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Kimoyo Beads, Multiverses and Crossovers: Establishing (Re)connection in the World of Marvel's *Black Panther*

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Abstract

In the *Black Panther* comics and film, literary plot devices, genre conventions and narrative choices are all used to examine issues of connection. From Vibranium and Kimoyo Beads to the interdisciplinary team of creators that established them, (re)connection is a vital part of the *Black Panther* universe, both inside and out. This article explores how Marvel's *Black Panther* universe can be used to explore the threads of (re)connection that are present within our everyday lives. It establishes how connection takes place within contemporary social movements, such as Black Lives Matter, and considers how *Black Panther* represents this connection as an opportunity for facilitating change and progress.

The issue 52 of Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's *Fantastic Four*, which was first published in July 1966, introduced readers to the fictional African nation of Wakanda and their king, T'Challa, more commonly known as 'Black Panther', a long-time member of the Avengers and one of Marvel's most memorable heroes[1]. Over the last forty years, the *Black Panther* comics have

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[1] After initially appearing in issues 52-54 of Lee and Kirby's *Fantastic Four* comics, the first solo *Black Panther* series was not published until January 1977. However, by the time that T'Challa first starred in his very own comic, he was already an established member of the Avengers, a team that he remains

given readers and academics the opportunity to discuss ideas of Post-Colonialism and Pan-Africanism, as well as the ways in which speculative discourses within popular culture both respond and engage with these ideas.

In 2016, Marvel hired African American journalist and author Ta-Nehisi Coates as the newest head writer of the *Black Panther* comic series[2] . Under Coates, the main *Black Panther* series and its two spin-offs[3], *World of Wakanda* and *Shuri*, have featured narratives that both emphasise and explore the importance of connection, both within the comics themselves and throughout real life. Ryan Coogler's 2018 film shares this focus, as it too explores ideas of transcontinental, social and progressive connection.

Connection can be understood as an integral part of Marvel's *Black Panther*. From its recent comic book run to the blockbuster film, the connection between people, the past and Wakanda itself are essential in the worldbuilding of the fictional African country and the prosperity of its inhabitants. This is materialised, for instance, in Kimoyo Beads, the audio-visual communication devices by which all Wakanda citizens are connected. These are worn as a bracelet and used for phones calls, accessing the internet and storing the wearer's personal information.

Kimoyo Beads were first introduced by Ta-Nehisi Coates during the 'All-New, All-Different Marvel' event, which retconned multiple Marvel

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apart of to this day. Over the last fifty or so years, T'Challa has battled numerous foes, both from his own rogues gallery and the wider Marvel mythos. The series has also gone through many head writers, most notably Don McGregor, Reginald Hudlin and Ta-Nehisi Coates. T'Challa has participated in both of Marvel's *Civil War* storylines, is the ex-husband of *X-Men*'s Storm and remains one of the most popular and well-known Black superheroes.

[2] Ta-Nehisi Coates is an African American writer who received the MacArthur Fellowship in 2015. He is known for writing about social and political issues, such as racial oppression and white supremacy. Under the creative direction of Coates, the *Black Panther* comics have been both commercially and critically successful, leading to multiple comic book spin-offs and the inclusion of *Black Panther* within the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

[3] In 2017, Ta-Nehisi Coates and Roxane Gay developed a limited spin-off series, *World of Wakanda*, which was written by Gay and illustrated by Afua Richardson and Alitha E. Martinez. In 2019, *Black Panther*'s second spin-off series *Shuri* was published by Marvel. The limited series was written by the Nigerian-American speculative author Nnedi Okorafor and illustrated by artist Leonardo Romero.

properties and marked the beginning of Coates' run as head writer. Since 2018, Kimoyo Beads have become an integral part of the *Black Panther* mythos, and like real-life social media, have become a platform for organising social change, sharing information and gathering support for progressive ideas (Nien, 2017).

Kimoyo Beads are reminiscent of some of the other gadgets that can be found within the science-fiction genre, such as the sonic screwdriver in *Doctor Who* or the Pip-Boy in the *Fallout* franchise, and are one of the reasons why *Black Panther* is widely considered an Afrofuturistic text. American academic Alondra Nelson defines Afrofuturism as "African American voices with other stories to tell about culture, technology and things to come" (2002, p. 9). Whereas Mark Dery, who first coined the term in *Flame Wars*, defines it as "speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of the twentieth-century technoculture" (1994, p. 180).

African American concerns are explored both within the Afrofuturistic world of *Black Panther* and real-life social and political movements. Shared concerns or ideas can provide common ground between individuals and interested parties, which can result in collaborations that aim to challenge or push back against the societal issues and problems that impact them most. Afrofuturistic representations highlight how technology facilitates these connections, as well as African American culture and shared heritage.

In *Shuri*, we learn of the Egungun, a Pan-African alliance created by T'Challa to connect Wakanda, untouched by colonialism and technologically superior, with the rest of the African continent (Okorafor et al., 2019). The Egungun is a fictional committee featuring representatives from countries all over Africa and serves to connect Wakanda with the wider continent. It is an alliance that provides key information and allyship, but also a chance for the isolated Wakanda to reconnect with their African roots, heritage, and the concerns of their peers. Furthermore, Wakanda is always portrayed as a

country that is irrefutably connected with its own history and heritage. This can be seen through Necropolis, the Wakandan city of the dead, and most importantly, the series' representation of the magical realm known as Djalia, the plane of Wakandan memory.[4] During Coates' *A Nation Under Our Feet* arc, Shuri is trapped in the Djalia in a state of "living death" (Coates et al., 2017). This is an experience that not only changes the trajectory of the main series' arc but also leads us into the narrative and ethos of Nnedi Okorafor's 2019 solo series *Shuri*.

In *Shuri,* the eponymous heroine receives the mantle of 'Ancient Future', as she is thrust into a role that grants her the spiritual and magical abilities to both communicate with and consult her Djalia ancestors (Okorafor et al., 2019). Steadman, Palmer and Tilley reiterate Abraham's statement that ancestor worship and its associated traditions are more akin to "methods of communication" than rituals (Abraham 1966, quoted in Steadman et al., p. 63). This is a notion that can be applied to T'Challa and Shuri's relationship with their ancestors, both within the comics and throughout Coogler's film. These characters' unbreakable connection with their ancestors and the spiritual plane allows them to use the knowledge, wisdom and traditions of the Wakandans and monarchs that came before them.

Shuri and *Black Panther* provide the basis for how a connection with our historical past and heritage can help to both create and strengthen the different types of connection that are taking place within contemporary society, such as political and social activism. Ultimately, *Black Panther* presents connection as an essential factor in combatting social issues and facilitating meaningful change and progression as a society.

In general, connection is a required and essential component within the superhero genre of comics. This is apparent in the comic convention of

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[4] In the *Black Panther* mythos, the Djalia is the Wakandan plane of ancestral memory. The Djalia is a transcendent and spiritual plane full of Wakanda's ancestors and Griots: mystical storytellers and historians that guide the living.

crossovers, in which different superheroes team up to fight a common enemy or shared injustice. Long-running crossover series in comics include Marvel's *Avengers* and DC Comics' *Justice League*, which both represent the teamwork and connections formed between their superheroes as a fundamental part of their success in taking down the big bad and fighting evil. The representations of these kinds of teams in comics asks readers to consider how collaborations, unity and alliances might influence change, solve problems and lead to greater impacts within contemporary society.

Collaboration is also imperative in the creation of the American syndicated comic book, as Marvel comic books are highly collaborative projects worked on by a team of writers, artists, letterers, colourists, editors, advertisers and publicists (Rendace, 2000). At Marvel, there can be no comic books without connection. Connection is also necessary to bring together the words, images and ideas depicted within a comic in order to form a cohesive narrative and to achieve closure. Closure in comics is what Scott McCloud describes as the "phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole," (2017, p. 63) and it is necessary to give the comic book structure, as well as to convey time and motion within the comic book medium.

Importance is placed upon the conjunctions and collaborations that can be witnessed in both the narrative and creative form of the *Black Panther* texts. However, connections do not always prosper in real life as well as they do within the superhero genre (Gleiser, 2013). Nonetheless, I propose that the representation of progressive and ambitious connections within the *Black Panther* comics and film provides readers and audiences with hope, inspiration and the suggestion that by coming together they too might be able to produce and facilitate real change in their everyday lives.

This is significant as the narratives and depictions of connection within the *Black Panther* universe mirror the real-life strategies and actions of movements such as Black Lives Matter, who rely on connection and collaboration to spread awareness of their political and social beliefs

(Schuschke and Tynes, 2016). Social protests and activism use different forms of connection to inspire, organise and inform, all strategies that the *Black Panther* texts represent as both successful and impactful.

In the world of Marvel's *Black Panther*, and the fictional country of Wakanda itself, connection is not only significant but becomes essential in understanding and exploring the stories and characters that they portray. Furthermore, their representations of connection and collaboration reflect and comment on the ways in which connection is important in our own lives. This essay will examine how these representations mirror similar strategies and actions used by social activists and movements within real life. It will consider how connection is depicted to both audiences and readers as something that can facilitate and bolster real-life campaigns, collaborations, and organisations so that meaningful change and progression can be achieved. This article will explore how the *Black Panther* comics and film provide hope and inspiration, depicting how, by coming together, we too might be able to produce and facilitate real change in our everyday lives. In this sense, this article explores the ways in which the *Black Panther* mythos can possibly portray connection as a real and viable opportunity for social progress.

Kimoyo Beads, The Djalia and The Egungun

As it was already explained, Kimoyo Beads are pieces of wearable technology that are worn by all citizens of Wakanda. Kimoyo Beads, as shown in Figure 1, keep the wearer informed of events happening within Wakandan society, store health or personal information and serve as the Wakandans' primary form of communication (Okorafor et al., 2019). The Beads are made from Vibranium, a fictional and highly coveted metal responsible for Wakanda's technological advantages and most famously, Captain America's shield[5].

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[5] Vibranium is an expensive and rare fictional metal which first appeared in issue 53 of Marvel's *Fantastic Four*. It can only be found in the fictional African nation of Wakanda and originates from a

Figure 1: A close up of Okoye's Kimoyo beads in Shuri (Okorafor et al. 2019, p. 91.)

Vibranium is one of the rarest materials in the whole of Marvel lore and can only be found in Wakanda. Martin Lund argues that "Lee and Kirby's Wakanda is a composite of colonial imagery" and describe it as a "tribal kingdom with highly desirable natural resources" (2016, p. 8). However, Wakanda has never experienced the horrors of colonialism first-hand, apart from interactions with the villain Ulysses Klaw[6].

Contemporary depictions of Wakanda subvert colonial stereotypes by depicting how they use Vibranium for their own financial and technological gain. Vibranium is also used as a device for exploring ideas of Afrofuturism, such as the notion that by "redeploying technological devices or scientific knowledge", African-American ideas, imagination and experiences can be explored (Bennett, 2016, p. 92). This represents a departure from past depictions; in issue 53 of *Fantastic Four*, for instance, Vibranium was depicted through a colonialist and imperialistic lens, with Reed Richards commenting that it could "be worth a fortune to our missile

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meteorite that crashed into the Earth thousands of years ago. Vibranium absorbs vibrations and kinetic energy and is virtually indestructible.

[6] Ulysses Klaw is an enemy of the Fantastic Four and the Black Panther who has appeared within both the Marvel comics and Cinematic Universe. In both the comics and films, Klaw is an international criminal who steals and sells Vibranium from Wakanda.

program alone!" (Lee and Kirby, 1961, p. 5). Little attention was paid then to how the Vibranium could be used within Wakanda itself, or for the African nation's own improvement and reward. In recent years, the origin of Vibranium has been elaborated upon and now has multiple uses within Wakandan society, as well as newfound importance and significance. Kimoyo Beads are themselves made from Vibranium and provide a constant reminder of a Wakandan's connection to their homeland and history. It is interesting to note that Wakanda uses their Vibranium to create opportunities for communication and innovative technologies, as opposed to the destructive and imperialistic uses first suggested by the Fantastic Four.

In the world of *Black Panther*, Kimoyo Beads act as a vessel for connection between the Wakandan people and their homeland, right down to the Vibranium meteorite that their Beads are crafted from. Kimoyo Beads have become a wearable symbol of belonging within Wakandan society and are "at the forefront of performances of cultural and national identity" (Ndakalako-Bannikov, 2020, p. 74). Kimoyo Beads are both a way of celebrating Wakandan culture and innovation, and also a way of communicating and sharing their ideas, morals and beliefs. Kimoyo Beads, and the ways that they are used and depicted within the *Black Panther* mythos, are comparable to social media, and how individuals use it to portrays themselves and their identity, whilst also using it as a tool to inform and share ideas with others (Hogan, 2010; Wilkins et al., 2019).

The representation of Kimoyo Beads as a wearable and cultural symbol marks it as performative, drawing comparisons to how we present ourselves, our culture and our identities on social media (Hogan, 2010). Performative expressions of identity, such as symbols, names and appearances, allow individuals to both express and partake in collective forms of identity (Ben-Cnaan, 2010). Similarly, performative activism has been understood as a form of action that takes place "instead of a true desire and intention to usurp systemic oppression" (Holmes, 2020, p.804); it is, in

this way, when individuals or corporations try to align themselves with allies and activists for recognition, reputation and other self-interested reasons. Hashtag activism is a term that has been used to describe online social movements that are mainly performative in nature – as described above – but that nonetheless highlight prominent social issues, narratives and ideas (Yang, 2016). Although online campaigns and Hashtag activism are complicated by "performative activism and allyship" (Holmes, 2020, p. 805), they still unquestionably create a connection between individuals, bringing them together using shared experiences, ideas and beliefs. Kimoyo Beads in *Black Panther* provide an Afrofuturistic portrayal of how this kind of connection can be successful, making it possible to establish real-life comparisons of how we are already facilitating and creating it within wider society.

However, Kimoyo Beads are not only performative: they are so interwoven into a Wakandan's sense of identity, that the simple act of taking them off is represented as an act of isolating oneself or as severing ties to one's homeland. In Figure 2, Aneka, a former officer of the Dora Milaje[7], is portrayed as removing her Kimoyo band before declaring herself stateless (Coates et al., 2016). The act of removing her Kimoyo Beads is spread out between three panels, placing significance on why Aneka is removing them and the apparent ramifications that she may face. The removal of Aneka's Kimoyo band is symbolic of the Midnight Angels[8] severed connection with T'Challa and the Wakandan monarchy but also signifies the beginning of a stronger connection between the Dora Milaje and the rest of the Wakandan people.

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[7] The Dora Milaje are an all-female and elite group of Wakandan special forces, who are assigned to protect and serve the Wakandan monarchy. They also serve as the personal bodyguards of the Black Panther and make an oath to protect the Wakandan royal family and citizens. The Dora Milaje were originally created as wives-in-training for the Wakandan king, but in recent times are much more independent and willing to challenge the monarchy's practices and decisions.

[8] When Aneka and Ayo are expelled from the Dora Milaje, they are named 'The Midnight Angels' after the prototype armour that they steal from the Wakanda Design Group's lab. The prototype armour is technologically advanced and gives Ayo and Aneka the ability to fly. The Midnight Angels consequently use the stolen armour to help solve some of Wakanda's problems and injustices, such as preventing the trafficking of women out of the country and into the wider continent.

Figure 2: Aneka removes her Kimoyo band and declares herself stateless (Coates et al. 2016, p. 101).

The removal of Aneka's Kimoyo Bead is almost entirely performative, as she remains connected to her people and committed to fighting for their democracy, rights and safety. However, as discussed previously, performative actions can still foster connections, inspire others and create collaboration between similarly minded individuals. The performative actions that both connect and disconnect in *Black Panther* can be used to consider how similar events and discourses operate within our own society and the effect that they have on social or political movements.

In June 2020, millions of people posted black squares to Instagram in support of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. This momentous act of Hashtag activism, satirically referred to as 'Black Square Summer', was intended to create a connection between individuals and the activists of BLM

and create a sense of strength in numbers (Okafor, 2020). However, like the removal of Aneka's Kimoyo band, these actions were primarily performative. Just as Aneka remains a citizen and representative of Wakanda regardless of whether or not she is wearing her Kimoyo band, it can be argued that many of the Instagram users that participated in 'Black Square Summer' remain complicit in the oppression of Black people and have not taken direct action since then to help achieve social or political change.

Thanks in part to Aneka and the rest of the Midnight Angels, Wakanda is able to reconnect its people's interests with that of the monarchy through collaboration and meaningful mitigation. These representations respond to some of the conflicts and tensions that are taking place within contemporary society, such as the murder of Breonna Taylor in March 2020. Following weeks of protests, outrage and civil unrest, both in Kentucky and across the world, the Louisville city council unanimously voted to ban no-knock search warrants (Duvall, 2020). Because of the response to Breonna's death and the conversations between protestors, Breonna's family and politicians that followed, Senator Rand Paul also introduced the 'Justice for Breonna Taylor Act', which prevents federal police from carrying out a warrant until they "provide notice of their authority and purpose" (Justice for Breonna Taylor Act, 2020). Black Panther, therefore, offers the possibility to think about how fictional narratives can be used to examine and approach problems that are taking place within wider society and how they could potentially be remedied through communication, mitigation and protest.

It is not just the connection between the Wakandan people that is explored within the world of *Black Panther*, as the Africa-Wakanda 'Egungun' alliance revealed in *Shuri* offers up a way of approaching real-life ideas of Pan-Africanism and transcontinental connections. The Pan-African committee Egungun are named after the Yoruba word for masquerades, which have ties to ancestral reverence and Orisha worship (Aremu, 1991).

The Egungun are portrayed as possessing information beyond what is available through the Kimoyo Net, which is exclusively used by Wakanda and its people (Okorafor et al., 2019). The Egungun encourages Wakanda to partake in wider African and worldwide issues, something that they have traditionally avoided throughout their history.

Like the comics, Coogler's film also portrays a Wakanda hesitant to enter the world stage and get involved in western conflicts and politics. The film makes some changes to the plot of the comics, such as the removal of Wakanda's relationship with the X-men and history with the Fantastic Four, but maintains a connection to its roots in its portrayal of Wakanda as an isolated yet strong nation. *Black Panther* (2018) ends with T'Challa's promise to share Wakanda's resources and technology with the rest of Africa and the world. This is an action that Aiyesimoju believes to symbolise "healthy global interaction without undermining national and continental sovereignty and individuality" (2018, p. 96). It also allows for Africa to help Wakanda come up with solutions for their own problems that cannot be fixed with technology or by a superhero head of state.

Through the Egungun, Wakanda is reconnected with the rest of the African continent. This provides them with an opportunity for greater allyship and the sharing of key information that the isolated Wakanda might be missing or oblivious to, as shown in Figure 3. In *Shuri*, Okoye and Ramonda are surprised at the existence of such an alliance, but more importantly, are enthusiastic at the prospect of such a connection and the opportunities that it creates (Okorafor et al., 2019). It could be suggested that after many years of isolation, albeit not geographically, Wakandans possess the same "desperation to reconnect" as African Americans and other members of the African diaspora (Bolaji, 2015, p. 83).

This 'desperation to reconnect' can also be seen in African American's consumption of African culture and representation. Emmanuel Akyeampong argues that this consumption of African culture is a way for
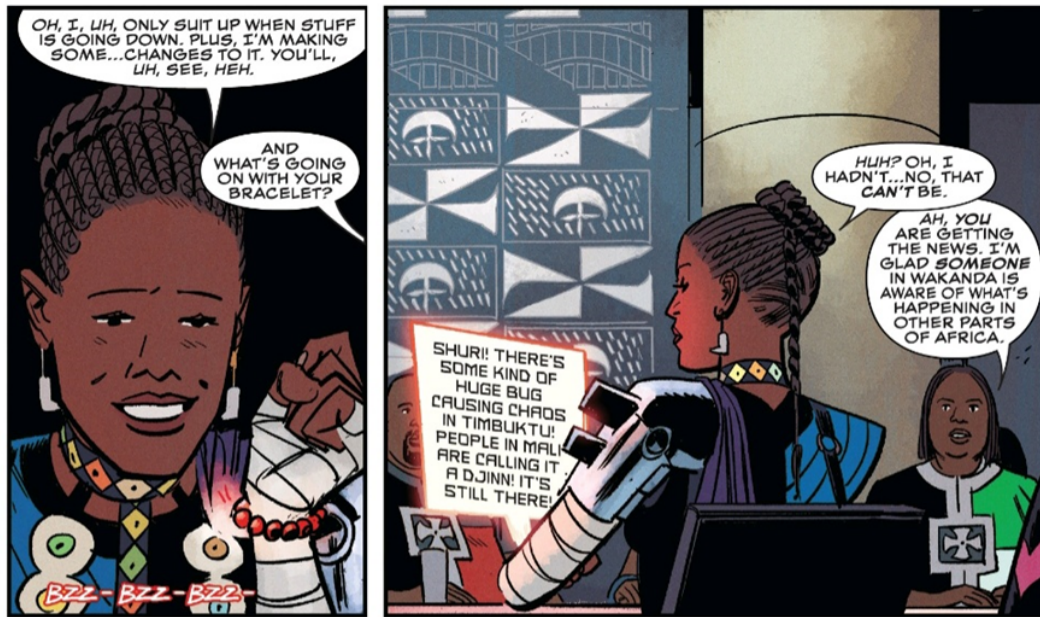
Figure 3: Shuri's first meeting with the Egungun (Okorafor et al. 2019, p. 75).

African Americans, and other members of the African diaspora, to maintain an "African spirit" (2000, p. 193). The representation of Killmonger[9] within the *Black Panther* film sets up Wakanda as a metaphor for the many "natural or cultural heritage sites" throughout the African continent, that scholars such as JoAnn McGregor and Lyn Schumaker argue are "places where identity is shaped and emotions of awe or pride are invoked" (2006, p. 652).

The *Black Panther* universe highlights how both comics and films' representation of African Americans and African culture can also be considered places where identities are shaped and similar emotions are invoked. Richard Dyer argues that "how social groups are treated in cultural representation is part and parcel of how they are treated in real life" (2002, p. 1). It could therefore be suggested that these images are used by African

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[9] Erik 'Killmonger' Stevens is T'Challa's cousin who was born and raised in America. In *Black Panther*, Killmonger conspires to dethrone T'Challa and uses Wakanda's technology to liberate and empower Black people all over the world. Erik is a US veteran, whose extensive kill record as a special operative first earned him the nickname 'Killmonger'. In *Black Panther,* King T'Chaka killed Erik's father for committing treason by helping Ulysses Klaw steal a cache of Wakanda's vibranium, setting him on an unwavering path towards revenge.

American readers to consider ideas of oppression and social reality as well as identity and culture. These representations emphasise how African Americans use such responses to form collective identities and find similarities between their cultures, heritage and experiences. These connections can then be used to help form or sustain social groups or as a basis for collective action or protest.

Wakanda and the rest of the African continent are connected by a shared origin: a portrait of an Africa before colonialism and untouched by external sources, separated by the struggles, conflict and transfigurations that have followed within Marvel's fictional history. Shuri even goes as far as calling Wakanda before Vibranium, and by extension pre-colonial Africa, "savage", much to the outrage of the Griots in the Djalia (Coates et al., 2017, p. 83). Shuri's comment is reminiscent of colonial and imperialistic literary stereotypes that have been used to both portray and oppress Africans within popular culture (Stam and Spence, 1983). However, by using this particular piece of racially coded language, Okorafor is actually aiming to subvert and question these stereotypes, rather than perpetuate them.

Nnedi Okorafor's use of the word 'savage' alludes to stereotypes that have been utilised before within film and literature and serves to make the reader question both this language and other established Western representations of Africa throughout history and popular culture (Diawara, 1993). Furthermore, Shuri's comment exposes some of Wakanda's hidden prejudices towards the rest of the continent, which might even be shared by the readers themselves.

Shuri's colonialist language is reminiscent of the Nationalistic discourses that took place in Post-colonial Africa, where African culture, achievements and advancements were "counterposed to essentialised Western colonial notions of backwardness, atavism, and absence of culture" (Neocosmos, 2003, p. 24). Wakanda aims to distance themselves from western stereotypes and expectation of what Africa is or is perceived to be.

However, like the rest of post-colonial Africa, Wakanda is also tasked with fostering new trans-continental connections and finding ways in which they can work "together in unity towards a common goal" (Beyers, 2019, p. 5).

The portrayal of the Egungun within the *Shuri* comics highlights the importance of Wakanda reconnecting with the wider African continent for them to be able to fully understand their own history and prejudices. The existence of the Egungun alongside the introduction of transcontinental supervillains and threats such as Mali's Moses Magnum, gives the continent, as it is portrayed within the Marvel universe, a chance to reconnect, share their experiences and use their joint knowledge to overcome any challenges or problems that they may face in their uncertain and mysterious future (Okorafor et al., 2019).

The Egungun do not make an appearance in Coogler's film, but both Nakia and Killmonger are portrayed as actively opposing Wakanda's policy of isolation[10]. Rosemary Onyango argues that Killmonger's "plight enables us to contemplate conflicts that damage relationships within family and nations and how they can be resolved" (2018, p. 41). Although his plan is deeply flawed and inherently villainous, Killmonger's call for (re)connection is a legitimate one. This is something that even T'Challa acknowledges, as his closing pledge in *Black Panther* (2018) not only promises connection but also to honour the dreams that Killmonger was willing to both kill and die for. In *Black Panther*, Killmonger's death catalyses the creation of new forms of communication and collaboration, between Wakanda, the African continent and the rest of the world.

Communication is one of Wakanda's most important forms of connection, both between the Wakandans themselves and regarding how

[10] Nakia is T'Challa's childhood sweetheart and a former member of the Dora Milaje who longs for Wakanda to play its part in fighting Africa's injustices. In Coogler's 2018 film, Nakia is a member of the Wakandan War Dogs: A spy who uses her Dora Milaje training to fight against the Boko Haram and go on missions all over the world.

they establish a meaningful connection with the outside world. It could be suggested that this is representative of modern-day Africa, as, like Bolaji (2015) has explained, the increased availability and accessibility of affordable mobile phones has connected Africa and its diaspora in a way that has never been possible thus far. Anna-Leena Toivanen states that "communication technologies enable the intertwinement of the local and the global", especially in how it is represented within literature and popular culture (2016, p. 138). This entwinement opens up Africa to globalisation and neo-colonialist advances, but also provides opportunities for connection between families, nations and diasporas.

Another form of communication that is prevalent throughout both contemporary Africa and Marvel's depiction of Wakanda is the sharing of memories or oral stories (Champion, 2002). This is represented in Shuri's constant council with her ancestors and in what Shuri is told by her ancestors in the Djalia, during her state of 'living death':

> Here we will arm you, not with the spear, but with the drum, for it is the drum that carries the greatest power of them all [..] The power of memory, daughter. The power of our song. (Coates et al., 2017, p. 74).

Memory and shared memory are therefore not only an important way of reconnecting Wakanda to the interests and realities of the wider African continent but also become a way of forming connections through histories, memories, songs and tradition. It has been stated that "the principal connection of the cultures of the African continent is undoubtedly their oral tradition, particularly in the art of storytelling," and that like the comic book medium itself it is a "special union of image and idea" (Huber and Jonaitytė, 2020, p. 138).

Kimoyo Beads, the Djalia and the Egungun all connect Wakanda's past and present with their potential futures. In *Shuri*, connection is

portrayed as a real opportunity for securing further development, stability and Wakanda's ongoing prosperity:

> You should walk away from the mantle. Walk beyond it. Work with the Egungun; your brother was right to join with them. Strengthen those connections with the rest of Africa, in person and with your technologies. (Okorafor et al., 2019, p. 167)

Although the 'Black Panther' mantle allows Shuri to continue feeling connected to Wakanda, her duties as princess, and her brother, it is, in fact, her relationships and technology that keep her connected to her homeland and the path that has been set out for her by her ancestors. Ramzi Fawaz suggests that "within the generic conventions of the superhero story, this relationship to others is often framed as a guardianship of humanity or, more expansively, of all life in the cosmos" (2018, p. 24). However, Shuri subverts this trope, making the connection between Wakanda's superheroes and citizens one of collaboration, which facilitates joint custody over their country and its future. This is further explored in Wakanda's transition into a republic as well as the tension between T'Challa's positions as both superhero and monarch.

In the comics and films of the *Black Panther* universe, it is not just representations of (re)connection that are worth exploring. It is also beneficial to consider the form and design that such representations take, as well as how they are created and conceived. Representations of connection within the *Black Panther* franchise take place within both the film and the comic book form. These representations take place within film, literature and other forms of popular culture because they allow us to explore the connections between fictional texts and real-life (Short, 1993). Furthermore, they also allow us to examine the processes that go into creating these works of fiction and the connection which is required to successfully create, edit, market and publish them.

Comic Books as Connection

Connection is not only explored in the narrative and lore of the *Black Panther* mythos but through the comic book tropes and genre conventions that are utilised by its creators. *Black Panther, Shuri* and *World of Wakanda* are American syndicated comic books that are published by Marvel, a commercial comics publisher that has been owned by Disney since 2009. Superhero comics, such as those published by Marvel, have historically had strong connections with American identity, values and politics (Fawaz, 2016). Marvel has had a longstanding rivalry with DC Comics, and together they hold a combined market share of almost 65% within the United States alone (Watson, 2020).

Therefore, it is important to consider the *Black Panther* comics and film within the corporative context of the publishing giant that Marvel has become, and how the franchises' representations and narratives are influenced by the series' marketability, targeted audiences and potential profits. Furthermore, Marvel has a proven track record of interfering with comic book creators' independence and work, forcing them into poor financial deals and taking away the artistic control of their creations (Elbein, 2016). These comic books are not only the product of collaboration between artists and writers but are also the result of connections between cultural production, marketability and commercialisation.

Nonetheless, this type of comic book is significant as it is a form that relies on the connection between words and panels and between the images in the panels themselves. This is a relationship that has been commented on by comic book illustrator Brain Stelfreeze, who worked on 2016's *Black Panther* series alongside head writer Ta-Nehsi Coates:

> Writing comics and drawing comics is a really very specific art form. It's a lot easier to get it wrong than it is to get it right. I was a little bit nervous about the person who comes from a medium where you do all the work yourself. Comics really require extreme collaboration: you set things up, then the next guy has to come along and then the next guy

has to come along […] throwing things back and forth and challenging each other. (Khal, April 2016)

The US syndicated comic book is a medium that requires collaboration between creators in order to exist and the finished product, therefore, represents an amalgamation of different ideas, disciplines, experiences and vision. It is also influenced and warped by corporate decisions, trends within popular culture and the product's overall ability to sell. Coates himself has commented on how Stelfreeze's expertise has challenged him to be "more expressive in his scripting", something that intrinsically affects how we as readers perceive things like the balance between dialogue and acting in a panel, or maybe even the lack thereof (Khal, 2016b).

Comic books, however, do not only 'challenge' their creators, but also their readers to think beyond the characters and the plot itself, and to form their own interpretations and meanings. *Black Panther* also challenges its readers to think about the connection in their own lives, how it is formed and the effect that it has on our experiences and wider society. Robert Stam and Louise Spence state that when looking at representation within film and popular culture, we must "pay attention to the mediations which intervene between 'reality' and 'representation'" (Stam and Spence, 1983, p. 11). Therefore, the mediations that take place within the *Black Panther* franchise include commercial practices, wider societal discourses and representations of race. The relationship between representations and reality is in itself a connection worth examining in its own right.

The characters of the *Black Panther* mythos are popular members of the overall Marvel roster and the Marvel Cinematic Universe. As a result of this, the series often employs the use of common comic book and superhero genre clichés or conventions. As it was already mentioned, this includes one of the biggest industry mainstays: the superhero crossover. A superhero crossover is a film or comic where characters from different series or fictional

narratives come together, usually, to form a super-team, take down a common threat or respond to a crisis (Beaty, 2016, p. 323).

Superhero crossovers have become a norm within both the comic book and film industries, as they are usually commercially successful and popular with audiences (Beaty, 2016, p. 324). In 2019, *Avengers: Endgame* broke box office records and DC Comics' TV crossover *Crisis on Infinite Earth*s proved popular with critics and fans alike (Rotten Tomatoes, 2019). Marvel's 2006 *Civil War* crossover storyline is considered one of the greatest comic book events of all time and the 2016 movie adaptation was the first MCU film to introduce the *Black Panther* characters and universe to the big screen (*Captain America: Civil War*, 2016).

Superhero crossovers facilitate and connect communities through excitement, criticism and response. They serve to connect fandoms through shared experiences whilst also forming bonds or connections within each universe's canon and lore. *Avengers: Endgame* is the highest-grossing film of all time and brought together all of the Marvel Cinematic Universe in an epic battle against the 'Mad Titan' Thanos, including the characters of Coogler's *Black Panther* (Box Office Mojo, 2020)

Superhero crossovers are an important establisher of (re)connection within the *Black Panther* universe. Collaborations and impromptu team-ups feature throughout both the comics and film, from Shuri's intergalactic body swap with Groot from the Guardians of the Galaxy to X-Men leader Storm's frequent visits to Wakanda. In the comics, T'Challa is an established member of The Avengers and Shuri is no stranger to the odd team-up herself, having assisted the New-York based Champions team within her own series (Okorafor et al., 2019).

Crossovers, such as the ones that take place within the Marvel Cinematic Universe, act as a catalyst for connection in a similar way to which the Egungun and multiple crossovers do within the comics: by creating communities and groups that share information, ideas and experiences.

After the events of *Captain America: Civil War*, Wakanda slowly begins to open itself up to the outside world, forming new allegiances and connections with the Avenger initiative, United Nations and other characters within the MCU.[11] In *Endgame*, T'Challa, Shuri and Okoye play an important part in taking down Thanos and ultimately saving the world from his agenda of global destruction (*Avengers: Endgame*, 2019).

Furthermore, the connection formed between Shuri, T'Challa and Bucky Barnes, The Winter Soldier, also plays an important part in his recovery and redemption. Bucky was hidden in Wakanda following the events of *Civil War*, his injuries healed by Shuri and Wakanda's advanced Vibranium technology (*Black Panther*, 2018). At first glance, Wakanda's protection of Bucky, despite the wrongs that he had committed against their nation, seems to convey a "more positive interaction between people of different cultures" (Glenn and Cunningham, 2009, p. 136). However, it also invokes a worrying stereotype, which has long been present both within film and literature: the 'Magical Negro'.

The Magical Negro is a racialised stereotype which Glenn and Cunningham describe as "magical or spiritually gifted" Black characters that "focus their abilities toward assisting their White lead counterparts" (2009, p. 135). Films and narratives that feature the 'Magical Negro' stereotype "marginalise Black agency" and "empower normalised and hegemonic forms of whiteness" (Hughey, 2009, p. 543). Although the narrative does portray how Wakanda are using newfound relationships and connections to become a more progressive and benevolent nation, this portrayal also risks the presentation of *Black Panther*'s heroes as racial stereotypes and tropes.

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[11] In *Captain America: Civil War,* a group of Wakandan humanitarian workers are accidentally killed by Wanda Maximoff in a showdown between the Avengers and the supervillain Crossbones. As a result of this, King T'Chaka of Wakanda and his son, T'Challa, attend a UN conference in Vienna where the Sokovia Accords, which would hopefully prevent any similar incidents, are set to be ratified. At the conference, T'Chaka is killed by a bomb planted by a mind-controlled Bucky Barnes, leaving T'Challa as Wakanda's ruler and forcing him to take on the mantle of Black Panther.

In the Marvel Cinematic Universe, T'Challa and Shuri act as 'Magical Negroes', who use Wakanda's inherent spirituality, magic and technological advancements to heal white protagonists, support Western regimes and to remedy American problems or conflicts. Although the depiction of Wakanda within the MCU could be considered an example of how "ideal harmonious relationships" are developing between Black people and their oppressors, this kind of connection also exposes the ongoing oppression that is being examined by these kinds of narratives (Glenn and Cunningham, 2009, p. 137).

The audience and reader's response to this kind of representation, including issues of race and stereotyping, also lay the foundation for another kind of connection. When watching films such as *Black Panther*, audiences become active spectators that question portrayals that oppress or distort the representation of minorities through stereotypes, tropes and genre conventions (Diawara, 1993, p. 219). By sharing interpretations and relating to other individuals' experiences of these representations, these views and responses can be connected to wider social issues and movements, feeding into their actions and ideas. Audiences have always been able to connect what they see and read within popular culture with wider social issues, conflicts and oppressions taking place within their everyday lives. Superhero crossovers therefore also provide an opportunity for exploring how these fictional narratives and representations crossover with the events and examples that are happening right now within our own realities.

Furthermore, Bart Beaty suggests that the appearance of characters across different titles helps to "establish the sense of a shared universe" (2016, p. 322). These crossovers not only create the effect of a 'shared universe' within the Marvel canon but also within our everyday lives. Crossovers feature the genre tropes and conventions of the superhero genre and use them to champion real-life collaborations and social movements. These narratives portray teamwork and direct action as viable means for tackling real-life problems and injustices. Black Lives Matter is just one

example of a social movement that has used the notion of a 'shared universe' to connect its supporters through their shared experiences and opinions.

Black Lives Matter's supporters are connected by their shared beliefs, which they use to organise social-based campaigns and protests (Edwards and Harris, 2015). Like social movements such as Black Lives Matter, Superhero teams are formed around the notion that they are all in it together (Mundt et al., 2018). This same philosophy applies to the Egungun within the *Black Panther* comics, as well as the Pan-Africanist arguments and groups that they embody. These narratives, therefore, emphasise how organised social movements within the United States are connected by a shared sense of moral duty, determination, and kinship.

Likewise, it is important to restate the role that Kimoyo Beads and technology play in both connecting and unifying the people of Wakanda within the *Black Panther* universe. I have also mentioned the similarities in the way that both social media and Kimoyo Beads can be used by different social groups and movements to facilitate collaboration, share information and organise effective action. Figure 4 shows how Wakanda uses this technology to organise their own response to Thanos' threat in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), as well as how they share the information with the rest of the Avengers to create a collective, informed plan of attack.

Figure 4: Okoye and T'Challa use the Kimoyo bead's communication and information technologies to strategize Wakanda and the rest of the Avengers response to Thanos' army (Avengers: Infinity War, 2018, 01:33:20).

69

This scene centres on the information made available by the Kimoyo Beads and how the Avengers use it to protect both themselves and the Golden City of Wakanda. Both the overhead camera angle and the centralised lighting shifts the scene's focus to Okoye. T'Challa and Kimoyo Beads are centred in this scene, with the rest of the Avengers spread out around them. The rest of the Avengers remain oblivious to the incoming threat until Okoye verbally informs them. By the time that the Falcon Sam Wilson, one of the only Avengers with a direct view of the sky during this scene, attempts to alert them of Thanos' dropships, Wakanda's Vibranium shield has already been switched on, destroying an enemy spaceship on impact. This scene emphasises the importance of the Kimoyo net as well as the connection, communication and safety that it provides. Through the representation of the collaboration and unity between Earth's mightiest heroes, the film provides a speculative lens through which we can consider how social movements and protests use technology or social media to efficiently share their own resources and information to enact and influence change.

Conclusion

The world of Marvel's *Black Panther* offers up a visual and narrative representation of the different kinds of connection that we encounter in real life, as well as the connective practices that unify social movements, audiences and communities. Through Kimoyo Beads, the Egungun and the Djalia, the *Black Panther* comics and film represent the creation and sustainment of connections between people, places and ideas. Fawaz states that "this is fundamentally what superhero comics represent: not particular identities alone but collective actions undertaken by particular individuals working together" (2018, p. 33). Representations of both collective action and connection within this franchise, both narratively and formatively, serve as an example of what could exist through meaningful and collaborative connections within our own reality.

Furthermore, these texts reflect on the disconnection that we often see in real life and offer audiences and readers an applicable way of approaching and overcoming them through unity and synergism. In Wakanda's civil unrest, we see an echo of both the hope and uncertainty that is taking place throughout the United States. The depiction of Wakanda's protests against tyranny inspires readers to consider social movements such as Black Lives Matter and their ongoing protests against police brutality and prejudice. In *Avengers: Endgame*, Wakanda's victorious participation in the battle against Thanos asks audiences to consider how they too could participate in real-life allegiances that strive to challenge oppression and injustice.

Jason Bainbridge states that "superheroes traditionally enjoy their greatest popularity during times of transition and uncertainty" (2015, p. 746). By using the superhero genre to relate to real-life tensions, movements and ideas, it allows them to become even more accessible, marketable and relatable. Interestingly, almost all alliances within the *Black Panther* universe result in positive outcomes, peace and stability. This could be a result of the way that "comics abstract and simplify" ideas or representation, as most readers already know that real-life connections such as these do not always prosper as they do within the superhero genre (Gateward and Jennings, 2015, p. 2). However, these representations can still provide readers with the hope and inspiration that by coming together we too might be able to produce and facilitate real change in our everyday lives.

In addition to this, they also highlight the positives of the different types of connection that take place within real-life situations and communities. Campaigns and movements find strength in shared experiences, shared goals and compassion. These connections can be both positive and negative, as seen in both the growth of right-wing organisations but also the sense of community in the groups that oppose them. *Black Panther* uses Afrofuturistic technology to examine how our own technologies and social media allow for the rallying of support and the sharing of information or key ideas.

Connection with our history, heritage and identity is also another way in which people are organising, supporting each other and (re)finding new and old ways of belonging. For example, the Black Lives Matter movement has put community and connection at the forefront of its activities and engagement. The movement sees police brutality and violence against Black people as a "community problem to be solved by understanding" and brings together marginalised voices and diverse members of the Black community to collaborate towards transformative justice, opportunities for protest and real change (Farrag, 2018, p. 78).

The world of *Black Panther* gives us a chance to explore ideas of connection and collaboration, but also the prospects of (re)connection and disconnection. In a multiverse enriched by Afrofuturism and science-fiction, its diverse and optimistic creators represent connection and collaboration as something which is not only a requirement for a successful and thriving future but also as something that we should be working towards and aspiring to achieve in our present.

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