

“A Homegrown Revolutionary”: Linking Erik Killmonger to Tupac and the Legacy of the Black Panther Party

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In a 1994 MTV News interview, Tupac Shakur delivered a clever anecdote about being denied food while hungry, noting that a polite request for food becomes an angry demand if hunger goes unsatiated. He concludes by asking, “We was askin’ [for social change] ten years ago. We was askin’ with the Panthers... Those people who were askin’ are either dead or in jail. Now what do you think we’re gonna do? Ask?” (“Tupac Shakur: In His Own Words”). Tupac’s rhetorical question warns that, given the continuance of systemic oppression, the post-Civil Rights generation may revolt.

Kara Keeling states that Tupac “resists buying into the narrative of a Utopian black revolution [espoused by his mother and former Black Panther Afeni Shakur], but in so doing, he posits the Black Panther Party’s struggle as one rooted in another world” (62). Nonetheless, Keeling believes Tupac “reveled in the potency of his inheritance, Panther-style warrior black masculinity” (62). This negotiation between Tupac’s Black Panther birthrights and his fidelity to the “thug life” was the hallmark of his relatively short life.

Tupac portends *Black Panther* (2018) antagonist Erik Killmonger (Michael B. Jordan) who, like Tupac, is a “homegrown revolutionary” connected to the Black Panther Party’s legacy. On his decision to make Killmonger a Tupac pastiche, *Black Panther* director and writer (with Joe Robert Cole) Ryan Coogler linked Tupac to Oakland and the Black Panthers’ legacy: “We wanted to bring the energy of Tupac [Shakur] to a Marvel movie... [T]he ‘Pac that we know came from his time in the Bay Area... And that’s where you saw these organizations [like the Black Panther Party]” (Travis). Like Tupac, Killmonger—son of a slain Wakandan prince and would-be revolutionary—sought to rectify the disconnectedness between his

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birthright and his upbringing.

As such, this essay interrogates the link between Killmonger—vis-à-vis Tupac—and the Black Panther Party. This essay first offers a character profile of Erik Killmonger that highlights his comic book origins, traces which aspects of his background and persona are—and are not—captured in *Black Panther*, and argues why a Tupac-like portrayal is apropos. The essay links Tupac with the Black Panthers, examining how he negotiated with their ideology; it then indicates the ways in which Killmonger evokes Tupac's ethos in *Black Panther*. The essay concludes by arguing that Killmonger—like Tupac—serves as an effective means by which to consider the Party's legacy.

Erik Killmonger: From Page to Screen

In *Black Panther* #23 (2000), Erik Killmonger—having usurped the role of Black Panther from the former king T'Challa—briefly allies with the Avengers to liberate Wakanda from would-be usurper Reverend Michael Ibn al-hajj Achebe. The Avengers' ineffectiveness vexes Killmonger, who laments, “[Becoming Black Panther] was just a stupid childhood fantasy—to unite my two worlds—Wakanda and America—to be a hero in both! But, frankly, I can't stand to be in the presence of such gutless people” (“More of that Business with the Avengers”). This scene is emblematic of Killmonger's dilemma: he is a perennial outsider unable to navigate between the nation of his birth and the land in which he was raised.

Killmonger first appeared in *Jungle Action* #6 (1973), in which he reveals that he is the mastermind behind several destructive guerrilla attacks in Central Wakanda. In his first confrontation with Black Panther (T'Challa), Killmonger throws Black Panther into the raging Warrior Falls (McGregor, Don et al. *Panther's Rage Part 1*). As he recovers from his injuries, T'Challa reveals to his inner circle that Erik Killmonger is N'Jadaka, a Wakandan who—during his childhood—had been captured and enslaved by Ulysses Klaw, a vibranium-seeking physicist who murdered N'Jadaka's entire family and T'Challa's father King T'Chaka (McGregor, Don et al. *Panther's Rage Part 2*). Unable to return to Wakanda after escaping Klaw in the United States, N'Jadaka manages to survive in America where he eventually earns several advanced degrees and adopts the alias “Erik Killmonger.” After seeing Black Panther team with the Avengers, Killmonger implores T'Challa to bring him back to Wakanda, where he sets up a rebel village. Unbeknownst to T'Challa, Killmonger seeks revenge against the Wakanadan monarchy, whom he holds

responsible for his family’s murder (McGregor, Don et al. *Panther’s Rage Part 2*). After their initial battle, Killmonger—a brilliant tactician and skilled warrior—orchestrates another series of attacks against Black Panther before nearly defeating him in hand-to-hand combat. However, Kantu—a survivor of one of the villages Killmonger destroyed—intervenes by pushing Killmonger over Warrior Falls to his death.

Killmonger eventually is resurrected and, on at least one occasion, succeeds in dethroning T’Challa. While each confrontation varies in both form and results, the commonality is that Killmonger often uses Western techniques against Black Panther in his quest for the Wakandan throne. For example, in *Black Panther* #18 (2000), Killmonger attempts to undermine the Wakandan monarchy by destroying the nation’s economy (Priest, Christopher et al. *Killmonger’s Rage*). In later years, Killmonger—supplied with American weapons—overthrows the neighboring country of Niganda and convinces the Nigandans that Black Panther—recently returned from adventuring with the Fantastic Four—was merely a “lapdog of the United States” seeking to expand the Wakandan empire (Hudlin et al. *Back to Africa, Part 2*).

Though Killmonger is one of Black Panther’s fiercest antagonists, he typically has been portrayed by various writers as a revolutionary filled with righteous anger towards Wakanda and the Western world. Unlike other Marvel villains, Killmonger does not seek world dominance; instead, he vacillates between wanting to end the Wakandan monarchy and pushing the globetrotting Black Panther to resist outside influence. That said, Killmonger is a traditional comic book villain because he is willing to go to extreme measures to achieve his objectives.

Michael B. Jordan’s portrayal of Erik Killmonger in *Black Panther* maintains some fidelity to the comics though there are key distinctions. In the film, Killmonger—whose birth name is N’Jadaka but whose legal name is Erik Stevens—is the American born son of Wakandan prince N’Jobu (Sterling K. Brown) and an imprisoned American woman. In 1992, N’Jobu—a member of Wakanda’s War Dog espionage unit operating covertly in America—is slain in his Oakland apartment by his brother, the previous Wakandan king and Black Panther T’Chaka (Atandwa Kani), after T’Chaka confronts him about working with mercenary Ulysses Klaue (Andy Serkis) to steal vibranium. Critical of Wakanda’s isolationist policies, N’Jobu had plans to share vibranium and Wakandan technology with people of African descent worldwide to fight oppression.

Despite being orphaned in America, Killmonger acquires an elite education and

advanced military training; indeed, CIA agent Everett Ross (Martin Freeman) reveals Killmonger acquired his name because he had proven to be a highly lethal black ops agent. He eventually teams with Klaue—Wakanda’s most wanted criminal after bombing villagers and stealing a quarter ton of vibranium—before murdering him and bringing his body to Wakanda. As son of a Wakandan prince, Killmonger is permitted to challenge recently crowned T’Challa (Chadwick Boseman) to ritual combat for the throne and Black Panther mantle; subsequently, he defeats T’Challa and casts his body into Warrior Falls. As king, Killmonger threatens to create a Wakandan empire but seemingly is foiled and killed by Black Panther.

Coogler’s incorporation of a Tupac-like character is consistent with Marvel’s modernization of characters mostly created in the mid- to late-1960s. Black Panther—the first Black superhero—first appeared in *Fantastic Four* #52 (1966) and was created by Jack Kirby to fill a representational void in comics. Representational politics aside, *Black Panther* comics, according to Blake Scott Bell, “largely ignored the specific hardships of contemporary civil rights activists who were struggling for the basic rights to express their political and economic needs without being beaten or killed” (“Wakanda and the Dream of a Black Homeland”). Early attempts at involving Black Panther in plots dealing with African American issues—such as Don McGregor’s “Panther vs. The Klan” arc in *Jungle Action*, in which Black Panther fights against the Ku Klux Klan—ended abruptly. Indeed, before *Jungle Action*, Marvel briefly had changed Black Panther’s name to “Black Leopard” to avoid any connection with the Black Panther Party (Narcisse). However, later volumes of *Black Panther* have not shied away from engaging with issues such as American racism, as these later volumes have been scripted by Black writers Christopher Priest, Reginald Hudlin, and Ta-Nehisi Coates.

As did the aforementioned, Coogler utilizes *Black Panther* to further explore issues of Black identity. In an interview, Coogler highlighted how the film emphasizes the dichotomy between the colonized and the uncolonized (Betancourt). The ability to govern—or lack thereof—is exemplary of this dichotomy; as such, it is unsurprising that Coogler noted that he had President Barack Obama in mind as he scripted *Black Panther*. Like Obama, T’Challa is a relatively inexperienced head of state charged with negotiating between his globalist inclinations and the isolationist beliefs of his people. Coogler envisioned Killmonger’s ability to drive a wedge between T’Challa and his disaffected border security chief W’Kabi (Daniel

Kaluuya) over T’Challa’s inability to bring Klaue to justice as representative of the criticism Obama might have received had another country captured or killed Osama bin Laden (Travis).

To the degree that Obama is an effective parallel for T’Challa is the degree to which Tupac is for Killmonger. As Michael Eric Dyson writes in *Holler If You Hear Me: Searching for Tupac Shakur*, “Tupac is perhaps the representative figure of his generation. In his haunting voice can be heard the buoyant hopefulness and the desperate hopelessness that mark the outer perimeters of the hip-hop culture he eagerly embraced, as well as the lives of the millions of youth who admired and adored him” (13). Furthermore, Dyson contends, “Tupac lived the tension between revolutionary ambition and thug passion,” both of which Dyson—among others—argues is a result of his upbringing by former Black Panthers and Black nationalists (64). This same tension manifests itself in Erik Killmonger.

“Power to the People”: Examining the Black Panther Ethos

A man garbed in dark paramilitary gear appears in the capital to claim his birthright and to call for justice. This scenario could describe either Erik Killmonger’s initial encounter with T’Challa and Wakandan tribal leaders inside T’Challa’s throne room or Black Panther Party Minister of Defense and co-founder Huey P. Newton’s reciting law protecting the right to bear arms after he and other Party members staged an armed protest at the California State Capitol in Sacramento in 1967.

The Panthers—who had formed a few months earlier—appeared at the Capitol seeking justice for the police killing of Denzil Dowell, a 22-year-old construction worker whom the police accused of burglarizing a liquor store and resisting arrest. Though the coroner’s report suggested Dowell may have died with his hands raised in submission, an all-white jury ruled his death as a justifiable homicide (Wasserman). Moreover, the Panthers sought to contest the Mulford Act, legislation banning open carry brought forth by California assemblyman Don Mulford to curtail the Panther’s police patrols (Morgan 134). The bill was signed into law by then-governor Ronald Reagan; however, the protest brought national attention to the Panthers’ efforts and spurred their recruitment efforts.

Historian and former Panther Paul Alkebulan posits there are three eras of the Panthers: 1966 to 1971, 1971 to 1974 and 1974 to 1982 (x). The Panthers’ first year was spent advocating for Black political autonomy, with the group calling for the enactment of policies ranging from full employment, housing, and education to

exemption from military service and prison pardons (Alkebulan xii, Rhodes 32-33). This first year also featured the Party's most fervent challenges to police authority, particularly through its members' public bearing of arms and advocacy for self-defense. In this regard, the Panthers saw themselves as acolytes of Malcolm X, whose self-defense agenda was coupled with positioning Black liberation as a human rights issue (Roman 8).

The Panthers' Ten Point Program—the articulation of the organization's demands and beliefs—indicates Malcolm X's influence. Though two versions of the Program existed, the first was drafted in October 1966 and appeared in *The Black Panther* newspaper (Figure 1). Amy Abugo Ongiri likens the Ten Point Program to the “What We Want, What We Believe” statement that appeared in the Nation of Islam's official publications (17). Alkebulan argues that the Ten Point Program was not a particularly revolutionary document; he highlights the inherently contradictory notion of demanding government reform at the barrel end of a gun (Alkebulan 15). However, the Panthers soon would back away from some of the inflammatory rhetoric—which included calls for direct attacks on the police—after Huey P. Newton was arrested for allegedly murdering an Oakland police officer during a traffic stop. Newton was convicted of voluntary manslaughter and imprisoned until 1970.

Newton's 1970 release from prison coincided with a shift in perspective, one that embraced “revolutionary nationalism and intercommunalism” and an identification with anti-colonialist movements abroad (Rhodes 32). During the organization's first era, the Black Panthers embraced socialism and cooperated with white leftist groups such as the Peace and Freedom Party—who nominated Panther information minister Eldridge Cleaver as its presidential candidate in 1968. This change in perspective, spearheaded by Newton, left many of the more militant Panthers dissatisfied with the Party's direction, leading to a significant rift.

Newton's embrace of socialism and Cleaver's run for office foreshadowed what Alkebulan conceives as the Panther's second era, one in which the Panthers sought political power. Panther co-founder Bobby Seale's Oakland mayoral run and future Party leader Elaine Brown's Oakland city council campaign were exemplary of this era. Indeed, the Party poured a great deal of funds and resources into their respective campaigns, neither of which was successful. These failures—coupled with Newton's exile to Cuba after being accused of murdering a sex worker—lead to further disruption (Alkebulan xv). Dissension among members would increase during a power struggle between Newton and Brown, as Newton wrested power

from Brown, which resulted in her leaving the party altogether.

<p>1. We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny of our Black and oppressed communities. We believe that Black and oppressed people will not be free until we are able to determine our destinies in our own communities ourselves, by fully controlling all the institutions which exist in our communities.</p> <p>2. We want full employment for our people. We believe that the federal government is responsible and obligated to give every person employment or a guaranteed income. We believe that if the American businessmen will not give full employment, then the technology and means of production should be taken from the businessmen and placed in the community so that the people of the community can organize and employ all of its people and give a high standard of living.</p> <p>3. We want an end to the robbery by the capitalist of our Black and oppressed communities. We believe that this racist government has robbed us and now we are demanding the overdue debt of forty acres and two mules. Forty acres and two mules were promised 100 years ago as restitution for slave labor and mass murder of Black people. We will accept the payment in currency which will be distributed to our many communities. The American racist has taken part in the slaughter of over fifty million Black people. Therefore, we feel this is a modest demand that we make.</p> <p>4. We want decent housing, fit for the shelter of human beings. We believe that if the landlords will not give decent housing to our Black and oppressed communities, then the housing and the land should be made into cooperatives so that the people in our communities, with government aid, can build and make decent housing and the land should be made into cooperatives so that the people in our communities, with government aid, can build and make decent housing for the people.</p> <p>5. We want education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society. We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in the present-day society. We believe in an educational system that will give to our people a knowledge of self. If you do not have knowledge of yourself and your position in the society and the world, then you will have little chance to know anything else.</p> <p>6. We want completely free health care for all Black and oppressed people. We believe that the government must provide, free of charge, for the people, health facilities which will not only treat our illnesses, most of which have come about as a result of our oppression, but which will also develop preventative medical programs to guarantee our future survival. We believe that mass health education and research programs must be developed to give all Black and oppressed people access to advanced scientific and medical information, so we may provide ourselves with proper medical attention and care.</p> <p>7. We want an immediate end to police brutality and murder of Black people, other people of color, all oppressed people inside the United States. We believe that the racist and fascist government of the United States uses its domestic enforcement agencies to carry out its program of oppression against Black people, other people of color and poor people inside the United States. We believe it is our right, therefore, to defend ourselves against such armed forces, and that all Black and oppressed people should be armed for self-defense of our homes and communities against these fascist police forces.</p> <p>8. We want an immediate end to all wars of aggression. We believe that the various conflicts which exist around the world stem directly from the aggressive desires of the U.S. ruling circle and government to force its domination upon the oppressed people of the world. We believe that if the U.S. government or its lackeys do not cease these aggressive wars that it is the right of the people to defend themselves by any means necessary against their aggressors.</p> <p>9. We want freedom for all Black and poor oppressed people now held in U.S. federal, state, county, city and military prisons and jails. We want trials by a jury of peers for all persons charged with so-called crimes under the laws of this country. We believe that the many Black and poor oppressed people now held in U.S. prisons and jails have not received fair and impartial trials under a racist and fascist judicial system and should be free from incarceration. We believe in the ultimate elimination of all wretched, inhuman penal institutions, because the masses of men and women imprisoned inside the United States or by the U.S. military are the victims of oppressive conditions which are the real cause of their imprisonment. We believe that when persons are brought to trial that they must be guaranteed, by the United States, juries of their peers, attorneys of their choice and freedom from imprisonment while awaiting trials.</p> <p>10. We want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice, peace and people's community control of modern technology. When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume, among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation. We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That, to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that, whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute a new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and, accordingly, all experience hath shown that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But, when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security.</p>
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Figure 1. Black Panther Party Ten Point Program (1972)

(“History of the Black Panthers: Black Party Platform Program and Program”)

Elaine Brown’s leadership tenure and subsequent ouster is indicative of the Panthers’ paradoxical views on the role of women. Brown openly lamented that men in the Party saw women as irrelevant and often accused them of undermining the organization because of their alliances with white feminists (Spencer 92). Ongiri indicates that collective memory is partly to blame for this view of the Panthers, as most Americans recall the images of armed men at the Capitol and Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice*—with its claims of rape as an act of “insurrection” (21). However, Antwanisha Alameen Shavers argues, “Contrary to what some may believe, the Black Panther Party proved to be one of the most forward-thinking organizations of the 20th century in relation to advocating for the liberation of oppressed groups, especially where gender and sexuality were concerned” (34).

Tupac would inherit many of these perspectives though he developed a worldview that differentiated from his forebears. Sadly, however, his last days were eerily reminiscent of Huey P. Newton’s final years. Alkebulan points to Newton’s erratic behavior upon return from Cuba as instrumental in the Party’s denouement. Aside from his earning a doctoral degree, Newton spent his last years struggling with drug and alcohol issues before being murdered in 1989 by Tyrone Robinson, a member of the rival Black Guerrilla Family (BGF).

Tupac and the Code of Thug Life

Shortly before the debut of the dramatized biopic *Panther* (1995), Polydor Records released *Pump Ya Fist: Hip-Hop Inspired by the Black Panthers*. The compilation album features tracks by politically engaged emcees of that era, including Chuck D of Public Enemy, KRS-One, and Tupac Shakur. On an otherwise provocative and often uplifting album, Tupac’s “Throw Your Hands Up” struck a raw note. Unlike the title track performed by fellow West Coast emcee Kam, which served as a rallying cry against police abuse, “Throw Your Hands Up” is a shot across the bows at Tupac’s enemies. Though the song’s refrain entreats its listeners to settle disputes with fisticuffs instead of weapons, the verses mostly consist of braggadocio; misogynistic references to women as “bitches,” “hoochies, and “hookers”; and drug references (2Pac). The track was a far cry from poignant songs like “Brenda’s Got a Baby,” the tragic tale of an abused pre-teen mother, or the motivational “Keep Ya Head Up.” Indeed, “Throw Your Hands Up” was an odd contribution from the one performer with actual Panther bonafides.

While perhaps inapt for a Panther-themed album, “Throw Your Hands Up” certainly was fitting for an artist mired in controversy. When *Pump Ya Fist* was released in March 1995, Tupac—who finally had recovered from being shot five times during a studio ambush a few months prior—was mere weeks removed from being sentenced to 18 months in prison for sexual abuse. A year earlier, he served a brief jail sentence for assaulting *Menace II Society* (1992) co-director Allen Hughes after being dropped for a role in the film. A few months before the clash with Hughes, Tupac had been charged—though not convicted—for assault after shooting two off-duty Atlanta-area police officers.

Tupac’s violent end seems like the inevitable outcome for an artist who, as Katie Grimes reminds us, had “experienced state persecution even as a young child” because of the continued FBI surveillance of Tupac’s mother and former Black Panther Afeni Shakur (335). Afeni Shakur was not a nominal member of the Party; she was an active member of the New York chapter known as the “Panther 21” after being accused of plotting to bomb New York department stores and police stations (Hall). Tupac’s familial connections to the Panthers went beyond his mother and included his stepfather Mutulu Shakur and his godfather Geronimo Pratt, a former leader of the Los Angeles branch who served nearly three decades in prison after being wrongly convicted for murder. Dyson posits that his Panther birthright “hung over Tupac’s head as both promise and judgment,” noting that, on the one hand, it was used to explain the political nature of his music while, on the other hand, it was used as a rationale for his violent undoing (48). For his part, Tupac did not shy away from his Black Panther legacy; indeed, in an interview he advocated for black gun ownership as he admitted to feeling like “a Black Panther in a ‘90s kind of way” (Rhodes 46).

That said, Tupac’s embrace of the Panthers was neither straightforward nor without critique. Karin L. Stanford draws attention to Tupac’s black nationalist leanings that resulted from his connection to the New Afrikan Independence Movement to which his stepfather Mutulu Shakur belonged. The New Afrikans shared many of the Panthers’ views though, unlike the Panthers, they were more insular and sought to create a sovereign nation-state (Stanford 7-8). Stanford argues that one can see aspects of the New Afrikan belief system in Tupac’s lyrics and politics and through his relationship with Watani Tyehimba, a leading member of the New Afrikan People’s Organization (NAPO) who served as Tupac’s mentor and business manager (6). Furthermore, Tupac held some resentment for the Panthers, whom he felt abandoned his mother and left the family destitute despite her

longsuffering for the Party (Dyson 53).

One aspect of the Panthers' beliefs that Tupac held sacrosanct was their desire for justice and reform of the criminal justice system. His disdain for police brutality and harassment can be heard on each of his albums, beginning with his third single "Trapped" from his first album *2Pacalypse Now* (1991). The song not only admonishes the police for their actions but also, borrowing from early Panther rhetoric, proposes the solution is firing back (2Pac, "Trapped"). Songs like "Trapped" exemplify Tupac's belief that young, poor black men were victims of the criminal justice system whose only recourse was not reforming but counteracting it (Vaught 91).

Tupac's Code of Thug Life (Figure 2), which consists of 26 edicts for those who lived the "thug life," owed a great deal to the Panthers' Ten Point Program. Seneca Vaught hails the Code as "a remix, appropriating and rearranging elements that were outmoded or ill-suited to the interests of the hip-hop generation" (Vaught 103). The Code sets rules of engagement for rival factions, all with the intent of promoting peace; calls for the protection of children and innocents; encourages self-policing; and offers harsh punishment for Code breakers and informants. Tupac promoted the Code to gang members nationwide in the hopes of increasing political awareness and preparing for revolution (Stanford 17).

The failure of the Code was less in its articulation but more in its author's ability to promote and to adhere to aspects of it himself. Vaught attributes Tupac's failure to his adherence to "revolutionary manhood" (89). Kara Keeling agrees, noting "recourse to this image of black masculinity as the stuff of black revolution serves to sanction and support Shakur's own sexism, misogyny, and homophobia" (62). Moreover, Tupac's various feuds constantly pushed him towards violating many of his own tenets. For instance, Tupac's willingness to use singer Faith Evans, with whom he had a brief relationship, as fodder in his conflict with her husband Christopher Wallace (Notorious B.I.G.)—whom he blamed for his shooting—evidences Vaught and Keeling's critiques of Tupac's often toxic masculinity and his inability to respect women.

Nonetheless, Dyson calls for a nuanced view of Tupac, even in his failings. He deems Tupac as "the conflicted metaphor of black revolution's large aspirations and failed agendas" (48). On the one hand, he chides Panther acolytes for viewing Tupac's materialistic and hedonistic tendencies as compromising his radicalism; on the other hand, he questions those who see Tupac's thuggery as fulfillment of the worst aspects of the Panthers (49).

1. All new Jacks to the game must know: a) He's going to get rich. b) He's going to jail. c) He's going to die.
2. Crew Leaders: You are responsible for legal/financial payment commitments to crew members; your word must be your bond.
3. One crew's rat is every crew's rat. Rats are now like a disease; sooner or later we all get it; and they should too.
4. Crew leader and posse should select a diplomat, and should work ways to settle disputes. In unity, there is strength!
5. Car jacking in our Hood is against the Code.
6. Slinging to children is against the Code.
7. Having children slinging is against the Code.
8. No slinging in schools.
9. Since the rat Nicky Barnes opened his mouth; ratting has become accepted by some. We're not having it.
10. Snitches is outta here.
11. The Boys in Blue don't run nothing; we do. Control the Hood, and make it safe for squares.
12. No slinging to pregnant Sisters. That's baby killing; that's genocide!
13. Know your target, who's the real enemy.
14. Civilians are not a target and should be spared.
15. Harm to children will not be forgiven.
16. Attacking someone's home where their family is known to reside, must be altered or checked.
17. Senseless brutality and rape must stop.
18. Our old folks must not be abused.
19. Respect our Sisters. Respect our Brothers.
20. Sisters in the Life must be respected if they respect themselves.
21. Military disputes concerning business areas within the community must be handled professionally and not on the block.
22. No shooting at parties.
23. Concerts and parties are neutral territories; no shooting!
24. Know the Code; it's for everyone.
25. Be a real ruff neck. Be down with the code of the Thug Life.
26. Protect yourself at all times.

Figure 2. Tupac Shakur's Code of Thug Life (“Code of Thug Life”)

In an interview with Dyson, emcee and activist Yasiin Bey—formerly known as Mos Def—articulates the difficulties of being the child of revolutionaries. The son of a former member of the Nation of Islam, Bey empathizes with Tupac, noting how the weight of expectations coupled with constant government surveillance and persecution resulted in a confused second generation that, for all intents and purposes, had been abandoned (67). Tupac’s life and lyrics reflected this abandonment, particularly on tracks such as “Me Against the World.” Viewers of *Black Panther* would witness this disconnectedness and rage in Erik Killmonger.

“Ain’t All People Your People?”: Killmonger’s Black Nationalism

A pivotal scene in the film underscores this disconnectedness: After defeating T’Challa, Killmonger—like all Wakandan monarchs before him—partakes in a ritual that involves ingesting the heart shape herb that bestows superhuman power, being buried in Wakandan soil, and astral traveling to the ancestral plains to meet with the previous Black Panthers. However, unlike when T’Challa completes the ritual, Killmonger does not meet with the previous kings; instead, he is taken to the apartment in which his father N’Jobu was slain. In a flashback scene juxtaposed with the ritual, young Erik (Seth Carr) plays basketball with friends before noticing a partly-obscured Wakandan aircraft fly away. He runs inside only to discover his father has been killed.

The scene then shifts to Killmonger’s astral projection inside the apartment, where he opens a secret wall panel—located next to a poster of Public Enemy’s *It Takes A Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* (1988) album cover—and reveals N’Jobu’s revolutionary manifesto. The manifesto contains a letter to Erik in which N’Jobu questions his own identity. With the frequent refrain of “Who am I?” the letter suggests that love—presumably of Erik’s mother, whom he plots to free from prison during the film’s opening scenes—and concern for his son no longer allows him to be an observant War Dog. He foretells that Erik will find himself asking that same question one day. Erik turns to find his father’s spirit sitting on the floor, and Erik’s adult projection shifts to a child. N’Jobu’s spirit regretfully warns young Erik that because he is part-African American, he may not be welcome in Wakanda. Young Erik does not understand, and N’Jobu is unable to provide an answer. N’Jobu asks Erik why he does not cry for him, to which Erik responds, “Everybody dies. It’s just life around here.” N’Jobu sheds a tear, expresses remorse for not taking

Erik to Wakanda sooner, and laments their severed ties from each other and from Wakanda.

This scene is significant for several reasons: first, again, it highlights the levels of disconnectedness that Killmonger—like Tupac before him—has from his parents, his revolutionary birthright, and the lands from whence he came. Second, it draws connections not only to Oakland and thus the Panthers but also to the revolutionary hip-hop of Tupac’s era. Indeed, given that young Erik is depicted as a pre-teen living in Oakland in 1992, it is highly likely that he listened to Tupac, whose first album *2Pacalypse Now* had been released the prior year. Lastly, it shows the roots of Killmonger’s revolutionary plans were planted by his father.

An earlier flashback scene reveals those roots. After being questioned by T’Chaka about his betrayal, N’Jobu angrily states:

I observed for as long as I could. Their leaders have been assassinated. Communities flooded with drugs and weapons. They are overly policed and incarcerated. All over the planet our people suffer because they don’t have the tools to fight back. With vibranium weapons they can overthrow every country and Wakanda can rule them all the right way. (1:05:52-1:06:13)

Here, N’Jobu evidences a black nationalistic perspective akin to the early Black Panthers and perhaps more so to the New Afrikan Independence Movement that tied its black nationalism to a reverence for Africa. Killmonger expresses this same righteous indignation and black nationalist perspective when he first encounters T’Challa in his throne room. He first chides the lavishly attired tribal elders—“Y’all up here livin’ comfortable”—as the rest of the diaspora suffers. Like his father did before T’Chaka in Oakland, Killmonger calls for Wakanda to share its weaponry so the oppressed can liberate themselves. T’Challa refutes him, stating that it was not in Wakanda’s purview to intervene, to which Killmonger replies, “But didn’t life start right here on this continent? So ain’t all people your people?” His rhetorical question not only is reflective of a black nationalistic perspective but also, like Tupac, a view of himself as “a man of the people” with the correct plan for attaining justice (Seneca 88).

However, just as Tupac’s Code of Thug Life veered from the Ten Point Program, so did Killmonger’s plans for revolution stray from N’Jobu’s plans. Taken at face value, N’Jobu’s plans advocated liberating the oppressed so that they can be ruled by a benevolent nation. However, as Killmonger takes his place on the throne, Killmonger commands his followers to dispense weapons so that the oppressed can begin their revolution and, accordingly, the Wakandan empire. He

finds an eager ally in W’Kabi who, after his lover and leader of the Dora Milaje imperial guard Okoye (Danai Gurira) objects, states, “[T]he world is changing... The outside world is catching up, and soon it will be the conquerors or the conquered. I’d rather be the former.” Though not expressed by Killmonger directly, this absolute fits Killmonger’s “eye for eye” worldview.

Tupac never spoke of empire, at least not in the literal sense. However, his stint in prison along with his growing list of enemies shifted his focus from fighting for justice to attaining vengeance. On the final album recorded before his murder, *The Don Killuminati: The 7 Day Theory* (1996), Tupac—who had changed his alias to “Makaveli”—expressed a kill or be killed mentality. For instance, on the album’s first track “Bomb First (My Second Reply),” he vows revenge against his growing list of enemies. Similarly, Killmonger’s quest for justice was mired in his zeal for revenge. Unlike N’Jobu, who believed Wakanda needed reformation, Killmonger first sought vengeance against his immediate relatives. Furthermore, his orders to War Dogs abroad included murdering the children of the oppressors, an act of retribution, not revolution.

In *Black Panther*, Killmonger—unlike the Panthers and Tupac—never expresses any reverence for women; however, like Huey P. Newton and Tupac, he proved capable of harming them and utilizing them as fodder as illustrated in the second scene in which he appears. Earlier in the film, Killmonger and Klaue—with the assistance of Killmonger’s lover Linda (Nabiyah Be)—steal a Wakandan artifact from the Museum of Great Britain. After Klaue is apprehended by Black Panther, Okoye, and Wakandan spy Nakia (Lupita Nyong’o) while trying to sell the vibranium remains from the stolen artifact, Killmonger and Linda rescue him. As they prepare to abscond to South Africa, Killmonger betrays Klaue. After killing the pilot of the plane on which they were about to board, Killmonger targets Klaue, who holds Linda at gunpoint. To get to Klaue, he shoots through and kills Linda, who now is disposable to him. In a later scene, he chokes a shaman who cultivates the few heart shaped herbs in existence when she balks at his order to burn them all.

Thus, Like Huey P. Newton and Tupac Shakur, Killmonger proves a brilliant idealist who unfortunately proves incapable of realizing his ideals due to his own shortcomings. However, like his real-life predecessors, Killmonger pushes Wakanda closer to actualizing those ideals. Indeed, the film’s final scene is set in Oakland, where T’Challa and his sister Shuri (Letitia Wright) stand before the apartment complex in which N’Jobu had been slain. T’Challa reveals that he has

purchases the building and plans to convert it into an outreach center. Thus, Wakanda discards its policy of isolationism and moves towards realizing its liberating capabilities.

Conclusion

Shortly after its debut, *Black Panther* generated a great deal of discourse—especially regarding the film’s framing of Erik Killmonger as a villain. Philosopher Christopher Lebron offered the strongest critique in a Boston Review essay. Lebron takes the film to task for forcing viewers to choose between two “radical imaginings”—a technologically advanced African nation that has resisted colonialism and the prospect of global liberation; for rendering Killmonger as “a receptacle for tropes of inner-city gangsterism”; and for Killmonger’s lack of redemption (“‘Black Panther’ Is Not The Movie We Deserve”).

Though mostly valid, Lebron’s article overlooks a few aspects the film, most notably that though Killmonger does not receive redemption within the narrative itself, that does not mean he should not be viewed as a redemptive character. Viewing Killmonger as a mere gangster requires—as it has with Huey P. Newton and Tupac Shakur—ignoring the difficulties of the life he was forced to lead. It requires demeaning his revolutionary potential, ideals, and attempts on the grounds that he was a problematic figure. It also requires the belief that redemption is only possible while one lives.

Along those lines, Lebron fails to see the film (or perhaps does not believe the film achieves its effectiveness) as an allegory for the Black Panthers themselves. To be certain, the film is an imperfect allegory, just as the Panthers were an imperfect organization. Nonetheless, the film—like the Panthers and Tupac—allows viewers to imagine both the beautiful possibilities of black nationalism offered by the Panthers, even as we wrestle with their tragic shortcomings.

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