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The Stolen People: Race, Slavery, and the African-American Identity in *Black Panther*

Killmonger, the main antagonist from Ryan Coogler's 2018 film *Black Panther*, is one of the most complex characters within the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Violent, remorseless, and almost destructive, Killmonger is at first perceived to be a typical villain who is after vibranium, a metal that is native to Wakanda which he intends to use to liberate Black people from their oppressors worldwide. However, layers of complexity are added to his character when it is revealed that he is the child of T'Challa's uncle and an African American woman that was left behind in Oakland, California by T'Challa's father. Abandoned in Oakland, Killmonger was forced to experience the struggles of being Black within a racialized American society, molding the way he perceived the world around him and how he identified himself, a battle that his cousin T'Challa has not experienced and cannot understand.

The tumultuous relationship between T'Challa and Killmonger is not a relationship meant to polarize good and evil but to shed light on the disparities between the African and African-American diaspora. Killmonger's shift in identity from being Wakandan to African-American not only accentuates an ideological clash with T'Challa but also emphasizes how the racial empire of colonial America has been ingrained and inscribed into the sheer construction of the African-American identity and continues to impact contemporary Black bodies. Therefore, Killmonger represents more than an average villain; he is the man who, like

other African-Americans, has been molded to fit into an identity shaped by imperial thinking, which creates an internal struggle as he attempts to reconcile both his Wakandan and African-American identities.

The fashioning of the African-American identity at the hands of the racialized American empire has generated an abundance of scholarly discourse around the factors that constituted the solidification of the African-American identity in the first place, and are elements that are integral in understanding the complexity of Killmonger's character. The fabrication of race stands at the center of the African-American identity and is discussed thoroughly by historians Barbara J. Fields and Karen E. Fields in their book, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life*. In their book, both Fields' argue that race is a craft that can be compared to witchcraft, which they justify by saying, "Witchcraft and racecraft are imagined, acted upon, and re-imagined... The outcome is a belief that presents itself to the mind and imagination as a vivid truth" (19). Both Fields' offer a new perspective on the concept of race that undermines its definition of being merely a construction, a new understanding of race that can be applied to contemporary characters such as Killmonger.

Slavery, also discussed as a factor in the formation of the African-American identity, is presented as a form of cultural trauma in sociologist Ron Eyerman's book, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of the African American Identity*. In his book, Eyerman argues that slavery was a cultural trauma, one that established a collective memory within African-Americans, as he explains, "Slavery formed the root of an emergent collective identity through an equally emergent collective memory, one that signified and distinguished a race, a people..." (1). The work of Fields and Eyerman all elaborate on the factors that fashion the

African-American identity, and are beneficial to the understanding of Killmonger's complicated character.

Black nationalism and the doctrines of the Black Panther Party are other factors of the African-American identity that are crucial to understanding Killmonger's psyche throughout the film. Historian Jessica C. Harris defines her idea of Black nationalism in her essay, "Revolutionary Black Nationalism", as being, "... the recognition of cultural and racial commonality and a call to racial solidarity" (409), and can be seen as an umbrella term for the variety of movements that were cultivated under the age of Black nationalism, also known as Black Power Movement, in the 20th century. Franziska Meister explores the functions of the Black Panther Party in her book, *Racism and Resistance: How the Black Panther Party Challenged White Supremacy*. According to Meister, the main goal of the Black Panther Party was to "...[engage] in a struggle for Black visibility on the physical, psychological, and structural level- Black visibility that would, as they hoped, ultimately disrupt the functioning and reproduction of white supremacy..." (26). Killmonger's rhetoric and thinking throughout the film reflect the ideals of both revolutionary Black nationalism and the Black Panther Party, only putting him more at odds with T'Challa and the other inhabitants of Wakanda.

Unlike T'Challa, Killmonger has been exposed to the racialization of Black people since he was a child in Oakland, California. In the very beginning of the film, Killmonger's father N'Jobu tells him about the history of Wakanda and the role of the Black Panther within the Wakandan civilization but also describes the world outside of Wakanda as "descending further into chaos" (00:01:20). At 00:01:23, the "chaos" that N'Jobu is referring to is shown not just to be war and violence, but also the enslavement of African people as they can be seen being led

onto ships in chains. In *Racecraft*, Fields' argue that while slavery was a factor that solidified racial ideology, racial inferiority also contributed to the racial imaginary, stating, "... the incorporation of Africans and their descendants into a polity and society in which they lacked rights that others not only took for granted but claimed as a matter of self-evident natural law" (128). The enslavement and eventual racial inferiority of Africans to White people accumulated into a racecraft imaginary that N'Jobu introduces to his son. Although N'Jobu is fully Wakandan, his time within the United States has made him aware of the racial ideology that has created divides within America, and therefore instills these realizations into his young son. By doing so, Killmonger has acquired and internalized the same racialized perspective of the world, ultimately making racecraft a reality within Killmonger.

Killmonger's internalization of the racialized perspective of the world only further complicates his relationship with T'Challa and the rest of Wakanda, as Wakanda has not been subjected to the racialization by colonial powers and therefore do not understand or believe in the craft of race. Killmonger's and T'Challa's differing perspectives of the world are made known to each other upon their first formal meeting when Killmonger expresses, "I want the throne. Y'all sitting up here comfortable... It's about two billion people in the world that look like us, but their lives are a lot harder. Wakanda has the tools to liberate them all!" (1:14:15-1:14:50). T'Challa responds almost immediately and asserts, "I am not king of all people, I am king of Wakanda. And it is my job to make sure the people of Wakanda are safe, and to make sure vibranium does not fall into the hands of people like you" (1:14:52-1:15:10). T'Challa maintains his conservative and isolationist view to the struggles of Black people outside of Wakanda because he has not directly experienced or internalized racecraft, putting

him at odds with Killmonger who sees all Black people as being “his people.” Since T’Challa has never been exposed to racial ideologies, he fails to understand Killmonger’s reasoning behind his desire for the throne, ultimately setting the two on opposing sides. The opposition between T’Challa and Killmonger not only creates conflict within the film but stresses the dissimilarity between two people within the African diaspora as a result of the racial imaginary.

The historical memory of slavery is alluded to and represented throughout the film by Killmonger, another aspect of his character that connects him to his African-American ancestors and identity. Since Killmonger has been aware of racecraft and the history of enslavement of African people, his racialized perspective of the world only fuels the slavery symbolism that he presents in the film. In scene 00:18:45, Killmonger sets eyes on a mask from the West African exhibit in a British museum and “vibes” with it, taking it for himself to do as he completes his mission to get to Wakanda. The mask that he chose for himself has come from the Igbo tribe in southeastern Nigeria. According to Terri L. Snyder in her article “Suicide, Slavery, and Memory in North America”, the Igbo people were sent to the Americas on a slave ship but managed to take control of the ship from the slave traders and, “...drowned themselves- an act that most scholars have understood as a deliberate, liberate, collective suicide” (39). Killmonger feels a connection to the mask of the Igbo people, which creates a link between Killmonger and his African ancestors. As he puts on the mask, he is fully embracing his identity as an African-American that is in touch with his ancestor’s struggle for freedom from enslavement. Killmonger has seemingly adopted the “cultural trauma” of slavery that Ron Eyerman argues is crucial to the formation of the African-American identity. Eyerman elaborates by arguing, “In this sense, slavery was traumatic in retrospect, and formed a ‘primal scene’, which could,

potentially, unite all ‘African-Americans’ in the United States, whether or not they had themselves been slaves or had any knowledge of or feeling for Africa” (1). Therefore, not only does Killmonger have a physical connection with the mask, but also a symbolic one; the cultural trauma that African-Americans harbor can be represented through Killmonger’s choice to wear the mask. Therefore, the historical memory of slavery crosses over into a contemporary context and has an immense impact on Killmonger’s reality. In this way, slavery is “living,” as Eyerman also argues, “...slavery is something lived and living, an inherited and transmitted habitus which determines current behavior and thus requires a spiritual transformation to be rooted out” (188). Another colonial practice imposed on Africans has shaped Killmonger’s perception of the world and overall thinking, complicating his image of being an archetypal villain by providing very dynamic aspects to his character.

The water battle between T’Challa and Killmonger in scenes 1:18:45-1:21:10 are symbolic to the forced transition from being “African” to being “African-American” through slavery. African slaves were sent on slave ships across the large Atlantic Ocean through the Middle Passage to become enslaved in America, and to forge the first roots of the African American identity (Block). African slaves had quite literally experienced a “sea change”; not only were their physical bodies transported through the water, but their experiences and identities of being purely African were transported as well. The water aided colonists in enforcing the newly beginning African-American identity onto African slaves that would eventually be embedded into the very beings of African-Americans who descended from the African slaves. The water battles symbolize the returning of a diasporic African back to their homeland of Africa, as Killmonger and T’Challa physically and metaphorically go head to head. At the end of

the film, after the two complete their last standoff that results in Killmonger being critically wounded, water is once again mentioned by Killmonger. Shortly before his death in scene 1:57:50, Killmonger uses his last breaths to deliver one chilling message to T'Challa, saying, "Just bury me in the ocean, with my ancestors that jumped from ships. Cause they knew death was better than bondage". Killmonger makes a direct connection to the Igbo mask that he wears at the beginning of the film, solidifying the conscious memory slavery had on his psyche.

Black nationalism is another aspect of Killmonger's character that is incorporated into the African-American identity and comes directly from his father, N'Jobu. At the beginning of the movie, it is revealed that N'Jobu helped a South African arms dealer steal vibranium to redistribute to traders. His real intention is not revealed until scene 1:05:52, when he reveals his exact plans of helping the arms dealer to his brother T'Chaka, angrily stating, "I observed for as long as I could. Their leaders have been assassinated, communities flooded with drugs and weapons. They are over policed and incarcerated. All over the planet, our people suffer because they don't have the tools to fight back". N'Jobu has seen the hardships African Americans have faced in America after creating a family with an African-American woman and wanted to do something about it with the help of vibranium. In a way, N'Jobu was "radicalized"- he dreamed of a future where African-Americans and Africans alike can overthrow oppressive governments and Western powers and establish their own rule with the help of Wakanda. N'Jobu's dream of the liberation of Black people worldwide is comparable to the ideas of the Black Panther Party and Black Power, which, according to Meister, is to arm and protect themselves from oppressive White governments that only seek to racialize and incriminate black people (30). N'Jobu's teachings are instilled in Killmonger in the brief time that he is in his life before he is killed by

his brother, but the lessons Killmonger learned from N'Jobu are ones that shaped the course of his life.

N'Jobu's doctrine of Black liberation from the bonds of oppression was directly instilled into Killmonger, as that is the main motivation for getting ahold of vibranium. After he defeats T'Challa in the water battle and becomes king of Wakanda because of his royal blood, he makes it his main goal of getting vibranium shipped to every Black community worldwide. His reasoning is an echo of his father's, which he expresses by saying,

“You know where I come from when Black folks started revolutions, they didn't have the firepower or the resources to right their oppressors... I know how colonizers think, so we're gonna use their strategy against them. We're gonna send vibranium out to our war dogs, and they'll arm every oppressed person so they can take over their oppressors, we will burn everything down so we can be on top... the sun will never set on the Wakandan empire”. (1:30:00)

Killmonger's dream is an extension of his father's; securing a future where oppressed Black people will finally be able to free themselves from their oppressor through the aid of vibranium. Killmonger's view on oppression is embedded into his identity as an African-American, which once again traces back to his father's influence while being a young boy in Oakland. Like Huey P. Newton before him, who founded the Black Panther Party in Oakland, Killmonger's dream of a future civilization of liberated and armed Black people is a thought too radical for the general public, further stressing the influence imperial thinking has on his character. He even encourages

the idea of a “Wakandan” empire; unknowingly becoming a representation of the imperial forces he is trying to break down.

Despite internalizing racecraft, the memory of slavery, and doctrines of Black nationalism, Killmonger displays an internal struggle with reconciling both his Wakandan and African-American identities. As a result, he is stuck in an “in-between” area of both identities, which reflects the struggle African-Americans have with reconciling both the “African” and “American” aspects of their identities. In the first few seconds of the film, Killmonger asks his father to tell him “the story of home”- despite being born and raised in Oakland to an African-American mother and Wakandan father, he still considers Wakanda to be his home, much like African-Americans consider Africa to be the “homeland” that they were taken away from (0:01:15). Therefore, there is a lostness in Killmonger’s character, as he identifies with the land he has never been to despite being identified as strictly African-American in America. Brian W. Thomas addresses the lostness in the African-American identity in his article, “Struggling With the Past: Some Views of African-American Identity.” Thomas states that assimilation and acculturation lead to a portion of the African-American identity to be lost by saying, “In this view, identity is lost; it is something that disappears through the process... In other words, we see [African-American] identity as being lost through the process rather than being the process itself”. After being forced to reside in America instead of Wakanda, Killmonger has become “lost” between which identity to adopt but leans towards his Wakandan identity.

However, Killmonger is forced into embracing his African-American identity after he is left in Oakland after the murder of his father by his uncle, T’Chaka. N’Jobu’s death isn’t revealed until scene 1:07:38, in which Zuri tells T’Challa that he and T’Chaka decided to leave

Killmonger in America by stating remorsefully, “We left him.” Killmonger, after wanting to go back to Wakanda, a home he’s never known, has that abruptly taken from him after Zuri and T’Chaka decide to cover up N’Jobu’s death. This seemingly little action had a deep impact on Killmonger when he was only a little boy- by leaving him behind, they have forcefully cut off his connection with Wakanda to cover up the truth. He had a life in Wakanda “stolen” from him much like African slaves did when colonial powers stole them and forced to become slaves in a country they knew nothing about. Now Killmonger, having no connection with Wakanda after the murder of his Wakandan dad, is left to put the pieces together and fashion the African-American identity that will eventually lead him on the quest to go to Wakanda and fulfill the dream his dad was not able to achieve- the liberation of his people from the bonds of oppression. In this way, Killmonger’s identity has been forced from Wakandan to African-American, as his ties to Wakanda were taken away from him by his uncle. Although Killmonger’s identity shift was effected on a much smaller scale, the transition from Wakandan to African-American resonates with the forced change in the identity of African slaves to African-Americans as generations of slaves were introduced to racecraft, racism, and racialization on and towards Black bodies. Like Killmonger, African slaves are remnants of the motherland that are forced to transform into a new type of African people who have been subjected to American racecraft and enslavement.

Killmonger’s anxieties and fear of not being accepted into Wakandan society after his father’s death is revealed in scenes 1:26:20-1:29:15, when Killmonger becomes king and meets with his father in the Ancestral Plane. Killmonger’s father expresses regret at not taking him back when he was younger, telling his son, “They will say you are lost... I should’ve taken you

back long ago... Instead, we are both abandoned here". Killmonger, being represented as his child self, states, "Well maybe your home is the one that's lost, that's why they can't find us." Killmonger's interactions with his father in the Ancestral Plane are crucial to understanding his mindset, as it reveals his fear and struggles to be accepted into a society that was not aware of him and has no plans of allowing him in. As his father said, he is "lost"- lost between the Wakandan identity and the African American identity. Like other African-Americans, Killmonger yearns to go back to his homeland; a homeland that was stolen from him through the death of his father and that was stolen from his ancestors when they were boarded onto ships.

Killmonger's abandonment by his uncle T'Chaka, therefore, has a profound impact on the solidification of Killmonger's African-American identity and the ideologies that come along with it. When confronted by said abandonment by T'Challa in the Ancestral Plane, T'Chaka states solemnly, "He was the truth I chose to omit" (1:56: 22). Killmonger is T'Chaka's creation; his very identity was shaped by T'Chaka murdering N'Jobu. Still, T'Chaka chose to forget about him, to act like he played no role in the making of Killmonger's identity. T'Chaka's refusal to acknowledge Killmonger as a Wakandan and to own up to his mistakes resonates with the entire history of colonialism in America; they crafted African slaves into African-Americans through the use of racecraft, race-based slavery, segregation, and police brutality, then fail to recognize and repent for an identity they have created. Therefore, Killmonger is an embodiment of African-American people as a whole- a people stolen from their home and forced to submit to an identity that now classifies them as outsiders of their homeland.

However, Killmonger continually attempts to reconcile both his Wakandan and African-American identities and assert his Wakandan identity that directly clashes with the

identification that is given to him by the inhabitants of Wakanda. The biggest instance in which Killmonger's identity clashes with his identification by T'Challa and others is when he is taken into Wakandan custody, and asks T'Challa in scene 1:15:19 to "ask who [he] is." His statement automatically garners a response from T'Challa's sister Shuri, who states, "You're Erik Stevens. That's who you are". Killmonger continually taunts T'Challa to reveal his true identity, until he ultimately reveals it himself by saying "I am N'Jadaka, son of Prince N'Jobu!" (1:16:10). Not only is Killmonger shedding his American name, but he is shedding his African-American identity and formally asserting himself as a Wakandan, and is not something that can be ignored by T'Challa any longer. However, Killmonger connects back to his African-American identity in the last minutes of his life, remarking on his lifelong dream of seeing a Wakandan sunset by saying, "You believe that? Kid from Oakland running around believing in fairy tales" (1:56:22). Despite finally entering Wakanda, Killmonger cannot completely let go of his African-American identity, leading to a failure in reconciling both identities upon his death.

Killmonger's death and his failure to reconcile the hybridity in his identity does not all end in vain, as it is the catalyst that allows T'Challa to turn his back on the traditional and isolationist views of the previous Wakandan kings. Killmonger's presence and eventual death in Wakanda was a realization for T'Challa; after seeing and acknowledging Killmonger's complex origins and mindsets, he realizes that he must right the wrongs of the Wakandan kings before him and give the resources that Wakanda has to the outside world. This is seen in scene 2:01:42, when T'Challa stands outside the apartment building Killmonger grew up in and says, "This will be the first Wakandan Outreach Center." Although T'Challa may never fully understand the hardships that Killmonger endured in America and cannot see the world as he did, establishing a

system of support for other African-Americans demonstrates that Killmonger was a lesson for T'Challa that allowed him to see the world beyond the borders of Wakanda.

Killmonger's character is impossible to be taken at face value after analyzing the factors that shaped his identity as he grew up as a Black man in America, thousands of miles away from his Wakandan roots that he continuously tries to connect with. The extensive exposure to the imperial construction of racecraft, the understanding of slavery within Black consciousness, and the adoption of Black nationalism ideals are what shaped Killmonger to be who he was within the film, but also reveal how imperial thinking affects the African-American population as a whole. Killmonger's tough childhood caused by his uncle only furthered his mindset, creating both external and internal conflict between himself and his cousin T'Challa that ends upon his death. However, Killmonger's death is not to be seen as the eternal damnation of Black people because of an identity shaped by an empire, but as a catalyst for change, as it T'Challa to realize the error in his nation's ways and attempt to repair what has been damaged. Therefore, Black Panther is not a film meant to highlight the differences between "good" and "evil," but as a call to action for a nation to acknowledge and fix the wrongs in their history. Only after a nation acknowledges their abuse of power and the damages they have done can they begin to repair what has been lost, and, as T'Challa says in the very last scene of the film, "...[to] find a way to look after one another as if we are one, single tribe".

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