies simply should not exist, have no redeeming purpose in society, and that their problems and their suffering is to be ignored or minimized.

Worse yet, according to Wilderson, is the idea that both the police and the political left work to constrain Blackness (25). While their aims often run counter to one another, they both directly impact the Black community. According to Wilderson, the state “kills and contains Black bodies [while] the left kills and contains Black desire” (25). Wilderson contends that it is the state, under the guise of the police, who often perpetrate some of the most heinous violence against Blacks and Black bodies while the political left tempers Black rage and anger in such a way as to leave it denuded and impotent. Wilderson remarks that he saw a world transformed into something purer by the abolishment of police after George Floyd’s murder. He was invigorated as the calls to “abolish” police surged, but was disappointed that the political left softened the rage and pain felt by the African American community, so that “abolish mutated into ‘defund,’ ‘defund’ melted into ‘delay,’ and the zeitgeist shifted from unfettered Black rage to sober tutorials on activist websites . . . Black death . . . once again was weaponized by our allies to incarcerate Black demands, kill Black desire, and soothe the

psyches of everyone but us” (27). Wilderson, in articulating Afropessimist ideation, postulates that while the police want to subject and subjugate Black bodies to the systemic control of the state, it is the political left actually *fears* the desires of the Black community and works to, often unknowingly, *mitigate or contain* Black thought and Black suffering. Wilderson explains that the political left is invested in working side-by-side with African Americans, and even actively encourages such collaborations, only so long as there is not also a reminder of the ways in which the past has haunted Blacks and that they do not also refer to endured trauma, no matter how that knowledge of the trauma could shape or change the collaboration (27). Wilderson concludes his article, not on an air of hope and optimism, as is indicated at the end of *Black Panther* where T’Challa and Shuri look upon the blighted Black neighborhood and envision a Wakandan Cultural Center reaching out to give hope and opportunity to a community in desperate need, but rather with the hurt and pain of a man torn down after so many senseless acts of anti-Black violence perpetrated by the state and the denial of Black suffering by those he called allies. His final sentences read almost like an epitaph: “I closed my eyes and tried to see that Black, intrepid, rusty-butt boy who answered to my name. I need to recall his optimism and his smile before he felt the world kneeling on his neck” (27).

Wilderson is not the only contemporary African American writer to have written from an Afropessimistic perspective. Even an author like Ta-Nehisi Coates, best known for his work as a correspondent for *The Atlantic* and for his reinvention of the *Black Panther* comic book title, has struggled with the idea of Afropessimism, even if he has

not specifically termed it as such. In his book, *Between the World and Me* (2015), Coates describes growing up in the streets of Baltimore and coming to understand that to be Black in his specific time and place was to be subjected to a fear that meant that his life could be taken from him in a multitude of ways. Coates says that “to be Black in the Baltimore of my youth was to be naked before the elements of the world, before all the guns, fists, knives, crack, rap, and disease. The nakedness is not an error or pathology. The nakedness is a correct and intended result of policy, the predictable upshot of people forced to live under fear. The law did not protect us” (17).

Here Coates echoes Wilderson, stating explicitly that “anti-Blackness” is not an accident, but consciously encoded into Western civilization through policy, laws, and unspoken ideologies. For Coates, Afropessimism comes not only from the state, although he does believe that the state, under the guise of the law, has become a terrorizing force, but rather from the simple terror of not being able to control one’s own Black body. Coates describes a story in which he, while in the sixth grade, learned the lesson that his body, and by extension, his life was not his own to control. Coates tells of another boy, for reasons unclear to him even to this day, brandished a gun, and that, “in his small eyes I saw a surging rage that could, in an instant, erase my body . . . the boy with small eyes stood across from me holding my entire body in his small hands . . . I remember being amazed that death could so easily rise up from the nothing of a boyish afternoon, billow up like fog” (19-20).

Coates was unable to process images on television that depicted White families, particularly boys, for whom death held no tangible or real threat. Like Wilderson, Coates also believes that there are two actors that help keep African Americans and Blacks from being able to truly actualize their power. The first of them are the “crews” who are, “young men who’d transmuted their fear into rage . . . they would break your jaw, stomp you face, and shoot you down to feel that power, to revel in the might of their own bodies” (22). Schools are the other institution, sponsored by the state, that Coates also describes as hemming him in and keeping him trapped: “The streets were not my only problem. If the streets shackled my right leg, the schools shackled my left” (25). For Coates, the schools’ trap lay in ambiguity. He found that he could learn the correct “language” of the street, but he questioned the “correctness” of the ideas in school, but was never given a satisfactory answer. Why was nonviolence taught during Black History month when so much of his world was violent? What did it mean to be successful? How was the French language he was learning in school in any way relevant to the living and surviving that he had to do on a daily basis (25-26)?

Much like Wilderson, Coates experienced a form of Afropessimism in which he came to equate the schools as a state agent and the streets as a cultural agent, all designed to keep him from actualizing his full potential, and promising violent, coercive action should he deviate from his prescribed path:

I came to see the streets and the schools as arms of the same beast. One enjoyed the official power of the state while the other enjoyed its implicit action. But fear

and violence were the weaponry of both. Fail in the streets and the crews would catch you slipping and take your body. Fail in the schools and you would be suspended and sent back to those same streets, where they would take your body. And I began to see these two arms in relation—those who failed in the schools justified their destruction in the streets. The society could say, “he should have stayed in school,” and then wash its hands of him. (33)

Coates explains that Western society, particularly American society, has no place for African Americans, especially those who do not conform. Coates, like Wilderson, seems to see a cultural prison engrained within the very fabric of society and culture that refuses to allow African Americans a place in the world even when they conform. The Afropessimism perspective seems to leave little, if any, room for hope that efforts to challenge racism will affect meaningful change.

Afropessimism is not a new phenomenon and that it does have a solution, namely empathy. As Susan Lanzoni notes in *Empathy: A History* (2018) Kenneth B. Clark, a social psychologist was concerned with the social problems of racism and prejudice for the African American (then termed Negro) people. Clark wrote a book entitled *Dark Ghetto* (1965) in which the preface contains the words of African American people of the time. While many of the stories are heart-wrenching, including that of a woman who was spit on in her finest Sunday clothes, one is particularly striking in regards to the discussion of Afrofuturism working as a corrective to Afropessimism: “A lot of times when I’m working, I become as despondent as hell and I feel like crying. I’m not a man,

none of us are men!” (qtd. in Lanzoni 216). Clark, an academic, was “among a small group of psychologists dedicated to the amelioration of social problems” and felt that “empathy was not a matter of sentimentality or pity, but a conduit to an objective understanding of the experiences of those with little power and on the receiving end of discrimination” (217).

Clark articulated a possible cause of racism and its effects on both the groups discriminated against as well those in power who discriminate. Lanzoni describes Clark’s findings in which Clark noted that “Racism was a by product of the cultural pattern of striving for status and success, coupled with a need for conformity . . . Clark insisted that prejudice was not opposed to the American way of life but inherent in it” (235). Clark’s damning indictment of how prejudice seems inextricably linked with American society is what both Wilderson and Coates illustrate in their own stories. Both seem to see, at the very edges of American society, how American culture and Western culture seek to contain and destroy anything that is remotely tied to “Blackness” if it cannot be exploited in a capitalistic sense. Both Wilderson and Coates articulate the idea that Black bodies only have some value when they are something that can be exploited in some way. When Black bodies are not available to be exploited, they become a threat or a nuisance to be contained. Though both Wilderson and Coates believe that the state, through the police and through the educational system plays a major role in that containment, both also see a cultural component involved as well, determined to keep those with Black skin frustrated and unable to access the “American Dream.” This institutional frustration is intentional so

as to deny them the ability to threaten the capitalistic success of the hegemony. For Wilderson and Coates, this hegemony is all pervasive and continues even through present day. Wilderson takes aim at the media and social media when he argues that the message of Black Americans in Minneapolis, incensed by the killing of George Floyd, had their message co-opted and watered down, in order to “win the hearts and minds of Middle Americans as they watched us being gunned down on Instagram and the news” (27). Coates is much more raw, having discovered the death of a close friend at the hands of a police department that Coates claims has had many negative interactions with males of color. Coates says:

I knew that Prince [Jones] was not killed by a single officer so much as he was murdered by his country and all the fears that have marked it from birth . . . the truth is that the police reflect America in all of its will and fear . . . the abuses that have followed from these [criminal justice] policies are the product of democratic will . . . This officer, given maximum power, bore minimum responsibility. He was charged with nothing. He was punished by no one. He returned to his work.
(77-80)

For Wilderson and Coates, then, this idea of anti-Blackness is omni-present within Western society. However, Clark believed that empathy could be brought to bear to help assuage the problem of racism, prejudice, and anti-Blackness. Lanzoni describes a moment when Clark took a critic to task for not being able to empathize with the characters in a play describing the plight of Black Americans—Lanzoni notes that Clark

believed that “the critic [was] simply unable to ‘project oneself into the unpleasant experiences of another’” (236). Clark then “exhorted his white liberal colleagues to find the ground of mutual respect that crossed racial lines, rooted in an underlying similarity of the human condition—which he called ‘empathy’ . . . which was intelligent, measured, and reasonable . . . [and] leveled power imbalances and formed a conduit to the recognition of the ‘common predicament’ of humans” (Lanzoni 238-239). Lanzoni continues in the chapter to describe Clark’s continuing career and calls for empathy. She notes that though he also grew more *pessimistic* about how power expressed itself within Western culture as the Civil Rights movement came to the fore, he succeeded in calling for empathy for a time, and then faded away from the forefront of American politics. However, Lanzoni makes sure to note that Clark never moved away from his position that *empathy could redress* the power structures within American and Western culture (249-250).

Every Shut Eye Ain’t Sleep: The Summer of 2020

African Americans have had a troubled history with police officers in the United States of America. Historically, there have been a multitude of African American deaths during interactions with the police.

However, the rise of the internet gave a platform to share more and more of these accounts of interactions between members of the Black community and police officers and other community members. Smart phones, with their cameras and an easy connection

to the internet, have also contributed to the rise of documentation of sometimes uncomfortable, sometimes racist, and sometimes criminal interactions. These interactions, now caught on camera video and shared on social media platforms, have often gone “viral,” or have caught the attention of the public, and sparked debate, widespread protests, and even political movements such as Black Lives Matter. Many hope to bring attention to these problematic interactions and to find solutions that will end the vicious cycle in which interactions with officers, and sometimes members of the public, all too often end in death for an African American or Black person, and very often with little to no consequences for the killers.

While it is important to be clear that not all police officers are part of the problem, and that not everyone is a racist, it is just as important to understand that, especially as articulated by Afropessimists, some officers, as actors for the state, work to reinforce the *dominant hegemony* rather than the laws themselves. Working to reinforce the dominant hegemony is a problem for society when the foundations of western democracy and social order are that there are no social striations between citizens of the state. The striations are supposed to come from the individual achievement and attainment of citizens. This is unlike monarchies, dictatorships, and other forms of government based on position, class, or status. It is the law and the fair application of the law that defines social order, but when “problem officers” do not follow the law and choose to exercise power in an unfair, unjust, and abusive way, then these acts often erode confidence in the very agency designed to protect its citizens.

While a complete catalog of potential deaths of African Americans attributed to various police agencies across America would be far too numerous to list, and beyond the scope of this project, it is important to reflect on some of the most recent and high-profile deaths that have sparked civil protests and organized movements not seen since the Civil Rights era in order to get a sense of why some scholars see movements like Afrofuturism as potential solutions to the underlying social issues that a lack of empathy engenders.

While the following list is not comprehensive, nor exhaustive, it is still important to note the context in which many African Americans, especially Black males, find themselves in the late 2000s, 2010s, and early 2020s in order understand the problems still faced by the African American community and why a corrective agent, such Afrofuturism, is needed. Many of these figures have ignited a nationwide conversation about the nature of race relations in contemporary American society.

- On January 1, 2009, Oscar Grant was “pulled by police from a Bay Area Rapid Transit . . . and killed by Johannes Mehserle in one of the first police shootings captured on video by bystanders” (Meier).
- On July 17, 2014, Eric Garner was killed by a police officer using a choke hold after “uttering the words, ‘I can’t breathe’ 11 times” (BBC).

- On November 22, 2014, Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old boy, was shot and killed by an officer after pointing a toy gun at officers (BBC).
- On April 12, 2015, Freddie Gray “died after suffering major spinal injuries while being transported in a Baltimore police van in 2015” (Meier).
- On December, 26, 2015, Bettie Jones was “struck by a bullet from Chicago officer Robert Rialmo, who was responding to a domestic dispute at a neighbor’s house that also left 19-year-old Quintonio LeGrier dead” (Meier).
- On July 6, 2016, Philando Castile, who was legally licensed to carry a weapon which was on him at the time, was shot “as he was reaching for his license, according to his girlfriend” who live-streamed the encounter on Facebook (BBC).
- On March 18, 2018, Stephon Clark was shot “at least seven times in Sacramento, California” by police officers who felt their lives were in danger, but no gun was found at the scene, only a mobile phone (BBC).
- On September 6, 2018, Botham Jean was shot by an off-duty police officer, Amber Guyger, “who said she mistook his apartment for her own” (Meier).

- On October 12, 2019, Atatiana Jefferson was babysitting her “8-year-old nephew . . . when white Fort Worth police officer Aaron Dean shot and killed her through a back window of her home while responding to a call about an open front door” (Meier).
- On August 24, 2019, Elijah McClain “died . . . when police in Colorado used a stranglehold to arrest him and paramedics injected him with an excessive dose of a powerful sedative” (Meier).

While these events primed the rest of America, and the world, to recognize the injustices incurred by the African American community on a regular basis, whether it be at the hands of other citizens or law enforcement designated to protect and serve the community, these are by no means the only injustices that have occurred in recent years. Indeed, it was the totality of these events that both lead to formation of the Black Lives Matter movement and helped ignite the massive protests that were sparked by three deaths in the African American community in 2020.

It was in the summer of 2020, with a pandemic raging and people isolating, causing people to consume more media, that America witnessed three horrific examples of racial inequality and brutality enacted against three of its citizens. These three incidents, by themselves, were yet more tragic instances in which African Americans are often killed through extra-legal means. However, taking all three as a whole, with all of

them happening ~~in~~ within a seven-month timeframe, many across America saw the same disturbing pattern of Black lives lost that many Afropessimists have been decrying for years. Only in 2020, there was finally the evidence, through camera phones, the internet, and social media, to finally understand that Black lives, for some in the US and the West, really do not matter if it means protecting the prevailing hegemony found in America from African Americans in some way, even if that way ends up killing those very same citizens and denying those citizens even their basic humanity.

2020, Summer of Our Discontent, Act I: Ahmaud Arbery

Ahmaud Arbery was an avid jogger, who was ultimately killed for his passion for running, just as much as he was killed because the culture of his community dictated that having Black skin meant having criminal skin. In his own community, Arbery was “allowed” to be a stereotype, but not allowed to be a man, nor a fellow human being deserving of respect, or ultimately, his life.

Arbery was a twenty-five-year-old Black man who “was chased by armed white residents of a South Georgia neighborhood,” and who died after being shot three times with a shotgun (Victor and Morales). The killing of Ahmaud Arbery occurred on February 28th, 2020, but it took four months before three men were arrested in connection with his death. Based on the account of friends and family, Arbery liked to stay in shape and often jogged in and around his neighborhood (Victor and Morales). However, according to Richard Fausset, a reporter for the *New York Times* and one of the

original reporters of the story on a nationwide level, even before the story gained traction on the internet and social media, “the reaction to the story was pretty strong” (Fausset). However, with the pandemic and the lockdown keeping protests from occurring in any large-scale way, Fausset wondered if the story would attract attention. When the video of the shooting captured by one of the men involved with chasing Arbery was released online and went viral, Fausset noted that “that started to change everything” (Fausset). In his interview, Fausset describes, in detail, what the video shows in regards to the final moments of Mr. Arbery’s life. The importance of the video, however, is its subtext. While the video evidence is important, it is the discrepancies in the report provided to the police by the McMichaels that is most concerning as it appears that they might not have been entirely truthful in their depiction of the events that unfolded that day. It appears that they might have presented the facts so as to cast themselves in a more favorable light:

Well, it appears there’s some contradiction in the initial story that Greg McMichael laid out in the initial police report. In it, Mr. McMichael said that he and his son pulled up beside Ahmaud Arbery. And they shouted “stop,” and they’d been shouting it before. And it was that moment that Travis McMichael gets out of the truck with his shotgun. But the video shows that they were actually waiting for him in the truck. He [Arbery] was being blocked in because you had a third man, the man with the cell phone video, who was chasing him. (Fausset)

One of the primary reasons that this is important is that according to a memo from George Barnhill, a district attorney in Georgia who later recused himself from the case, it was this video along with the testimony of the McMichael's which laid out "extensive justification—legal justification" on why no one should be arrested or charged for Arbery's killing. Barnhill argues that Ahmaud Arbery committed burglary, that the pursuit was justified under Georgia's Citizen's Arrest law, and that Travis McMichael was justified in shooting Ahmaud Arbery because Arbery had grabbed the gun and started the fight, thereby allowing the use of "deadly force" (Fausset). However, the video does not corroborate Barnhill's interpretation of the shooting. If anything, the video indicates that Ahmaud Arbery, who was unarmed, attempted to avoid the confrontation. However, he had limited options based on the pickup truck blocking one possible avenue of egress and the person's vehicle who was following and taking the cellphone video, blocking another possible egress.

It is this second interpretation of the video that has troubled so many viewers, including celebrities such as LeBron James, politicians such as Stacey Abrams (Democratic Gubernatorial candidate), Brian Kemp (Georgia's Republican Governor), and Joe Biden (the Democratic Presidential candidate at the time). One unnamed viewer quoted in the interview says succinctly and powerfully: "This is not murder. This was an assassination" (Fausset). This idea of "assassination" illustrates the narrative power of the video to change the minds of the people who view it. To Fausset, the video changed the narrative of the story completely: "I mean, it's one thing to read about a man struggling

for his life and being shot and killed. And I think, just emotionally, it's a totally different story when you see it . . . the idea of an unarmed man out for a jog being chased down and killed by armed civilians, no matter what he was doing in the midst of the jog, is really what's resonated widely. And in fact, it's become very much a rallying cry" (Fausset).

What makes Ahmaud Arbery's killing so tragic, in Fausset's mind, is that it does not come as any great shock to people who understand the historical context of the American South and the racial animosity underpinning the shooting. Earlier in the interview, while explaining a trip to the neighborhood where the shooting took place, Fausset described the hostility he encountered just by walking in the neighborhood. He met a couple in the neighborhood who "had already made up their mind [sic] that Ahmaud Arbery deserved what he had gotten" (Fausset). While this view might not represent a majority of those who live in the community, it does illustrate the divide that exists between many who live in a post-racial America where race is not supposed to matter, especially in the South. Some people seem to harbor an innate suspicion that crime and criminality are inextricably linked with race about African Americans. This racial animosity precludes any empathetic expression towards African Americans even when empathy appears to be justified.

The *BBC News* story, "Ahmaud Arbery: What Do We Know About the Case," published in June of 2020, lays out a comprehensive listing of all the facts known up to the time of the article's publication. It specifically notes the burglary allegations implicit

in what the neighbors describe as Ahmaud Arbery's actions. It notes that *CBS News* obtained 911 emergency calls around the time of the incident. One of the calls, from a neighbor, says that a "Black man" was seen inside a building site where a home was "under construction," and that the man was "running down the street," even though the caller acknowledged that the man wasn't trying to break into the house: "No, it's all open, it's under construction" (BBC "Ahmaud Arbery"). The dispatcher then asks about criminality: "I just need to know what he did wrong. Was he just on the premises and not supposed to be?" and the caller replies: "He's been caught on the camera a bunch of times before at night. It's kind of an ongoing thing out here" (BBC "Ahmaud Arbery").

However, the homeowner of the house in question has made it clear that there was no evidence of theft from the property: "I don't want it to be put out and misused and misinterpreted for people to think that I had accused Mr. Arbery of stealing or robbery, because I never did" (BBC "Ahmaud Arbery"). Each one of the above incidents points to the ways in which, even without any concrete evidence, anything that seemed criminal in behavior was attributed to Ahmaud Arbery in the minds of many of the residents in the community.

George Barnhill, former district attorney was apparently blinded by race in this case when he refused to offer legal justification for the arrest warrant for the McMichaels, because as Fausset notes, "[Barnhill's] argument was that Mr. Arbery had committed a burglary, and that the men who pursued him were justified in pursuing him under Georgia's Citizen Arrest law" (Fausset). Barnhill took this action even though the

homeowner in question never specifically filed a burglary report. Barnhill's action contradicts one of the American judicial system's core foundations: one is "innocent until proven guilty" ("Presumption of Innocence"). Arbery's status as an "Other" in the community marked him as the embodiment of the community's animus for due to his difference. Arbery is dead, without being charged for a crime. Arbery was never *formally accused* of doing anything wrong in a legal sense as there were no outstanding warrants for his arrest. Yet, Ahmaud Arbery was charged, tried, and convicted by two men in a pick-up truck and another with a cell phone. It was a modern-day lynching in the state of Georgia in the 21st century. Arbery, a citizen of the US, was denied the "presumption of innocence" due to the color of his skin.

Ahmaud Arbery was an unfortunate victim of an institutionalized racism that immediately ascribed criminality to his behavior because he was Black. In essence, Arbery died because people in his neighborhood had little to no empathy for him as a human being. Arbery died because he was denied the empathy due to him as a member of the human community.

2020, The Summer of Discontent, Act II: Breonna Taylor

A lack of empathy combined with institutional racism was a determining factor in the fate of Breonna Taylor, who was another African American killed in 2020. Taylor's death was particularly shocking because of who Taylor was and how her killing occurred. According to the *New York Times*, "Shortly after midnight on March 13 [2020],

Louisville police officers executing a search warrant used a battering ram to enter the apartment of Ms. Taylor, a 26-year-old emergency room technician” (Oppel et al.). As an emergency technician, Breonna Taylor worked in both routine and critical care situations, but her status as an African American, did not afford her the empathy that might be shown to similar workers in her occupation who might have found themselves in a similar situation. *BBC News* has laid out a concise description of the incident that led to Breonna Taylor’s death:

Plain clothes police, executing a search warrant, forced their way into the apartment where Breonna Taylor was in bed with her boyfriend, Kenneth Walker, shortly after midnight. Mr. Walker fired a shot from his licensed gun, later telling police he thought that Ms Taylor’s ex-boyfriend, Jamarcus Glover, had broken in. Officials say that Mr. Walker’s bullet struck Mr. Mattingly [one of the detectives serving the warrant] in the leg. The three officers returned fire, discharging 32 rounds, according to a ballistics report from the FBI. Ms. Taylor was shot amid the commotion and died on the hallway floor. (BBC “Breonna Taylor”)

On the surface, Sergeant Mattingly claimed that Breonna’s death was nothing more than a tragic mistake: “Sergeant Mattingly had previously told *ABC News* and *The Louisville Courier Journal* in an interview broadcast on Oct. 21 [2020] that the case was not comparable to those of other Black people whose killings have become the focus of national protests. ‘This is not relatable to a George Floyd. This is nothing like it. It’s not an Ahmaud Arbery. It’s nothing like it . . . This is not us going hunting somebody down,

this is not kneeling on a neck” (Booker and Treisman). In media appearances, Sergeant Mattingly described the incident as altogether different from that of Arbery and Floyd, indicating that he did not feel that any injustice had been committed by himself or other officers on the scene.

These statements reveal a mindset in these officers that is eerily similar to the mindset displayed by the residents of Ahmaud Arbery’s neighborhood, in that there seems to have been a presumption of guilt because Breonna Taylor was Black and had been involved with a man who was suspected of criminal activity. As reported by the BBC, a search warrant was obtained on the night that Breonna Taylor was killed because “authorities believed her ex-boyfriend, Jamarcus Glover, was involved in a drug ring and had used her apartment to hide narcotics. No drugs were found at the property” (BBC “Breonna Taylor”). As with the Ahmaud Arbery incident, the link between racial profiling and suspected criminal activity inhibited a normal empathetic response toward the life of Taylor and her current boyfriend, Kenneth Walker. Mr. Glover, arrested for drug possession on the same night that Taylor was shot, maintained that “prosecutors pressed him to name Taylor as a ‘co-defendant’ in the case against him” because he had listed her address on documents and had “been seen collecting a package from the property” (BBC “Breonna Taylor”). However, Mr. Glover stated that he “had sent packages of clothes and shoes to Taylor’s address because he feared they would be stolen from his own home” (BBC “Breonna Taylor”). While Taylor’s family, boyfriend, and ex-boyfriend maintain one position, the police and Kentucky Attorney General Daniel Cameron maintain

another. Yet, the BBC named another agency that had also investigated this issue: “In May, Louisville postal inspector Tony Gooden said that another government agency had been asked in January to investigate whether her home had been receiving suspicious mail. Mr. Gooden did not name the agency but said that it had found no evidence of wrongdoing” (BBC “Breonna Taylor”).

Rather than recognize the basic humanity of those in the apartment and the complex, the officers chose to respond to the situation in a way that not only dehumanized Taylor and Walker, but also endangered other civilians in the process. It was only in August of 2022, some twenty-eight months after Taylor’s death, that the officers involved were charged with federal civil rights violations by the US Justice Department. Only one officer was charged (and acquitted) for his role in the “wanton endangerment of Taylor’s neighbors” but not of Taylor herself (Nakamura et al.). Specifically, “former detective Joshua Jaynes and two current police officers, detective Kelly Goodlett and Sgt. Kyle Meany, are accused of falsifying information on a search warrant before and after Taylor was fatally shot [and] former detective Brett Hankinson . . . is charged with two counts of deprivation of rights under color of law” (Nakamura et al.). “Under color of law” is an expression that essentially makes it illegal to deprive citizens of their rights by pretending to take action in accordance with job obligations or duties (*Deprivation of Rights*). At the time of this writing, the case against the current and former officers has not yet been litigated, so it remains to be seen if their actions will be punished. However, Afropessimists like Wilderson and Coates would

likely remain highly skeptical of these officers ever being held accountable for their actions until a guilty verdict is actually rendered. Based on the previous precedence of many other officers who have not been held accountable of the deaths of Blacks in this country, both Wilderson and Coates would likely question the fairness of the US justice system.

The actions of these four officers run counter to the Louisville Police Department's Mission Statement emblazoned boldly on the department's website: "It is the mission of the Louisville Metro Police Department to deliver professional effective services, fairly and ethically, at all times, to all people, in order to prevent crime, control crime and enhance the overall quality of life for citizens and visitors" ("Louisville Metro"). For Breonna Taylor, there was no fair or ethical application of police services.

However, unlike the Ahmaud case, no body camera footage for the incident exists and the officers contend that they announced themselves, even though the warrant issued was what is known as a "No Knock" warrant. Kenneth Walker maintains that the officers did not announce themselves and it was his concern for the safety of himself and Breonna that caused him to fire one shot at the officers when they entered the apartment (BBC "Breonna Taylor"). Here, we see the way that the justice system works differently for African Americans for whom death can come through extra-legal means.

The fact that no drugs were found in Breonna Taylor's residence and that an investigation by another "government agency" found no wrong doing, in addition to the assertion of the homeowner in the Arbery case that no items were stolen, indicates that

two African Americans have died in matters involving suspected criminality without credible evidence presented against either in a court of law under the proper protections due American citizens such as advice of legal counsel, a jury of one's peers, and an opportunity to present witnesses and/or evidence in order to refute allegations of wrongdoing.

Like Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor emerges as a victim of a system that ignored her humanity and denied her the basic level of empathy that should be afforded to all American citizens: the presumption of innocence. In America today, we often witness a presumption of guilt based solely on skin color.

2020, Summer of Our Discontent, Act III: George Floyd

Nowhere is this lack of empathy against African Americans and those of the African Diaspora clearer than with the murder of George Floyd, the African American male whose death was captured on video and stunned the world. Both Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor's deaths seem to indicate escalation in the use of violence against Blacks accused of criminal intent. If this is so, then George Floyd's murder was a violent crescendo dramatically and tragically illustrating the brutality that African Americans often face when confronted by the police. The shocking nature of his death prompted reflection on some of the most deeply held beliefs about the sanctity of human life, about the perceived criminality that African Americans are often subjected to in their daily lives, and the flaws in the police system that often values protecting a police officer

above doing what is right and just. George Floyd's death, captured on body cameras worn by officers, security video captured from cameras in the area, and cell phone video that was recorded by bystanders, is especially troubling as it came at the behest of a police officer, someone who is there to "protect and serve" ("The Origin of the LAPD Motto") the community. The idea that a police officer has the best interests of the citizenry was popularized in the 1950s in Los Angeles:

In February 1955, the Los Angeles Police Department, through the pages of the internally produced BEAT magazine, conducted a contest for a motto for the police academy . . . "The motto should be one that in a few words would express some or all the ideals to which the Los Angeles police service is dedicated. It is possible that the winning motto might someday be adopted as the official motto of the Department." The winning entry was the motto, [sic] "To Protect and to Serve submitted by Officer Joseph S. Dorobek. "To Protect and to Serve" became the official motto of the Police Academy, and it was kept constantly before the officers in training as the aim and purpose of their profession. With the passing of time, the motto received wider exposure and acceptance throughout the department. On November 4, 1963, the Los Angeles City Council passed the necessary ordinance and the credo has now been placed alongside the City Seal on the Department's patrol cars. ("The Origin of the LAPD Motto")

Originating within the Los Angeles Police Department, this motto has become synonymous with policing, police officers, and police policies across the US. However,

as the BBC succinctly reported, “George Floyd, 46, died after being arrested by police outside a shop in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Footage of the arrest on 25 May shows a white police officer, Derek Chauvin, kneeling on Mr Floyd’s neck while he was pinned to the floor [sic]” (BBC “George Floyd”). It is this image of a police officer tasked with protecting the public, committing a cold and callous act that ultimately deprived another man of his life, that sparked major protests against police brutality in the US.

As with Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor, George Floyd’s death demonstrated a lack of empathy based on the presumption of guilt due to perceived criminality. Police were initially called to the Cup Foods Store because of a 911 call indicating that Mr. Floyd had given the clerk a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill. From the beginning, there seemed to be something different about this particular case as noted by the BBC report: “After approaching the car, one of the officers, Thomas Lane, pulled out his gun and ordered Mr Floyd to show his hands. In an account of the incident, prosecutors do not explain why Mr Lane thought it necessary to draw his gun” (BBC “George Floyd”). Even in the initial stages of the encounter, before Chauvin arrived on the scene, there was heightened aggression and limited empathy towards George Floyd.

According to reporting, George Floyd was initially cooperative with the police officers, but a struggle ensued when officers attempted to place Mr. Floyd into the police car, where Mr. Floyd, according to the police report, “stiffened up, fell to the ground, and told the officers that he was claustrophobic” (BBC “George Floyd”). However, as seen by the video taken at the scene by bystanders and security cameras, Derek Chauvin’s arrival

and actions escalated the situation as he and the other officers continued to try to place Mr. Floyd in the police car, despite Mr. Floyd's insistence that he was in distress due to his claustrophobia.

During this attempt, at 20:19, Mr Chauvin pulled Mr Floyd away from the passenger side, causing him to fall to the ground . . . He [Mr. Floyd] lay there, face down, still in handcuffs. That's when witnesses started to film Mr Floyd, who appeared to be in a distressed state. The moments, captured on multiple mobile phones and shared widely on social media, would prove to be Mr Floyd's last. Mr Floyd was restrained by officers, while Mr Chauvin placed his knee between his head and neck. For more than nine minutes, Mr Chauvin kept his knee on Mr Floyd's neck . . . the duration was initially given as eight minutes and 46 seconds, but Minnesota prosecutors [against Derek Chauvin] have since revised the time. The transcripts of body cam footage from officers Lane and Alexander Kueng show Mr Floyd said more than 20 times he could not breathe as he was restrained. At 20:27, Mr. Chauvin removed his knee from Mr Floyd's neck. Motionless, Mr Floyd was rolled on to a gurney and taken to the Hennepin County Medical Center in an ambulance. He was pronounced dead about an hour later. (BBC "George Floyd")

During this encounter, there were multiple instances in which empathy could have helped to mitigate the situation and may have allowed George Floyd to survive the encounter,

and which would have prevented Derek Chauvin from being convicted of “second degree murder and other charges” (Shannon and Abdollah).

Blankenship’s concept of rhetorical empathy is particularly useful in an analysis of this tragic event: “I situate empathy as coming alongside or feeling with the experiences of an Other rather than feeling for or displacing an Other, which is usually associated with pity or sympathy” (Blankenship 6). Accounts “show that Mr Floyd said more than 20 times he could not breathe” (BBC “George Floyd”), Chauvin either was incapable of showing empathy to George Floyd, or chose not to do so. Chauvin did not feel empathetic toward Mr. Floyd’s loss of breath from the restraint tactic, even though the trial notes indicated, that as a trained officer, Chauvin would have understood the risks inherent with the tactic (Chappel). Even when George Floyd explicitly told Officer Chauvin that the restraint is “‘going to kill me, man.’ Officer Chauvin replied: ‘Then stop talking, stop yelling. It takes heck a lot of oxygen to talk.’ Mr Floyd replied: ‘Can’t believe this, man. Mom, love you. Love you. Tell my kids I love them. I’m dead.’” (BBC “George Floyd”).

In this one exchange, we see Chauvin’s refusal to see George Floyd as a human being deserving of empathy. Floyd appeals to Chauvin’s morality by telling him that Chauvin’s restraint is going to kill him, and Chauvin’s response is to silence Mr. Floyd by rationalizing Floyd’s ability to talk as evidence that the restraint is not too restrictive. Floyd then appeals to pathos by talking about his mother and appealing to the bond that a mother and son share, thereby illustrating that he shares a connection with Chauvin, who

also has a mother and who has a shared connection with Floyd through that familial love. This, too, does not move Chauvin to end the restraint. Floyd even appeals to the shared humanity that he has children and that Chauvin's actions are likely to leave Floyd's children without a father. However, once again the officer is incapable of engaging with Floyd and ignores even this plea. Floyd, in one final speech act, attempts to appeal one last time to the police officer's understanding that killing another human being is wrong by again repeating that if Chauvin does not end the restraint tactic soon it will kill him and he will be dead. This plea is either ignored or dismissed by the officer which ultimately resulted in Floyd's death.

If Chauvin had felt *with* Floyd, or at least, understood Floyd's pleas and mitigated his restraint tactics, it is possible that Mr. Floyd would be alive and Mr. Chauvin would not have been convicted of all three charges for the death of George Floyd. This lack of empathy was something that figured into the conviction of Derek Chauvin on April 20th, 2021 and the sentence handed down by Judge Cahill on June 25th, 2021 for his crime. Chauvin was convicted on: "second-degree unintentional murder, third-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter"— a somber vindication for African Americans because "[George Floyd's] final moments illustrated in clear visuals what Black Americans have long said about the ways the criminal justice system dehumanizes Black people" (Levenson and Cooper). Attorney Ben Crump went further, by associating the conviction to the concept of morality: "This is a victory for those who champion humanity over

inhumanity, those who champion justice over injustice, those who champion morals over immorality” (Levenson and Cooper).

Judge Peter Cahill handed down a sentence, at the sentencing hearing, that was longer than the sentence recommended by the Minnesota State guidelines because of the nature of four aggravating factors to the crime. While Chauvin’s attorney argued for probation due to Chauvin’s lack of a criminal record among other factors, the state guidelines recommended a sentence of 12.5 years. Judge Cahill sentenced Derek Chauvin to 22.5 years. Rather than try to explain his rationale for the sentence during the hearing, Judge Cahill released a 22-page Sentencing Order and Memorandum Opinion that laid out his justification for not only why he chose not to consider a motion for the defense for probation, but also his reasoning for why enhancement over the recommended sentencing guidelines was appropriate for this particular case. He lays out the facts of the case and the length of time provided by the Minnesota sentencing guidelines for a conviction under normal conditions (State of Minnesota, County of Hennepin) and then articulates four a number of instances that necessitated an enhancement to the base sentences:

(1) Mr. Chauvin “abused his position of authority” by using unreasonable force to hold “a handcuffed George Floyd in a prone position on the street” — “ a position that Defendant knew from his training and experience carried with it a danger of positional asphyxia”—for more than nine minutes and forty seconds, “an inordinate amount of time” Id. ¶ 1(c).

(2) “Defendant’s placement of his knee on the back of George Floyd’s neck was an egregious abuse of the authority to subdue and restrain because the prolonged use of this maneuver was employed after George Floyd had already been handcuffed and continued for more than four and a half minutes after Mr. Floyd had ceased talking and had become unresponsive.” Id. ¶ 1(f).

(3) Mr. Chauvin “abused his position of trust and authority by not rendering aid, by declining two suggestions from one of his fellow officers to place George Floyd on his side, and by preventing bystanders, including an off-duty Minneapolis firefighter, from assisting.” Id. ¶ 1(d).

(4) That “failure to render aid became particularly abusive after Mr. Floyd had passed out, and was still being restrained in the prone position, with Mr. Chauvin continuing to kneel on the back of Mr. Floyd’s neck with one knee and on his back with another knee, for more than two and a half minutes after one of his fellow officers announced he was unable to detect a pulse.” Id. (State of Minnesota, County of Hennepin)

Chauvin’s conviction and subsequent sentencing evidences that he was unable or unwilling to extend Floyd the concern one human should exhibit for another. More chilling, all of Floyd’s rhetorical strategies (i.e., Floyd’s attempts to alter Chauvin’s actions) were consciously denied by Chauvin in a cold and calculating manner that, as Afropessimists have previously decried, illustrates the power of the state to deny African Americans the right to live. Chauvin’s actions on that day are the clearest indication that,

for some, the coercive power of protecting the hegemonic ideation that America is for some, and not for all, is far more important than fulfilling the defining mission statement that police have come to be identified with, which is to protect and serve. Who was Chauvin protecting on the day he killed George Floyd? Who was he serving? Was it for the public good or was it an ideology that epitomizes the idea that anti-Blackness is woven into the fabric of the American cultural landscape and that it is to be protected at all costs?

2020, The Year that Empathy Died

The cases of Arbery, Taylor, and Floyd focused attention in America and across the world to the issues that African Americans have been speaking about for decades, if not centuries: the fact that those with Black and brown skin are not afforded nor extended empathy in keeping with legal and social conventions. While, in theory, America says that all people are equal and are offered due process under the law, in practice, problem officers of the law and members of the public are often either emboldened by society or authorized by society to carry out extra-legal sentences on Blacks or those from the African Diaspora.

Erik Leake, author of “Should You Encounter: The Social Conditions of Empathy” lays out a compelling argument as to why some people are afforded empathy and others are not. More appropriate, however, is his research that points to reasons why a *group* of individuals might not be afforded empathy. Leake, like Lisa Blankenship,

looks at empathy through a rhetorical lens and argues that empathy, in addition to having an individual component, as in human-to-human interaction, also has a social component. Indeed, for Leake, it is this social component that often determines whether or not *individuals* extend empathy to one another:

My argument is that empathy is not simply an individual psychological event but socially determined and rhetorically mediated, meaning that empathy is a product of the social situation at least as much as of individual psyches. This is not to say that empathy does not vary by individual or that individuals do not experience empathy in how they feel and think about one another . . . Instead, I argue that the social conditions of empathy are too often overlooked in an emphasis on empathy as an individual phenomenon or as occurring between two individuals without taking larger social conditions into consideration . . . Empathy is not simply a question of neuroanatomy. It is as much a question of social conditions and who is determined worthy of it and who is not. In times of increasing economic distress, widening social inequality, and fraying community relations, empathy itself is imperiled . . . A rhetorical understanding of empathy helps us shift attention from individual readers and writers to the social conditions that support or inhibit it.

(3-4)

Empathy is thus both situational and socially determined. Like Blankenship, Locke describes the most prominent thinkers on the subject of empathy. From Aristotle to the rhetorician Kenneth Burke, Leake summarizes how empathy and empathetic thought

have been articulated in scholarship. However, like Blankenship, his focus is on a rhetorical understanding of empathy and so, rather than focusing on the neurological underpinnings of empathy as articulated by Roughley and Schramme, Leake uses rhetoric and rhetorical studies to ground his arguments. Leake then, for this particular study, is of prime importance as his work provides a rationale as to the possible reasons and motives that keep race and racialized structures at the forefront of many interactions between police and members of the public and those from Black and African American communities. It also potentially explains the Afropessimism present in those same communities.

Leake makes clear how rhetorical and social ideologies come together to form a socially constructed version of empathy. Leake looks at two “social conditions” of empathy: first, the interplay of “victim status and responsibility” and second, the “recognition of the self-other” overlap as it applies to community members, especially if one has the potential to “share vulnerabilities” (3).

Leake then examines at the way empathy has been defined in rhetorical literature throughout the centuries, he turns his attention to how and why empathy is given (or withheld) in terms of group and social dynamics. He is less interested in the one-on-one or day-to-day interactions where empathy is concerned. Rather, Leake focuses on how society either allows empathy to accrue to a person or group, or how society often withholds empathy from groups that one might see as deserving, if one is on the “outside” of that community or society:

The more easily we see somebody as a victim, the more easily we may identify with them. A greater challenge is to empathize with those who we do *not* see as victims, perhaps because we view them as at fault for their fate. The appraisal of fault is often a question of context, history, ideology, and social conditions. Those who understand one's life conditions to be primarily a result of social and historical forces largely beyond one's control may be more apt to empathize with people who are victims of the same forces. Those who view one's life conditions to be largely a result of one's own decisions may be more likely to assign responsibility and resist empathizing with the victims of social forces. These attitudes inform the social conditions that underlie appraisals of responsibility and support or inhibit empathy. (8)

Leake argues that victim status and personal responsibility is not the only variable as to whether empathy will be offered. The other variable is the "self-other overlap" in which difference of the "Other" is noted, but where one identifies with the understanding that the "Other" could be oneself, under different contexts or situations (8-9). Here, he references the work of Kenneth Burke and Aristotle to illustrate that one must first recognize difference in the Other. Once the difference is noted, one must consider whether the Other's situation could have happened, or may yet happen, to oneself in the future, or if it has happened, then there must be a remembrance of that feeling so as to invoke a shared connection (9). Leake argues that the self-other overlap is more than just

a simple human being-to-human being connection, but that the Other must *actually matter* (Leake 10).

Leake claims that this identification, in social and cultural contexts, often takes place *prior* to the occurrence requiring empathy (10). Thus, getting and retaining empathy becomes a delicate dance of navigating responsibility and fault:

The social conditions of empathy are those social forces, values, logics, and possible subject positions that create or inhibit possibilities for empathy prior to the encounter itself. They are conditions that empathy may work with or against. They are often overlooked in theories of empathy that stress the individual experience qua individual . . . Two critical conditions focused upon here are (1) the designation of the victim as not at fault for his or her situation, especially through understanding the influences of history and social conditions upon another's life situation; and (2), recognition of a self-other overlap through a shared humanity, shared worthiness of concern, and shared potentialities and vulnerabilities. (11)

Leake uses the example of homelessness to illustrate how people are afforded or denied empathy using a series of reports penned by Roger Jacobs, once a freelance writer, who found himself homeless (along with his girlfriend, Lela Michaels) (15). Leake, in investigating this broader appeal to society, discovered that denial of empathy often came from commentators who “voiced a strong individualistic ideology and argue that Jacobs is responsible for his situation,” ignoring or choosing to ignore the reasons/evidence that

Jacobs provides that shows that circumstances beyond his control lead to his homelessness. Leake focuses on respondent, Thia, who not only denies Jacobs' assertions, but also seems "offended" and believes that Jacobs "acts as if something is owed to him," illustrates Leake's argument that those who social forces as "determinant factor" often afforded empathy where those who see personal responsibility as the determinant factor often don't afford empathy (13-14). Another important factor is the concept of being "an insider vs. an outsider" in a particular community, according to Leake. Those on the "inside" are much more likely to be afforded empathy than those on the outside, even if the factors for extending/rejecting empathy are equal (12-16). Leake argues that, with a few notable exceptions, Jacobs was not very successful in convincing readers that he deserved their empathy because his homelessness marked him as an "outsider" (18). The self-other overlap is complex but essential to the empathetic process. The self-other overlap, "[comes] in recognizing one's place in a community, in arguing for similar possibilities and vulnerabilities to suffering, and in making the case for the significance of one's own life in relation the lives of others and concerns of others. It is at the heart of empathy" (21).

The absence of a self-other overlap permeates US history, from the beginning of the country's Reconstruction efforts after the Civil War and enslavement, we see that there are figures in the government and in media who were determined to make sure that African Americans were restricted through laws and customs and were portrayed in the worst light possible in the brand-new medium of film. As Wil Haygood, author of

Colorization: One Hundred Years of Black Films in a White World (2012) makes clear, “President Woodrow Wilson may have calmed the nerves of Negroes during his campaigning, but once he reached office, he enacted the kinds of policies that convinced them they had been fooled . . . Congressional Democrats, with President Wilson backing them, began enacting measures to thwart Black achievement wherever they could” (6). At no time after Reconstruction was America, especially the region known as “the South,” interested in a true reconciliation with all of its citizens. Blacks, to the South, were not only anathema to those in the states that once held slaves, but they were also saddled with the sense of injustice that White southerners felt at having lost the Civil War. Many White Southerners felt that the Reconstruction efforts had hurt their families because “in order for Southern states to be readmitted to the Union after the war, they had to agree to terms that involved voting rights for Blacks, new schools, [but] . . . local politicians and powerful landowners [in the South] went about returning Blacks [to] second class citizens” (6-7). Even as politicians and rich landowners worked to strip Blacks of protections earned after the Civil War and Reconstruction, powerful forces in the media of the time worked to reify social stigma against Black Americans so as to continue the hegemonic and racist ideas that originally led to the slave trade.

Thomas Dixon’s *The Clansman* (1905) was a “fulsome celebration of Ku Klux Klan brutality during the Reconstruction . . . Its theme is that Blacks could not be trusted to handle the freedom they’d been given by the Emancipation Proclamation” (Haygood 7). While Haygood argues that White Northerners were generally repulsed by the subject

matter, those in the South made it a bestseller (7). Even worse for Black Americans was the fact that D.W. Griffith, one of the rising stars in the new genre of film, took on Dixon's material and translated the story into film according to Haygood. This film was explosive, and if Wilson and the Democrats of the time sought to remove Blacks from political power, then Griffith and his film helped to reify the second-class status of Blacks in the mind of Southerners, thereby spreading the South's hegemonic ideology to the broader expanses of the country:

The Black characters were white actors wearing Blackface makeup; no Black actors were cast in major roles. The Blacks were portrayed as thieves, rapists, wild-eyed fools who had joined with Northern liars to wreak havoc upon the South. There were scenes to make any Southerner whoop with patriotic joy: A Confederate soldier plunging a flag into a Union cannon before dying; Reconstruction scenes depicting Southern legislatures becoming undone by the chicanery of Black lawmakers. The scenes cut right to the core of Southern emotion. (11-12)

Returning to Haygood, the incredible popularity of *Birth of a Nation* was incredibly damaging to Black culture and community members despite their best efforts to stop it or assuage the damage. Not only were Blacks "being beaten down politically and legally," but they were unable to stop a film consciously designed to keep America from seeing Blacks as part of the "human family." The self-other overlap that Leake argues is a crucial formation to social examples of empathy was destroyed for Blacks thanks to the

coercive power of *Birth of a Nation* and the myriad stereotypes that the movie spawned into society. In addition, the power of the film, along with the political and social constructions of the time, kept White America from seeing the plight of African Americans as something *done to them*, but rather as them deserving such treatment, *due to some inherent failure inside them* that made their treatment justified—just as “Thia” feels that Jacobs’ descent into homelessness, and ultimately, despair and death, was brought upon himself.

This denial of empathy is crucial to understanding why Afrofuturism is so necessary. As Haygood concludes in his powerful opening chapter, “It seemed as if Blacks had yet one more enemy: cinema. If Black Americans were to fight back against what cinema had now done to them, they would need their own filmmaker. They needed someone to tell their stories, stories with nuance and honesty and respect and comedy and joy—all the things that this magical thing called cinema was offering to mainstream society” (21). Afrofuturism is a way of telling the stories of African Americans and those of the Black Diaspora to illustrate the *potentiality* of the future, and to show how Black lives are not simply defined by and relegated to a past filled with enslavement and death, but that Black lives are also filled with the same possibilities and potentialities that define all humans.

Afrofuturism and Black Lives Matter

The Black Lives Matter Movement has prompted renewed attention on a profound lack of empathy for people considered Other—Blacks, Asians, Hispanics, and Jews. However, as with the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, Black Lives Matter has focused on African American and Black injustices, and the ways in which the West, in general, and the United States, in particular, can move past racialized paradigms. As noted on its website, blacklivesmatter.com:

The #BlackLivesMatter movement was founded in response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin’s murderer. Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, Inc. is a global organization . . . whose mission is to eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes. By combating and countering acts of violence, creating a space for Black imagination and innovation, and centering on Black joy, we are winning immediate improvements in our lives. (“Black Lives Matter Global”)

The murder of seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin was a racially polarizing case, argues Karen Grigsby Bates, author of the article “A Look Back At Trayvon Martin’s Death, And the Movement It Inspired,” although as she later argues, it did not begin that way. According to Bates, there was broad sympathy for Martin until then President Obama called the incident a “tragedy” and empathized with his family (Bates). Public sentiment

began to turn and people start to speak up for George Zimmerman, Trayvon's killer. Stories were written about Trayvon's "bad boy" side: "'Trayvon was the victim in this case,' his father, Tracy Martin told NPR. 'They tried to make him the villain in this case.' And not just Trayvon. During the initial jury questioning, Tracy Martin and his ex-wife, Sabrina Fulton were criticized, too" (Bates). The trial took on political overtones where "white nationalists [sic] and the alt-right adopted Zimmerman's case, seeing in him a martyr being sacrificed on the alter of political correctness," and once the trial ended in the acquittal of Zimmerman, Martin's death and the trial became linked with the Black Lives Matter movement (Bates).

The Black Lives Matter movement addresses what some scholars call Afropessimism, the feeling that Anti-Blackness is endemic in Western society and that this Anti-Blackness will not change no matter how much society legislates change. In the book, *Black Lives Matter vs. All Lives Matter: A Multidisciplinary Primer* (2021), Karim Bangura Abdul describes the primary philosophies undergirding these two perspectives. However, in many ways, Abdul replicates the binaries that have so long infected US political and cultural thought. Yet, these two perspectives are so much more than simple dichotomies. For instance, while Abdul indicates that empathy is at the center of the "13 guiding principles" for Black Lives Matter (5). However, there is no such corollary for the All Lives Matter Movement, just an indication that race should not matter in any context, which equates to a denial of racism by removing it from the conversation (5-6).

Since racialized structures do exist and do influence many aspects of Western society, this formulation is not actually helpful to engendering empathy, as Bates notes in her article:

When people push back and ask why all lives shouldn't matter, Sabrina Fulton has a ready response: "It's not taking away from someone else's life," she says, "it's just putting emphasis on Black lives because Black lives seem so . . . disposable." Fulton says she is heartened by the activities of all races who supported them during the trial and are still advocating for justice for others who don't look like them. "We didn't get into this situation with just African Americans, and we're not going to get out of this situation with African Americans" she insists. "I think all races understand it's not about civil rights, it's about human rights." (Bates)

The Black Lives Matter movement brings awareness that those from the African Diaspora are not only US citizens, entitled to all the rights of citizenship (due process, free speech, the right to assemble) but also human beings worthy of respect, consideration, and empathy. This identification is crucial because, without it, minorities of all ethnicities, but critically Blacks and those from the African Diaspora, are effectively cut off, or perhaps cast out from the human family. Worse yet, the hegemony marks Blackness with as the Other and works to actively hinder those who are "Othered" from becoming successful in society, a concept that is anathema to the "American Dream" promoted by the hegemony.

As Olufemi O. Taiwo describes in *Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics (And Everything Else)* (2022), both state and capital investment have had powerful roles in creating legislation and policies that have reshaped the world in

multiple ways detrimental to African Americans (23-32). Taiwo's definition of "elite capture" looks a lot like Foss's articulation of hegemony: "elite capture happens when the advantaged few steer resources and institutions that could serve the many toward their own narrower interests and aims. The term is used in economics, political science, and related disciplines to describe the way socially advantaged people tend to gain control over benefits meant for everyone" (22). It is the hegemonic practices of the majority combined with the "elite capture" concept that allows Afropessimism, the sense that Anti-Blackness is endemic to US society to gain a foothold in African American communities. According to adherents of Afropessimism, not only is the "door" to success already firmly shut to those who are Black, but empathy is systemically withdrawn to those who need it the most.

Through stories, we create kinship and infuse messages with a narrative voice that can be as effective as that of protests, direct action, and other forms of civil disobedience. Indeed, Adam Banks underscores the power and influence that stories can have when he asserts that the "griot" is formed from a tradition of African American rhetoric (17). The griot is a time-honored storyteller and forms the basis for many cultural traditions in this community; stories have always had integral place within African American society.

Stories, then, form the foundation of creating self-other overlap, and stories that show African Americans as participants in the future, who are able to work, play, laugh, cry, speak, shout, and yes, die as all humans do, creates a shared responsibility so that Blacks become "the Other" no longer, but rather, other members of the human family.

Even before the formation of movements such as Black Lives Matter, African Americans have been telling personal stories to illustrate how race in the West, particularly in America, inhibit the extension of empathy by society at large. In Leonard Pitts Jr.'s 2005 article, "The Conflation of Race and Criminal Hits Home with Arrest of Son," he describes how his son was arrested even though his son clearly was not involved in any criminal action. He relates his rage and sadness through the story, ending it with an Afropessimistic understanding that he knows that this is the way the world works for African Americans, his son now knows that this is the way the world works, and in a few years, his grandson will also learn that this is the way the world works (Pitts).

While movements such as Black Lives Matter call attention to this type of injustice, Afrofuturism offers Mr. Pitt's son and grandson new narratives of the ways the world could work. Afrofuturism challenges the stereotypical assertions of Blacks as being the problem of American society. Black Lives Matter and Afrofuturism work in conjunction as they ask society to see Blacks as part of the solution; to see that the problems of race can be solved if only society would change its policing policies to match America's ideals and Afrofuturism works to show the personal stories and how unfairness binds not only those from the African Diaspora, but also the entire world by keeping us chained to ideologies of the past. Afrofuturism, especially in such a mass market medium as video games and cinema, has the potential to change embedded attitudes, so that children, grandchildren, and future generations of *all* races have a chance to unshackle themselves from the harmful hegemonic ideologies that keep society

from moving forward. However, even with the success of *Black Panther*, there are still issues, even in the film industry, that hinder Afrofuturism's push to the future. One of these issues is what the social movement #OscarsSoWhite calls attention to and seeks to alleviate.

Afrofuturism and #OscarsSoWhite

The #OscarsSoWhite movement is also a vital component in the fight for equal recognition as it identifies a hegemonic and systemic barrier inside one of the most powerful and influential storytelling mediums, film. The #OscarsSoWhite movement has been instrumental in getting both outsiders and insiders of Hollywood to notice the inequities in film production and awards as described by Nicole Sperling, writer for *Entertainment Weekly*, and author of the article "Oscars So Right?"

According to Sperling, "[April] Reign launched #OscarsSoWhite from her living room couch in 2015. At the time, the managing editor of BroadwayBlack.com was frustrated watching the Academy choose an all-white pack on Oscar nominees, a phenomenon that repeated itself again in 2016" (42). Sperling points out that the Academy has had an "uneven" track record concerning race, noting how it has "failed to consistently" nominate filmmakers of color (43). Sperling singles out Sidney Poitier's win for Best Actor, and while not explicitly saying it in the article, implies that Denzel Washington's win in 2002 for his role in the 2001's *Training Day* was far too long overdue. However, Sperling explicitly states that it is a travesty that Halle Berry remains

the only Black woman who has won for Best Actress, a fact also bemoaned by Halle Berry herself in the article “Halle Berry says she’s ‘heartbroken’ no other Black woman has won Oscar for best actress” by Adia Robinson. T. J. Holmes interviewed Halle Berry in early 2022 and Robinson quotes Berry from that interview: “I do feel completely heartbroken that there’s no other woman standing next to me in 20 years . . . I thought, like everybody else, that night meant that a lot of things would change . . . That didn’t happen. No other woman is standing here” (qtd. in Robinson).

Not only can we see Berry’s frustration, but we can also see the ways in which a lack of opportunity seems to create a lack of empathy. Denied opportunities for actors of color to express themselves fully in service of their art means lost opportunities for audiences to fully immerse themselves in the richness and plurality of the country and its intendant pluralistic ideologies that many espouse allegiance and love for. In addition, Hollywood’s traditionally white male structure and lack of opportunities for storytellers who are non-white has meant that many actors from all ethnic backgrounds have been predominantly shut out of opportunities that other white actors have been afforded. As Nicole Sperling notes in a sidebar: “African Americans: 12.6% of U.S. Population, 3.9% of All Acting Nominations, 4.4% of All Acting Wins” (43). However, the numbers are even more dismal with other ethnic groups in the United States (Sperling 43). Sperling’s figures are dated as the article was released February 2017, and do not take into account recent Academy recognition of films like *Hidden Figures*, *The Green Book*, *Moonlight*, and *Parasite*.

However, as Reign makes clear, these figures are far too low to adequately address the ways in which stories and narratives of people of color are being suppressed. As Reign states: “while we’ve had a spate of films about the Black experience (sic), we still don’t have films that reflect the Latino experience, the Asian-American/Pacific Islander experience, the LGBTQIA experience . . . Let’s remember that #OscarsSoWhite is not just about race, and definitely not just about the Black race” (Sperling 42). Here, we see Reign advocating for movies that broaden the horizon to encompass all races, not just one race, nor one dominant ideology.

Sperling argues that it was the #OscarSoWhite movement that made executives inside the Hollywood entertainment industry take notice of Black talent in a serious way: “#OscarsSoWhite is ultimately about which movies get made, not just which ones get award recognition” (43). Traditionally, the people who have the power to greenlight a movie in Hollywood have been male and white. Charles D. King, a producer on *Fences*, believes that #OscarsSoWhite is instituting a fundamental change. However, others are less optimistic. Franklin Leonard, a former producer and founder of the Blacklist.com, a site for unproduced screenplays, claims that nothing will change “until it is no longer perceived as a risk to make a movie about a person of color . . . or to hire a writer of color to write on a subject that has nothing to do with being that color.” (qtd. in Sperling 43).

#OscarSoWhite embraces the Afrofuturistic notion that the future is full of possibilities. While not strictly Afrofuturistic in nature because its focus does not reinvent history, movies like *The Woman King*, would have been seen as a much riskier

investment without the keen focus of the #OscarsSoWhite movement as noted by Leonard's analysis of Hollywood's aversion to risk.

For Womack, Afrofuturism “unchains the mind” (15). Womack also argues that Afrofuturists hoped that technologies like the internet along with the umbrella term of “art” would help to “facilitate equal access to progressive technologies, knowing that a widespread embrace would diminish the race-based power imbalance—and hopefully color-based limitations—for good” (18). While movements can often be seen as divisive constructs designed to tear at the fabric of society, adrienne maree brown [sic], author of *We Will Not Cancel Us and Other Dreams of Transformative Justice* (2020), argues that her vision of a movement is one that acts “as sanctuary . . . [with] invitations to grow” (11). brown [sic] gets to the heart of the dynamic interplay of #OscarsSoWhite and the rhetorical empathy practiced by Afrofuturism when she notes that, in this space of a movement as a sanctuary, she feels safe and supported because this is “where winning isn't measured by anyone's loss, but by breaking cycles of abuse, harm, assault, and systemic oppression” (11).

However, the Academy of Motion Pictures still seems to “undervalue” African American talent, in particular, as movies such as *The Woman King* and *Till* did not receive any nominations for awards this year. Headlines such as “The *Woman King* Snub and the Oscars' Continued Disrespect of Black Women” from *Rolling Stone* and “*Woman King* and *Till* Oscar Snubs Show Why #OscarsSoWhite is Still Trending in Hollywood” from *Business Insider* illustrate just how difficult it will be to change an institution that from

The Birth of a Nation has profited from pedaling racist stereotypes of Black people. Even when African Americans manage to navigate the minefield of the movie production landscape to make a movie, recognition is often denied to stories that do not conform as well as reinforce the hegemonic practices of American society.

Clearly, #OscarsssoWhite as a movement still has more work to do in order to gain recognition for stories that are not in place of, *but in addition to*, those stories told and prized by the hegemony.

Afrofuturism vs. Afropessimism Redux

Lanzoni argues that the Black social scientist Kenneth Clark, in 1965, claims that the Civil Rights movement had only produced “minimal gains” and had “succeeded in releasing the emotions of despair, hopelessness, and anger on the part of Black [sic] Americans” (238). While Wilderson claims the Afropessimistic movement as his own, Coates does not explicitly say that he is an adherent to it. However, the stories that Coates tells of his childhood and young adulthood in *Between the World and Me* make it clear that Afropessimism clearly inhabits much of the trauma that characterized his early life.

For Clark, empathy was the primary resolution to the thorny problem of inequity, especially for the African American: “Clark’s bid for empathy did not aim to smooth jagged conversations and difficult friendships but to shape a political reality that reaffirmed the rights of all” (Lanzoni 240). Lanzoni writes that some of Clark’s work was problematic and he was accused of not always adhering to dispassionate objectivity or

conducting studies with appropriate scientific rigor (242-243). Key to Clark's assertions was that, like Coates, he described in detail the problems destroying the Black community, specifically focusing on the effects of oppression on those in the Harlem community. Lanzoni reminds us that "if Clark tended to pathologize life in Harlem, it is important to recognize he extended his diagnosis of disease to American society as a whole . . . What then was his diagnosis? White society was built around capitalist greed and was competitive, insecure, and anxiety-producing at its core" (243). These are the same ideas that both Wilderson and Coates articulate, only in different degrees. For Wilderson, it is explicit and the power structure is exposed for all to see. For Coates, power lies a little deeper, requiring one to peer slightly beneath the surface in order to see the root causes of the power structure of the hegemony.

While Wilderson sees no avenues forward, Coates does see a restorative to the problem of power: empathy. While Coates argues in *Between the World and Me* that it is too late for himself, he has tried to teach his son to look upon the world with empathy:

But Clark had indeed pitted power against empathy: the powerful in society clearly lack this ability, or they would not structure and support the kinds of brutal inequalities that continued to exist in American society. And empathy short-circuited the egocentric drive for individual power. Empathy was directly at odds with the biological imperative for individual survival and for the satisfaction of egocentric needs. Clark concluded that empathy was uniquely human; it required abstract thought . . . empathy and justice went hand in hand. (249)

Claudia Raskin says “that there is no mode of empathy that can replicate the daily strain of knowing that as a Black person you can be killed for simply being Black” (qtd. in Lanzoni 250). For Raskin, empathy was not a shield, physical or metaphorical, to completely solve the problem of anti-Blackness and anti-Black violence. Adam Banks, on the other hand, claims that “Black rhetorical traditions” in “oral, print, and digital communications” afford a wide range of opportunities for “Afrofuturistic synchronizing,” or creating links in these communication traditions that can be a help to African Americans, among others (12). Banks uses the figure of the griot to underline the importance of storytelling to the empathetic process:

Many people are familiar with the figure of the griot, the storyteller in many West African cultures . . . The griot is often a master of both words and music who is a storyteller, praise singer, and historian in many of those West African cultures. The griot and the tradition of stories that makes up the griot’s craft reflect both participation in and resistance to the larger order and link past, present, and future, even in the midst of physical and psychic dislocation. (22-23)

Even more importantly, however, is the griot’s ability to help those from the African diaspora *transcend* the horrors of “the middle passage, slavery, and centuries of American apartheid” (25). The griot is able to understand and transmute the evil inflicted upon those from the African diaspora into a transformative quality that, as Banks says, “shapes the moral character of their listeners” (24).

Coates does not descend into Afropessimism because Coates has managed to transform himself into a griot for his son. Rather than a griot of oral tradition, Coates has learned and mastered the medium of print (122). Writing is what saved Coates, but there is a far older tradition that many other Black people have accessed to help them survive. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Valerie A. Smith, editors of *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, 3rd Ed. (2014), noticed the power of the vernacular for the African American community. The vernacular includes such popular forms as “church songs, blues, tall tales, work songs, games, jokes, dozens [playful and not so playful insults] and rap songs, along with myriad other such forms, past and present” (4). These are important forms have helped inculcate resilience in the Black community despite the many trials faced by those of the African Diaspora (4).

As a form, Womack says that, “Afrofuturism is the only future-orientated aesthetic that has such a rich history in music” (56). Womack then goes on to list the many sundry artists involved with Afrofuturism, including the likes of George Clinton, Janelle Monae, and Outkast, to highlight a few. Banks argues that DJs, among all the types of the griots, is especially powerful because the DJ (1) knows the history of music and can improvise as necessary, making connections between various music styles and traditions; (2) is able to master a range of different technologies and traditions; (3) is rhetorically situated because the griot must know the audience and must know what to say to move the audience to action; (4) must be connected to the community in a deep way (28-29). Womack also connects the griot to the oral and music tradition through

Afrofuturism. The Afrofuturistic musician inspires and exhorts in ways that traditional orators may not have access to in their art:

The desire to be more, to be free of the constrictions of a society with marked color distinctions and separation is like pixie dust sprinkled through the tracks.

The music echoes with a universalism rhythmically that emanates from the roots of African music, but is jet-fueled into the future. There are no barriers in Afrofuturistic music, no entity that can't emit a rhythmic sound, no arrangements to adhere to, no locked-in structures about chorus and verse. Wordplay is keen.

(57)

The Afrofuturistic griot frees the mind from form and from restrictions. The barriers that exist in music are transcended in Afrofuturistic music in the same way that Afrofuturism imagines a world without barriers having to do with race. Imagination, the cornerstone of Afrofuturism, plays an important point in Afrofuturistic music. Womack argues that two artists, George Clinton and Sun-Ra, form the starting point for Afrofuturistic music.

Sun-Ra actually hails from the American South, specifically, the state of Alabama, and has been at the forefront of helping engender empathy through his music and the Afrofuturism movement. Womack notes that Clinton “spoke of being inspired by Sun-Ra” (57). In his article “The Source: Sun Ra and his Arkestra’s Egyptian Adventure,” Marcus J. Moore details the trip that Sun-Ra took to Egypt in 1971 and the concert that he performed at the Balloon Theater. According to Moore, Sun-Ra, who had “been born Herman Poole Blount in Birmingham, Al,” had claimed that aliens had spoken to him,

saying ”“They would teach me some things that when it looked like the world was going into complete chaos, when there was no hope for nothing, then I could speak, but not until then. I would speak, and the world would listen” (41). Here we see the griotic nature of those acting as griots. Moore describes the futuristic costume that Sun-Ra wore even in public when not performing his music. Sun-Ra’s music is the most important centerpiece of his legacy: “As a bandleader, Sun Ra’s style was wildly expressive, and he pushed his jazz to astonishing depths, charting new territory that few have approached since” (42). Moore explains German musician Herman Geerken’s description of Sun-Ra’s performance in detail, noting that Sun-Ra’s repetition of the word “intergalactic” and his vibrant music connected them all together so that “there wasn’t a single person present who could resist the magic of the moment” (qtd. in Moore 42). This shared feeling of connection is indicative of Womack’s assertion that: “Sun Ra wanted to use music to heal. He had a preacher-like conversion moment. Part spiritual revelation, part self-described alien encounter, Sun Ra believed came into the world to heal. This quest to fill the knowledge gaps, to find the erased contributions of people of color, and to ultimately shatter the color/class divides resulted in an information trek that would last for much of his life” (59).

Sun-Ra, as a musician, functions as DJ archetypal griot. In addition, as an Afrofuturist, Sun-Ra pushed his music to challenge the accepted practices of a hierarchical and hegemonic society based on color. Womack describes the ways in which Afrofuturists fight against the hegemonic practices of society: “Afrofuturists enjoy

challenging their listeners on their path to enlightenment. They enjoy pulling the rug out from under the smugness of reality. Whether it's through chord arrangements, oddity, or sheer boldness, they get a kick out of tossing their listeners into the far reaches of outer space" (58).

As Banks articulates, the griot is someone special, who transcends time and space in order to aid people through rhetorical traditions. As Banks argues, "the figure of storyteller as griot in the Black tradition also helps establish connections to storytelling traditions of all cultures" (33). Empathy, particularly rhetorical empathy, occurs in the story/storytelling process. As Lisa Blankenship states: "Reflexive practice occurs in an in-between space of liminality, a threshold, a place of uncertainty and teachability—a place of learning" (118).

This is the source of Sun-Ra's Afrofuturistic music and the power of the griot—the ability through storytelling to create, and sometimes compel, a liminal space that is uncertain, off-kilter, and not rigidly defined. Storytelling through Afrofuturistic contexts creates a place where the Other is no longer an enemy to be conquered or capitalistic conquest to be dominated, but simply another story that can be transmitted through the broader society. It is a story through which learning can occur and through which the Other can become simply another part of ourselves. We become, as articulated by Banks, "a new groove, mixed, remixed, and mixtaped" (33). Afrofuturism helps to mold us together into something organic, new, and interconnected through our music and through our stories.

The function of the university is not simply to teach breadwinning, or to furnish teachers for the public schools or to be a centre of polite society; it is, above all, to be the organ of that fine adjustment between real-life and the growing knowledge of life, an adjustment which forms the secret of civilization.

—*The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois

Conclusion: The Far Reaches of Outer Space

Womack recounts a story of an African American woman in her twenties who could not write a screenplay about Black characters. Womack discusses the woman's incredible frustration by the historical limitations that kept her characters bound and unable to express their lives without the specter of racial entanglements with the broader society of the time. Womack notes that, for this writer, "the parameters of race had completely chained her imagination" (15).

In *Digital Diaspora: A Race for Cyberspace* (2009), Anna Everett notes that "[Mark] Dery set forth his working concept of 'Afrofuturism,' an umbrella term that aims to elucidate some of the specificities of what might be regarded as Black-inflected or Afrocentric science fiction . . . clearly, unofficial histories, both distant and recent, remain among the unlikely places that any serious attempt to uncover Black participation in the often progressive vision of science fiction and fact-based technological social transformation will be found" (Everett 25). Afrofuturism is a key component in promoting social change, and it offers the additional benefit of engendering empathy and

understanding throughout a larger culture. Through movies and video games, and even oral traditions like music, Afrofuturism helps to disseminate cultural empathy and rhetoric, into the larger culture in order to disrupt racism on an individual and systemic level.

The Need for Afrofuturism

Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture (2013) by Ytasha Womack and *Black Panther* (2018) helped to form the basic underlying conception of this project. Science fiction stories, told through an Afrocentric lens, have relevance and weight beyond simple narrative connections. The idea that, “Afrofuturism unchains the mind” resonates with the idea that for there to be change, voices must first be heard (Womack 15). Afrofuturism is, to extend the metaphor, the voice crying out with a message for all to hear. Rather than a strident message that criticizes, that demands, and that immediately causes barriers to be erected against the message, Afrofuturism works on a more hopeful level, recognizing that power inherently fears what it does not understand, and seeks to create understanding where there is little, if any. Stanford Carpenter, cofounder of the Institute for Comics Studies, says that Afrofuturism “is this opportunity to push the boundaries of what you can be and in so doing, you’re imagining a whole new world and possibilities for yourself” (qtd. in Womack 14).

To see how this works and why Afrofuturism is such a valued commodity, one only need look at the movie *Top Gun Maverick* (2022). This movie, featuring Tom

Cruise, a white male actor playing the central role, also features a supposedly diverse cast. However, even though the cast contains a plurality of actors of diverse backgrounds, it is still considered by American society to be a hegemonic film. This can be seen on the question and answer site Quora, where a user posted the question, ““Why is the movie *Top Gun: Maverick* doing so well in spite of not having any overtly woke [sic] plot points or a notably diverse cast?”” While the question was quite consciously written in a manner to attract more conservative leaning respondents (“overtly woke plot points or a notably diverse cast”), most of the answers are short diatribes against the left or what the respondents consider as liberal ideation. However, one reply is particularly striking. This answer is from a respondent identifying as S. Patrick Maiorca, who claims to live in Oklahoma, and whose statistics on the site include 24.8K answers and 48.1M views (although there seems to be no way to independently verify said statistics), and whose answer was last updated on August 21st, 2022:

The reason is simple, most people don't go to movies to get lectured they [sic] go to movies to be entertained and Top Gun Maverick promises to be entertaining.

The problem with woke filmmakers is that they often forget that simple rule, movies have to entertain the audience. A filmmaker might try to make something thought-provoking and even have some social commentary in a film but if people feel like they are watching a lecture or a sermon, they won't like it. (Maiorca)

As Womack states, “It's one thing when Black people aren't discussed in world history . . . but when, even in the imaginary future, people can't fathom a person of non-Euro

descent a hundred years into the future, a cosmic foot has to be put down” (7). While Maiorca’s comment seems evenhanded, the writer acknowledges editing the comment to remove the word “morons” and that “the cast’s ethnic or sexual makeup is irrelevant to my answer” (Maiorca). Maiorca’s comments, which I take to be representative of a pervasive way of thinking, illustrates the potential power of Afrofuturistic texts: they do not lecture; they entertain. Afrofuturism creates a sense of new possibilities and new outcomes, and within Afrofuturism, well-told stories help others to see that those from the African Diaspora are not simply Others to be feared, but are a part of the human family. Afrofuturism also allows for a reengagement with the idea of Black identity, or what it means to be a Black person in the world. Womack is clear: “Black identity does not have to be a negotiation with awful stereotypes, a dystopian view of the race, an abysmal sense of powerlessness, or a reckoning of hardened realities. Fatalism is not a synonym for Blackness” (11). Afrofuturism responds to both hegemonic ideas as well as Afropessimistic beliefs by countering with hope for the future and of humanity’s acceptance for all in place of prejudice and fatalism.

While some respondents highlight the cast’s “diversity” in *Top Gun Maverick*, many respondents on *Quora* make it abundantly clear that other races are not welcome in the storyline, especially as main characters, much as occurred when a Black actor was cast to play Rue in *The Hunger Games*. While *Quora*, obviously does not represent a scientific sample, it does highlight an on-going debate. While the stated goal is that media should focus entirely on entertainment, many people look to media to reify the

hegemonic power structure that exists in Western culture, sometimes unconsciously, but in some cases, the seeking of this symbolic justification of the hegemonic power is intentional. What Maiorca leaves unstated is the implication that other respondents have articulated more forcefully: they only want to be entertained by people *who look like them* and *who act like them*, or to be more specific, they only want to be entertained by *other members of the hegemony*. There is always one who, given the anonymity of the internet, is willing to espouse the unstated ideas as illustrated by the reply of the respondent MoreThanAHumanX: “That’s because the majority of Americans are white middle class[sic]. Why this is surprising to people I’m not sure. Most Americans just want to be left alone and not have political ideals crammed down their throats’ [sic] constantly” (MoreThanAHumanX). As this respondent makes clear, it is not purely *entertainment* that is the factor at play in creating an empathetic bond with characters of a story. Anyone not a part of the hegemony, the “white middle class [sic]” according to MoreThanAHumanX, is the Other.

An example of this denial of empathy for African American characters comes from the movie version of Suzanne Collins’ novel *The Hunger Games*. Collins’ description of Rue is clear: a young girl who looks about ten and “has bright dark eyes and satiny brown skin” (98). However, when time came to cast an actor for the role, there was controversy over the race of the actor chosen. News outlets, including NBC, reported on the tweets that objected to African Americans being cast in roles that were specifically noted in the novel as being dark-skinned:

While some of the comments are mere surprise, others are more opinionated.

“Why does rue [sic] have to be Black not gonna lie kinda ruined the movie,” wrote one moviegoer on Twitter. Wrote another, “Kk [sic] call me racist but when I found out Rue was Black her death wasnt [sic] as sad #ihatemyself.” Both of those accounts appear to have been deleted from Twitter since Jezebel [the compiler of the twitter topic] called out the posts, but numerous other posts quoted on Hunger Games Tweets offer up similiar [sic] thoughts. (Cooper)

The idea that a character with dark skin is deserving of less empathy (i.e., her death is less sad) than one with light skin indicates the unstated prejudice that often occurs, not just in real-life, but also in media. While respondents like Maiorca may argue that race and gender are irrelevant to entertainment, the prejudicial sentiments about the casting of Rue as an African American actor work to refute this argument. Race, unfortunately, still matters.

Perhaps, if this was an isolated example, Afrofuturism might not be necessary.

Unfortunately, such bigotry is not isolated in the entertainment industry. At the time of this writing, there have been two major incidents involving actors of color who have been singled out, not because of their performances, or lack of ability to entertain, but because they were cast in futuristic or fantastical roles. Thus, in the minds of some, this casting automatically excludes them from either consideration for the role, or participation from the project in any meaningful way. In May 2022, Moses Ingram, an actor in the *Star Wars Obi-Wan* series, took to social media and “revealed she has received ‘hundreds’ of racist

messages since appearing in the new Star Wars [sic] show” (Cain). Moses Ingram posted a video in response to the racist abuse that she received: “The thing that bothers me is this feeling inside of myself, that no one has told me, but this feeling that I have to shut up and take it, that I have to grin and bear it. And I’m not built like that. So, I wanted to come on and say thank you to the people who show up for me in the comments and the places that I’m not going to put myself. And to the rest of y’all, y’all [sic] are weird” (qtd. in Cain).

If the character is not played by an actor representing the dominant racial group, then it does not matter how talented the actor is, how brilliant the performance, or even, as asserted, how entertaining it is, but rather, who is *allowed* to perform, who is allowed to tell stories, who is allowed empathy so as to connect with the audience. Conventional wisdom in movies has often asserted that the “bad guy/villain” is more entertaining to watch on screen than the hero, but Ingram, who gets to play a villain in the show, is denigrated. The denigration comes not from her performance, but from her race, something that Maiorca asserts should not happen. The racial abuse is such that Disney, the parent company of the show, and Ewan MacGregor, a producer and also Ingram’s co-star, took to social media to support her. However, this is not a new occurrence as “Star Wars actors Kelly Marie Tran and John Boyega have also endured racist abuse from fans after they were cast in the sequel trilogy” (Cain).

The casting of a non-white actor for the lead role in *The Little Mermaid* live action movie has also sparked racism in the entertainment community. In September

2022, Dani Di Placido wrote an article for *Forbes* entitled, “Disney’s *Little Mermaid* Backlash Has Reached Insane Heights” in which the author states that “the *Little Mermaid* has been engulfed in controversy ever since the casting of singer Halle Bailey was announced. While Disney’s tepid remakes always receive criticism from nostalgic fans, this time, the backlash is transparently racist, with all of the negativity aimed at the casting of a non-white actress to play the titular mermaid” (Di Placido).

MoreThanAHumanX’s posting on Quora about the supremacy of movies like *Top Gun Maverick* indicates there is a segment of the population who would rather exclude rather than include based on race.

In *Black Panther*, Ross plays an important part in keeping Killmonger’s orders from being carried out and bringing the world down into chaos. Ross is a white CIA agent portrayed by Martin Freeman and is tasked with keeping Killmonger’s ships from leaving the borders of Wakanda. *Black Panther* is not about the CIA agent Ross, or the Arms Dealer Ulysses Klaue, played by Andy Serkis even though both are referenced in a manner that recalls the colonialism that inflicted devastation and ruin upon the African continent and brought about the trade of enslaved people to many corners of the world.

Black Panther’s narrative explores the question of whether leaders of Wakanda should do what is right and noble, even if it is painful, or rage and attempt retribution upon those who have wronged those from the African Diaspora. This central question is not one that Ross nor Klaue could answer based on their characterization or experiences

inside the narrative of the story. Both T'Challa and Killmonger, on the other hand, have had experience with the injustice that is prevalent in the world along with the inner struggle to do what is right to confront the injustice, the film grants the Black characters agency, even if they have dark skin and are not part of the hegemony.

The Power of Afrofuturism

Afrofuturism works to extinguish the idea that other people, who are of different races, are the Other and are not deserving of empathy. Afrofuturism seeks to *show*, how the future could *include*, so as to create an empathetic bond. Afrofuturism seeks to eliminate the false division of ethnic groups in Western civilization, particularly inside America, with its history of slavery and prejudice, so that all simply become people, just with different “flavors” and backgrounds. As Womack states:

Afrofuturism is a great tool for wielding the imagination for personal change and societal growth. Empowering people to see themselves and their ideas in the future gives rise to innovators and free thinkers, all of whom can pull from the best of the past while navigating the sea of possibilities to create communities, culture, and a new, balanced world. The imagination is the key to progress, and it's the imagination that is all too often smothered in the name of conformity and community standards. (Womack)

Afrofuturism as a tool for social change is the first major impetus for this project.

Afrofuturism has the potential to help level the playing field for Black people all over the

world. Afrofuturism is a complete and holistic aesthetic, combining various forms of media to help promote science fiction, futurism, and fantasy through the lens of an African and African American perspective. The media runs the gamut from music, as articulated by Sun-Ra and many other artists, to books with Octavia Butler as one of the major practitioners, to TV with noted Black actors like Nichelle Nichols, LeVar Burton, and Avery Brooks to name a few, to the incredible work of the cast of *Black Panther*, including Chadwick Boseman and Michael B. Jordan. In each “venue,” the ideas set forth by Afrofuturism have the potential to foster an understanding between disparate groups, so that rather than being seen as the “Other,” Black people all over the world can be seen as simply humans who have lives to live and stories to tell like any other segment of society. Those stories may be different than the ones told by people of European ancestry, but that does not make them any less important to tell or to hear. Afrofuturism also has the potential to “speak truth to power,” a saying that has taken root in the African American community to denote a challenging of the hegemony and the accepted hegemonic practices of American and Western culture and ideology. Finally, Afrofuturism allows for representation and representatives of various diverse races to be depicted as participating in the wider discussion of culture and cultural values. This practice challenges the hegemony by its very nature, indicating that one group, one monolithic entity, no matter how powerful, does not speak with one voice for everyone, and it allows for a plurality of voices, not to dominate the conversation, but to create a harmony through more and varied voices in the community.

LeVar Burton, the multi-talented actor who is known for a wide variety of important roles, including Kunta Kinta in the mini-series *Roots*, Lieutenant Commander Geordi LaForge in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, and as host of *Reading Rainbow*, notes how the performance of Nichelle Nichols as Uhura in the original *Star Trek* series was an important milestone in his own desire to become an actor:

Representation matters. It mattered in the 60s, it mattered in the 70s. It mattered in the 80s. I mean it matters . . . so seeing Nichelle Nichols in the original series of *Star Trek* meant the world to me as young Black kid growing up in Sacramento, California. I was constantly looking for validation on TV when I was growing up . . . and that's another reason why *Star Trek* was so important because it was rare to see Black people on TV in positive roles. (ABC News)

In the early years of television, many white television executives and politicians only wanted to see African Americans depicted in a way that conformed to stereotypes, and reified the traditional power structure. Afrofuturism not only critiques those stereotypes, but also creates models on how to break from them in a way that opens up the future for everyone, not just some who have power, influence, or money. As LeVar Burton contends in his discussion of the current resistance to Afrofuturistic and Afrofantasy narratives and initiatives: “I think that sense of grievance that has been expressed of late really comes because we’ve turned a corner where we recognize on a grand scale how important representation is. To those who are privileged, equality seems like punishment” (ABC News). When someone no longer gets to determine who matters and why, that loss of

power, that loss of status, and that loss of control, is the punishment, and that is what many with racialized agendas, such as MoreThanAHumanX, are reacting negatively against. Everyone will have access to the future, not just a particular group based on race, previous prejudices, or allegiances to a particular hegemony. The stories that are told are no longer relegated to one hegemonic voice. The stories that Afrofuturism encourages are stories that work to include a multiplicity of diverse voices, even if it is futuristic ideas and narratives as seen through the lens of Blackness.

However, these stories, which resonate throughout the genres of film, music, literature, and into other aesthetic realms such as fashion and art, are not simply conduits for one-way communication, artist to audience. The Afrofuturistic narratives are weaving their way through multiple genres and disciplines affect the outlook of the present and the future for many Africans and many from the African Diaspora.

Robin Roberts, one of the commentators for *Good Morning America*, hosted a segment entitled “The *Black Panther* Effect in Ghana” for *GMA* in which she looked at the impact that *Black Panther* had on the country of Ghana. Roberts describes a futuristic city that is in the initial building stages, Wakanda One, that is “inspired, in part, by the success of *Black Panther* . . . Wakanda One is futuristic, it is a sustainable energy city. There’s hope for change and we have to teach our children to empower people using technology” (*Good Morning America*). This is a far cry from the desolate, despondent image of starvation, famine, and civil war that is often the image that comes to mind for many in the hegemonic part of culture, who Foss defines as those who would like to see

the historically racialized and gendered power structures continue unabated. Danai Gurira, in that same story, describes the pride that she has for Africa, but also the fact that it is a continent that has the potential to be so much more than what many in the West believe it to be. She states, “The aspect of how the film [*Black Panther*] might make people look to the continent—it’s what was already here. The movie is inspired by the real . . . not the other way around” (*Good Morning America*).

However, before Afrofuturism can actually affect change, it needs help from a second, just as important, scholarly tool.

The Power of Rhetorical Empathy

Rhetorical empathy underpins Afrofuturism. Stories of African Americans imagine worlds where space is made for them in society. Those from the African Diaspora are not seen as hinderances to the future, but as coworkers and sharers of new ideas, new visions, and new goals in order to help shape the future into something for everyone. The future is not defined or limited to a privileged few, but to everyone with a goal in mind or a story to tell. Rhetorical empathy, as described by Lisa Blankenship in *Changing the Subject: A Theory of Rhetorical Empathy* (2019), forms the second basic underlying concept of this project. Rhetorical empathy maintains that rhetoric is a communicative act carried out in multiple modes and, through its communication, conveys a variety of meanings, especially for those willing to do detailed analysis of said communication and meanings (Foss 11-21). Blankenship is particularly interested in the

idea of empathy, or the social and communal nature of rhetoric (50), where, through the communicative act, one can see the “self-expression” of others in a way that “disrupts” traditional ways of looking at the world, and other marginalized groups, in particular, in order to form a “collaborative understanding” of new ways of thinking and new knowledge gained from communication (Blankenship 51). In this way, the Other becomes linked to one’s own self, which Erik Leake, a scholar who also investigates rhetorical empathy from a societal standpoint, terms the “self-other overlap,” where the Other becomes *another* member of one’s own society or community, but with differences that are both unique and valued (Leake).

Rather than summarizing the Other in an objective way . . . rhetorical empathy asks writers to bring themselves to the subject in the form of personal stories and to understand the ways in which their own view on a subject or a group of people has been shaped by larger cultural discourses. Rhetorical empathy does not ask that we silence our own perspective, but rather that we foreground our emotions and responses to Others’ stories and ask how power is circulating and functioning in every speech act and rhetorical situation . . . Rhetorical empathy resists the echo chamber of contemporary, digital, and political culture and forces us to engage with the Other in the form of real people with real stories that, chances are, do not align with our own understanding of the world. (118-119)

Science Fiction movies are often large and complex endeavors, taking hundreds of people and hours to complete, especially due to the nature of the special effects that are required

for these futuristic stories. Yet, a YouTube video has more than eighteen million views “Nigerian Teens Make Sci-Fi Films with Smartphones,” posted in 2019, displays the ingenuity and determination of several teenage African filmmakers. These Nigerian teens make their own short science fiction films, with special effects, including using rudimentary technology such as “green fabric” and “a smartphone on a tripod made from a broken microphone stand” (*Africanews*). Godwin Josiah, student and filmmaker, remarks that the goal was not about going viral, but rather “we just wanted people to see that there are kids in Africa who are doing something different” (*Africanews*). The group, who were eight members at the time of the video, call themselves the Critics, and their first film, *Redemption* (2016) is about “two boys who create an organic biofuel.”

Adam Banks would argue that these young Africans exemplify all of the hallmarks of Afrofuturism, taking their passion for futuristic stories and their limited technology, to create short films that deliver on their promise as Africans and filmmakers. The idea that technology democratizes is a key element to the power and promise of Afrofuturism. The Critics have created over twenty such short films and incur “no production costs” as they do *everything* by themselves, but are limited to ten minutes because anything longer is too big and too unwieldy to upload (*Africanews*). One wonders at the manner in which a commentator such as MoreThanAHumanX would find a way to exclude these talented filmmakers from participating in their chosen field of film. Does the fact that these filmmakers choose themes, characters, and settings that are not geared towards “the white middle class [sic]” invalidate their obvious talent,

dedication, and perseverance? Does the knowledge that their movies are only ten minutes long deny them the status as “real” filmmakers because of the hegemony that Hollywood occupies in filmmaking, even though many film schools only require short films from their graduates? Indeed, would MoreThanAHumanX claim that, because these filmmakers did not graduate from a prestigious film school, they are not worthy to work on, direct, or be a part of the Hollywood film industry? While a commenter like MoreThanAHumanX might balk at the lack of a “white middle class [sic]” upbringing, there are, unfortunately, many directors, producers, and investors who would also balk at allowing them access to the Hollywood system, due to the same hegemonic influences (not attending the right school, not knowing the right people) that pervade the system and keep those who are not a part of the hegemony forever on the outside, looking in, despite obvious talent, motivation, and drive. While those producers and investors might not be as explicitly racially motivated as MoreThanAHumanX, the results are the same. In the hegemony, some have access while many others do not, no matter the talent or ability that someone might have, thus making a mockery of the “American Dream” that offers the promise of allowing those with the talent, drive, and desire to rise above their circumstances and succeed.

The Future is Now

Even with an in-depth comparison of many of the scenes in *Black Panther*, I have only looked at the scenes that specifically suggest an Afrofuturistic narrative and the effects of Afrofuturism on social and cultural paradigms. I was not able to look at the movie scene-by-scene, although it might be useful to do so, to see where in the movie Coogler focuses specifically on empathy and representation and where in the narrative he must focus on narrative structures to move the story forward to its conclusion. In addition, as I write these words, *Black Panther Wakanda Forever* has just had its opening weekend where it grossed \$180 million dollars. Reviews from critical sources are largely positive, but online there has been some pushback against the movie. An obvious line of research would be to take a critical look at the sequel to see where it succeeds in matching the scope and near universal praise of Coogler's original work and where the new movie falls short. It would also be worth looking at the critical and scholarly response to the movie as it might show the ways in which many in the online community, particularly males, have resisted the empathetic appeal of the sequel versus the impact of the first movie, as that might indicate the ways in which attitudes have shifted in a post January 6th, 2021, landscape, as well as indicate how the shifting political landscape of the past five years has changed the nature around race in online spaces.

Black Panther Wakanda Forever's narrative very intentionally makes note of the untimely passing of King T'Challa, and in meta-narrative fashion, does so using the imagery and iconography of Chadwick Boseman, the actor, so that the movie has, what Mark Kermode and other critical reviewers called, an "elegiac" quality (Kermode).

Whereas the 2018 *Black Panther* felt like a celebration of African and African American culture, 2022's *Wakanda Forever* seems like both an elegy and expiation of Black grief following the deaths of great Black actors Chadwick Boseman, Sidney Poitier, and Nichelle Nichols, but also in a world that has witnessed the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd. It might also be interesting to do an in-depth comparison between the two movies to understand the ways in which the idea of celebration and grief manifest in these movies specifically, but also in a wider form, perhaps bringing in other Marvel properties such as *Avengers Infinity War*, *Avengers Endgame*, *WandaVision*, and *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness*, which all deal, directly or indirectly, with grief, grieving, and the ways in which grief is expressed or repressed.

Due to my focus on the myriad ways in which *Black Panther* altered the conversation around Afrofuturism, American representations and deliberations on race, and the Trans-Global Black culture, I was not able to delve deeply into other media in order to ascertain how and why *Black Panther's* move into Afrofuturism gained mainstream acceptance, especially when other Afrofuturistic works, perhaps did not enjoy as much mainstream popularity. For example, *The Brother From Another Planet* (1984) seems to have many elements of Afrofuturism and rhetorical empathy in a "proto" form. While the director, John Sayles, situates his movie in the genre of satire, there are still many distinctive elements, such as the sometimes oblique, sometimes explicit references to slavery and the slave trade, that make his runaway alien story a prime

candidate for the genre of Afrofuturism. As Womack states, “Even the term ‘illegal alien,’ often used for undocumented workers moving to nations across the world, plays off fears of otherness, invasion, and takeover . . . Advocates charge that racial profiling and other human rights violations are on the upswing as . . . [those] stereotyped [as an] ‘illegal alien’ fall prey to unjust attacks, violence, or surveillance,” all of which fit the situation of *The Brother* (33).

I would also like to look at more recent media that use Afrofuturistic and Afrofantasy tropes such as HBO’s *The Watchmen*, along with *Lovecraft Country*, two television shows praised for their Black cast members and Afrocentric storylines. *Kindred*, a television adaptation of Octavia Butler’s magnum opus work of Afrofuturism, was just released in 2022. It would be interesting to put *Kindred* in conversation with *Black Panther*, but also with a non-Afrofuturistic work like *Roots* (1977), to see how Afrofuturism changes the conversation about members of the African Diaspora.

While I was able to discuss Sun-Ra and his music in connection to Afrofuturism, I was not able to delve into detail about his movie, *Space is the Place*, released in 1974, nor was I able to cover any of the other major musical artists in the Afrofuturism field to any major degree. Bringing music and fashion into the discussion of *Black Panther* might add an interesting dimension to an analysis of the film’s potential to inspire empathy because of the enhanced appeal to the senses. Much of *Black Panther*’s musical score was created with traditional African instruments and musical cues in mind, something that would be interesting to put into conversation with other Afrofuturistic works of other

musicians. Finally, in the realm of video games, I focused on two major games by major developers and publishers, but there are other games which feature Black characters that I was not able to highlight that might merit additional research, such as *Afro Samurai*, TellTale's *The Walking Dead*, *Watch Dogs 2*, *Deathloop*, and smaller independent games made by Black developers.

My research attempts to answer the call by Lisa Blankenship to discover ways in which rhetorical empathy engages and bridges disparate communities through personal stories. While Blankenship acknowledges that more empirical studies will enhance scholarship about the effects of rhetorical empathy, I saw a link between her work and that of Afrofuturism as described by Ytasha Womack and chose to investigate this linkage in greater detail. The 2018 film *Black Panther* marked a passing of a threshold, proving that audiences, no matter their color, gender, or other affiliations, were willing to engage with, and respond to, a film made predominately by Black talent and starring predominately Black talent, but told a story about possible future that eschewed the traditional historical concepts of colonialism and depredation by the Western world. *Black Panther's* engrossing narrative and powerful message is, in fact, driven largely by Blankenship's conception of rhetorical empathy and the hope that a broader culture might better understand the African and African American experience through the very stories that are told by those from the African Diaspora. *Black Panther* underscores the plight of Blacks in the broader society, but is also a celebration of what it means to be Black in a world where Blackness has too often been defined *for* the Black community, rather than

by the Black community. Much of the criticism on this film emphasizes Black agency and in doing so, uses rhetorical empathy to tell stories and to push the broader world at large, but America in particular, to understand that Blackness—that quality of being African or from the African Diaspora— richly complex, both similar to and distinct from other identities?

Skin color does not define one's contribution to society, world or country. Rather, it is one's expression of hopes and dreams that defines an individual. Afrofuturistic narratives that acknowledge that Black people might have been erased from the history of the past and have often been kept from opportunities that others have enjoyed, but it asserts that all ethnicities, including those from the African Diaspora, have a place in the future, where all possibilities are available to all. Afrofuturism imagines the way the world might change, for the better, when all are included. Afrofuturism helps to build bridges built on rhetorical empathy to connect us to each other, and to connect all of us to the possibilities that tomorrow might bring if we foster deep and inclusive connections with each other not as races but as human beings.

ENDNOTES

1. (Pena, Hancock, & Merola, 2009), (Yee & Bailenson, 2007), (Yee, Bailenson, & Ducheneault, 2009), and (Bem, 1972)

2. Due to the limited scope of the project, I chose to restrict the number of film and video game “texts” to a select few for analysis. My goal with future work is to provide a fuller history of Black film to give the reader a clearer sense of the “break” represented by Afrofuturism.

3. In 2018, *Black Panther* was one of the first mainstream examples of Afrofuturism, even though it was not strictly the first Afrofuturistic film. As such, outside of journal articles and special issues, not many sources were available for study devoted to Afrofuturism in general and *Black Panther* in general. I deliberately chose to supplement my scholarly research with reputable popular sources to make up for the dearth of sustained scholarship in this area. In the interim, quite a few scholarly books have been published. As this project was intended to offer original research, I chose not to integrate these sources into my dissertation for fear of unintentionally appropriating someone else's ideas and arguments. These are the books that are in conversation with my dissertation and that future scholars might wish to explore.

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3. Bukatman, Scott. *Black Panther*. 21st Century Film Essential series. University of Texas Press, 2022.
4. Maryann Erigha. *The Hollywood Jim Crow: The Racial Politics of the Movie Industry*. New York University Press, 2019.
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