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Afronowism and Afrofuturism: A Kinesic and Proxemic Study of *Black Panther*.

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ABSTRACT

This research explores Afronowism and Afrofuturism in Ryan Coogler's 2018 film *Black Panther* from a conceptual framework drawn from Edward Hall's Proxemics theory and Ray Birdwhistell's Kinesics theory. The main goal is to investigate how characters' body language and spatial interactions depict African cultural diversity and Afrofuturist ideologies. Drawing on the theories of Kinesics and Proxemics, the study explores the fundamental connections between cultural heritage and Afrofuturism as reflected in the nonverbal communication of the main characters i.e., T' Challa and Kill Monger, among others. The article argues that using the Afronowist motifs, the movie challenges historical stereotypes about African culture while also presenting an Afrofuturist perspective through the contrasting utopian ideologies of the main characters. The research uses a triangulation technique based on three different methods i.e., film visualization, beat and beat analysis, and a descriptive qualitative method to explore the Afronowist motifs as well as the Afrofuturist ideologies that represent an empowering image of Africans and African Americans. The study hopes to make a contribution to the newly emerging field of Afronowism as well as that of Afrofuturism in the context of African American film studies.

Keywords: Afronowism, Afrofuturism, nonverbal communication, culture, Kinesics, Proxemics.

Introduction

Black Panther examines themes like ancestry, responsibility, and a conflict between isolationism and global impact (McSweeney, 2021). The protagonist of the film, T'Challa regularly uses body language and nuanced facial expressions to portray both his internal strife and his leadership qualities. The movie follows T'Challa as he makes his way back to the secret, highly advanced African country of Wakanda to assume the throne. T'Challa is protecting his country's secrets and Vibranium supply from threats posed by Erik Kill Monger, a rival with a tragic past (Griffin & Rossing, 2020). The film's villain, Kill Monger, represents the struggle to reinforce African American heritage in Wakanda. His desire to use Wakanda's technology to liberate Wakanda highlights the ongoing struggle for racial equality and justice in the modern American society. Likewise, in showing African communities in the colorful and diverse world of Wakanda and the neighboring tribes through their traditional dresses, tribal ceremonies, visual symbolism, and the portrayal of cultural customs, the movie presents an empowering Afronowist perspective based in African cultural heritage. The study concludes that *Black Panther* explores the importance of cultural legacy through



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Afronowism and projects an Afrofuturist perspective through the contrasting ideologies of the leading characters.

Thesis Statement

Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* employs Kinesic and Proxemic codes to challenge historical stereotypes about Africans based on an Afronowist perspective, which is informed by the African cultural legacy, and projects an Afrofuturist perspective grounded in the contrasting utopian ideologies of the key characters.

Statement of the Problem

Undoubtedly, *Black Panther* is a revolutionary representation in the history of African American cinema, with its celebration of Afronowist culture and Afrofuturist ideologies. The film presents the image of an African state and challenges historical stereotypes about the African culture. Other filmmakers have oversimplified or generalized African cultures in their portrayal of African or African American characters, which has contributed to a monolithic view of the imaginary African continent. The African American filmmaker, Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther*, however, tackles historical stereotypes by portraying African characters in an empowering way. The previous filmmakers perpetuate stereotypes about African people as less intelligent, inferior, poor, and uncivilized but *Black Panther* challenges these stereotypes. The basic purpose of this research is to understand the alternative image of Africans and African Americans that the film presents through its recourse to Afronowist and Afrofuturist perspectives through the use of Kinesic and Proxemic codes. This will help understand the diversity of African and African American cultural perspectives.

Research Questions

How does Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* portray the diversity of African culture to challenge historical stereotypes about Africans?

What utopian ideologies do the characters of T'Challa and Kill Monger represent in the *Black Panther*?

How does the film *Black Panther* reconcile the gap between Afronowism and Afrofuturism using Kinesic and Proxemic codes?

Significance of the Study

This study examines the concepts of Afrofuturism and Afronowism in the film *Black Panther*, which aims to challenge historical biases and expand readers' understanding of the diversity of African and African American cultural legacy. By analyzing nonverbal cues in the film *Black Panther* through drawing on the theories of Kinesics and Proxemics, the study provides a better understanding of the significant contribution of Africans to the global culture. This study can broaden our understanding of the cultural relevance of the Afronowist and Afrofuturist art and offer insightful perspectives into the creative and scholarly domains. The examination of *Black Panther* from a kinesic and proxemic perspective in relation to Afronowism and Afrofuturism is significant for its contribution to the wider investigation of identity and power dynamics in the context of African and African American studies.

Literature Review

The present study focuses on the representation of Afrofuturism and Afronowism in the movie *Black Panther* through the lens of the theories of Kinesics and Proxemics to understand the contrasting utopian ideologies of the main characters with an emphasis on



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cultural legacies. The facial expressions, gestures, body movements, and spatial interaction used by characters in the film are important as they represent Afronowism and Afrofuturism through challenging cultural stereotypes and imagining an empowering future grounded in the utopian ideologies of the

leading characters, T'Challa and Kill Monger. This chapter reviews the literature available on the concepts of Afronowism and Afrofuturism, the African American cinema, and the film *Black Panther* in order to identify the gap that this study addresses.

Afrofuturism is a broad artistic, social, and political movement that envisions Black people's future via the African concept of identity, creative works, and agency. This movement is to appreciate the African people around the world who continue to play a significant role in the creation of the future world. Prominent figures in the Afrofuturist fiction include the renowned science fiction writer, Octavia Butler, whose novel *Kindred* (1979) uses time travel to explore the impact of slavery on the present and future societies, with a focus on race, gender, and class dynamics. Another Afrofuturist novel, *Parable of the Sower* (1993), also written by Butler, presents a plausible dystopia in which Afro-Americans are living as refugees. The protagonist, Laura, tries to find shelter when America has been attacked by social inequality and sudden climate change. The story ends where Laura, as an African American woman pledges to herself that she would make this world as much progressive and peaceful for Africans as it is for non-African and non-African American people. Another significant figure, P. Djeli Clark, a recipient of both the Nebula and Locus Awards, is regarded as one of the foremost contemporary authors of speculative fiction. His novella *The Black God's Drum*, published in 2018, is a standout piece. The story takes place in an alternate timeline where the Confederate States were victorious in the American Civil War, and follows Creeper, a young vagabond in New Orleans, who becomes entangled in a convoluted scheme involving the enigmatic weapon known as the Black God's Drum and the pursuit of its control. Similarly, science fiction author Samuel R. Delany explores complex themes of race, sexuality, and identity in speculative settings in his works, such as the novel *Dhalgren* (1975). The genre is not solely concerned with crafting imaginary worlds, but it can also serve as a means of escaping real-life troubles or analyzing the current issues faced by African Americans. Nickey Dryden, a famous African Novelist, in her book *The Prey of God*, published in 2017, writes about the promising and bright future for the South African people. He further confers about the upgrading infrastructure in genetic engineering, which is making life easier for native people.

The bustling coastal town of Port Elizabeth has been shown as a hub where renewable energy is contributing an economic boost. The book revolves around the technological advancement created by the South African people in the hope of a better future for Africans. Tochi Onyebuchi, a former civil rights lawyer, made waves with the release of his debut science fiction novella in 2020, *Riot Baby*. The work received widespread acclaim, earning both an Alex Award and a World Fantasy Award. The story is set in a near-future dystopia and offers perceptive insights into family dynamics and the Black American experience. At its core, it follows two siblings, one of whom possesses extraordinary telekinetic abilities. Onyebuchi masterfully weaves together a gripping narrative with thought-provoking themes, showcasing his creativity and literary talent. Another famous contemporary Afrofuturist writer is Rivers Solomon, who is a non-binary author. Their first novel, *An Unkindness of Ghosts* (2017), is a captivating tale that takes place on a colossal "generation ship." The ship's society has become fragmented based on race, with those of darker skin being confined to the lower decks and subject to servitude. *The Deep* (2019) is another fantasy novel by Solomon.



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Rammellzee, an Afrofuturist graffiti artist, initially started on the New York City subways before branching out into painting, hip-hop music, and performance art. He had a keen interest in the formation of letters and mathematical equations and believed that there was a connection between fourteenth century Gothic script and his later *Wild Style* graffiti (Palma, 2023). One of his unique creations was the character Gash-o-Lear, which started as cosplay and evolved into a mixed-media form. It drew inspiration from Star Trek, contemporary hip-hop fashion, and Japanese robot anime, all of which are potent influences on Afrofuturist artists. Rammellzee and Jean-Michel Basquiat were close friends, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, exhibition

catalog demonstrates how Basquiat, other street artists, and the hip-hop movement in the 1980s and '90s inspired Rammellzee (Palma, 2023). Similarly, the Studio Museum of Harlem organized an exhibition named *The Shadows Took Shape* which derived its name from a poem by Sun Ra. The exhibition aimed to explore the global influence of Afrofuturism, which, according to curator Zoé Whitley, is an artistic technique used to address issues such as race, displacement, and diversity through recognizable visual symbols (Bristow, 2014). Although Afrofuturism is predominantly associated with the experiences of African Americans, Black people worldwide have adopted many Afrofuturist concepts and made them relevant to their specific diaspora experiences. Wangechi Mutu's artwork, *The New Ones, Will Free Us*, exhibited at *The Met's facade* in 2019-2020, featured a caryatid, a female sculpted figure common to African and Classical Greek art. In her video work, *The End of Eating Everything* (2013), a Medusa-like figure symbolizing consumption and materialism is depicted, which also resonates with the East African mythical figure of guava, a siren or mermaid-like creature (Bristow, 2014).

Another critic, Yaszek Lisa has explored the colonization-related issues that are directly addressed in *Black Panther*. For instance, M'baku, the leader of the mountain tribe, feels alienated from Wakandan civilization, proving that Wakanda is not merely an unattainable ideal. M'baku challenges T'Challa for control of Wakanda at the beginning of the movie and later saves him from being killed by Kill Monger. The head of the military, the most fearsome warriors, the director of the lab, and the most important spies are all women, even though the King of Wakanda appears to always be a man, suggesting that gender relationships are balanced. For instance, the defeated Wakanda males kneel before the victorious ladies towards the climax of the film after T'Challa and his warriors defeat Kill Monger in the decisive battle (Yaszek, 2006). As the above review shows, scholars have analyzed *Black Panther* from the perspective of colonization, the African diaspora, feminism, and racial empowerment, among others. This thesis, however, focuses on exploring the film from the perspective of Afronowism and Afrofuturism with a particular emphasis on African cultural legacy and the contrasting utopian ideologies of the leading characters through the lens of Kinesics and Proxemics theories.

Methodology

This study uses triangulation as its research methodology to analyze the film *Black Panther*. The practice of studying a phenomenon through the combination of multiple theoretical frameworks or the use of multiple data gathering methodologies is known as triangulation (Thurmond, 2001). The benefits of methodological triangulation include avoiding bias and flaws associated with relying solely on one research technique. The three techniques used as part of this research are descriptive qualitative analysis, fictional film visualization, and beat-and-beat analysis. Descriptive Qualitative analysis is a method used in qualitative research to methodically characterize and analyze a phenomenon's meaning without imposing prior notions (Kim et al., 2017). The process



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entails an in-depth examination of the information in order to determine the characteristics of the phenomenon being studied. When gaining a comprehensive, contextual understanding of the film *Black Panther*, this approach is especially helpful to categorize the data. This research conducts an in-depth qualitative examination of the characters in order to understand their ideologies, motives, and development in the film *Black Panther*.

Theoretical Framework

This study examines how body language, gestures, facial expressions, and spatial interaction are used for nonverbal communication in the movie *Black Panther* through a theoretical framework that draws on the theories of Kinesics and Proxemics. The investigation goes to comprehending how Afronowism and Afrofuturism are portrayed through these nonverbal communication strategies. This study emphasizes that *Black Panther* draws on Afronowism to challenge historical stereotypes about Africans and imagines an Afrofuturist perspective via the contrasting utopian ideologies of its main characters. The theoretical basis for the argument is elaborated in this chapter, focusing on structuralism and sign theory, which form the broader framework, as well as on the key components of the conceptual framework of this research, i.e. Proxemics and Kinesics.

Analysis

This provides an in-depth analysis of the film *Black Panther* in order to explore its representation of the Afronowist and Afrofuturist perspectives through the film's depiction of the rich tapestry of the African cultural heritage and the utopian ideologies of T'Challa and Erik Kill Monger. According to this analysis, *Black Panther* imagines an Afrofuturist viewpoint through the contrasting utopian ideologies of its leading characters and uses Afronowism to subvert historical stereotypes about the African culture. For the purpose of the analysis, the chapter draws on the theoretical framework based on the theories of Kinesics and Proxemics provided by Ray Birdwhistell and Edward Hall. Kinesics and Proxemics, two types of nonverbal communication theories, are very useful in understanding the plot, characters, and overall cinematic experience of the movie. In particular, this chapter is divided into three parts that analyze *Black Panther's* cultural and ideological perspectives which are based on Afronowism and Afrofuturism while the concluding part provides a detailed overview of the film's representation of African and African American empowerment.

The film *Black Panther* makes a generous use of nonverbal communication cues, spatial behaviors, and interaction that I will analyze through the lens of kinesics and proxemics. In order to comprehend the power dynamics, social status, or character intimacy, I will examine how characters use their body language and personal and social spaces. In this section, I utilize the film visualization method to break down scenes or dialogues into beats. I then analyze each beat for its nonverbal elements, such as changes in body language, facial expressions, or spatial positioning, and note any shifts in action, emotion, or focus. Beat analysis is the process of breaking down a film's narrative structure through an analysis of its beats, which are components smaller than a scene. In this section, I will analyze plot, cultural heritage, and character's utopian ideologies through the beat analysis method. I will use four beats (units smaller than a film scene) to analyze the plot of the selected film with the aid of kinesic and proxemic codes.

The term "pre-kinesics" deals with general physiological bases for the systematic study of body motion" (Birdwhistell, 1952, p.3). Ray Birdwhistell used the term to describe the



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study of communication cues that take place just prior to overt bodily movement. It is focused on the more muted cues or gestures that people may use prior to displaying more overt body language. Pre-kinesics explores the subtle signals and cues that precede observable body language and movements, thereby offering insight into the intentions and emotions of individuals prior to their explicit expression through body language, while kinesics focuses on the movements and body language itself (Birdwhistell, 1952). For instance, the first appearance of the Wakandan nation on the screen can be seen through the pre-kinesic category whereby the fictional country of Wakanda is introduced through the metaphor of ‘sand

characters’ rising out of a desert region with different kinds of nonverbal communication cues. Wakanda is portrayed in this stage as a fictional country that represents Africa through strength and technology. The pre-kinesics category of *Black Panther* establishes the tone and mood of the whole film *Black Panther*.

The social-kinesic category is about the “functioning of motion related to social performance” (Birdwhistell, 1952, p.3). Body language and nonverbal communication in the context of social interactions and interpersonal relationships are the main subjects of study in social kinesics. It looks at how people communicate cultural norms and expectations within social groups, navigate social situations, build rapport, express emotions, and convey social status through their body language, gestures, and facial expressions (Birdwhistell, 1952). In *Black Panther*, T’Challa returns to Wakanda to claim his throne. This is the introduction of the character, and it is the first time the audience see him in his home country. Through different beats such as dressing, drumming, dancing, fighting moves, etc., the significance of the Wakandan culture as well as that of the King are communicated. These motions (beats) reflect the cultural importance of celebration as well as combat in the Wakandan society. Further layers of social kinesics are provided by the responses of the surrounding crowd. Their cheers, gasps, dancing, unique hairstyles and facial expressions convey their devotion to their respective leaders and their emotional stake in the result of the fight reflects African cultural legacy (Afronowism).

Thirdly, the term micro-kinesics deals with “the abstraction of kines into manageable morphological classes” (Birdwhistell, 1952, p.3). Micro kinesics offers a more precise and in-depth examination of the smallest movements and their effects on interpersonal dynamics and communication, whereas traditional kinesics offers insightful information about the more general aspects of body language and nonverbal communication. Micro-kinesics studies the involuntary, spontaneous micro-expressions and micro-gestures to offer deeper psychological insights into a person's inner thoughts and feelings (Birdwhistell, 1952, p.3). In *Black Panther*, the contrasting body movements, facial expressions, and gestures of T’Challa and Kill Monger are reflected via the micro-kinesics category. For instance, T’Chaka’s facial expressions in the second scene represent his distrust of his younger brother.

T’Challa’s facial expressions show his unease regarding the enemies yet his courage to face challenges.

The Proxemics codes are also present in different beats of the film *Black Panther*. For instance, T’Challa moves through the crowded market with Erik Kill Monger. They use a combination of smooth, fluid movements and sharp, precise gestures to navigate the chaotic environment and to communicate with each other. Additionally, their use of eye contact, facial expressions, body language, and intimated distance helps to convey their emotions and intentions to the audience. The crowded, bustling environment is designed to feel claustrophobic and overwhelming, with people and objects packed tightly



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together. This creates a sense of tension and urgency that is reinforced by the rapid editing and fast-paced action. Additionally, the use of close-ups and medium shots helps to establish a sense of intimacy between the characters and the audience, drawing us into the action and making us feel like we are a part of the film. In short, these categories (social-kinesics, pre-kinesics, micro-kinesics, proxemic) help understand the significance of various beats in conveying the Afronowist and Afrofuturist themes of the movie. By combining elements of history, empowerment, spirituality, and social consciousness into an aesthetically spectacular and thematically profound cinematic tapestry, *Black Panther* skillfully uses its beats to express Afronowism and Afrofuturism as a whole.

Afronowism is a vibrant movement in art and culture that arose out of the need to celebrate and give voice to Africans and Afro-diasporic identities in the modern world. Fundamentally, by adopting a forward-looking viewpoint, Afronowism aims to redefine and mold ideas of African identity. By encouraging people to be proud of their heritage, it advances a positive and complex view of the African culture that transcends historical accounts of oppression. I think Afronowism can be seen in many different forms of art, such as visual arts, music, literature, fashion, and more. In order to create a fusion that represents the dynamic nature of Afro-diasporic cultures, artists and creators incorporate modern influences into traditional African aesthetics as a source of inspiration. In *Black Panther*, this is done through face markings, body markings, and hairstyles to represent African culture and customs. The African cultures place a high value on facial and body markings like tattoos and scarification. These cultural customs are included in the movie to give the characters and the plot more depth and authenticity. For instance, the Wakandan royal family has a unique salute that they use to welcome one another, and which is shown through making an X with arms crossed over the chest. It is known as the “Wakanda Forever salute”.

This action acts as a symbol of African pride as well as a reflection of respect and national cohesion. Similarly, the Ndebele people of South Africa serve as inspiration for the tattoo on the head of the characters. The characters can represent their cultural identity and heritage through these signs. Hairstyles play a significant role in African culture as well, and *Black Panther* makes heavy use of them. For instance, the female character (Nakia) also wears her hair in a variety of traditional African hairstyles, such as twists and braids. Nakia’s elaborately braided hairstyles are symbolic of her dual role as a proficient warrior and a spy. Letitia Wright’s character Shuri is depicted as having short hair with geometric patterns that reflect her inventive and young nature. These hairstyles highlight and promote African beauty and identity in addition to serving as a reflection of the characters’ cultural history.

In Kinesic term, the characters’ costumes are infused with African influences that celebrate African heritage. A few characters (Kill Monger, Nakia, Dora and Shuri) are depicted wearing ornate ceremonial robes and warrior outfits that emphasize their positions and status within the Wakandan society, such as King T’Challa, who frequently dons a Vibranium Black Panther suit. The various Wakandan tribes are portrayed as having unique hair and clothing styles that speak to their respective cultural upbringings and worldviews. For instance, the all-female royal guard known as the Dora Milaje dons uniforms modeled after traditional African warrior garb, which include vivid colors, armor, and unusual hairstyles like shaved heads or elaborate braids. The Jabari tribe, commanded by M’Baku, is depicted with rough accessories and fur-lined clothing that represent their traditionalist and isolationist views. In addition, the members of the ethnic group are



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dressed in attire typical of the Bantu people of Central and Southern Africa. Overall, the nonverbal codes, clothing, and hairstyles in *Black Panther* serve as potent symbols of identity, culture, and heritage that not only enhance the film's visual splendor but also bolster its themes of unity, diversity, and pride within the fictional nation of Wakanda.

In Proxemic term, the movie takes advantage of the actual setting and surroundings to evoke a feeling of African culture and ideals. *Black Panther* presents ceremonial areas where challenges and rituals are performed, like the Challenge Mound. The underground laboratory, for instance, is a small, high-tech facility that stresses the nation's advanced technological capabilities. The throne room is a huge, open space that emphasizes the value of tradition and lineage. When T'Challa arrives in Wakanda for the coronation ceremony and met his younger sister Shuri. In this scene, an affiliated function of the proxemics code is noticed. They are closer and frank with each other. However, the throne room in Wakanda is designed to be an intimate space, with the throne at the center and the surrounding walls lined with close-knit seating areas. This design reflects the importance of tradition and respect for authority in the Wakandan culture. The use of space in scenes set in Wakanda's royal court reflects power dynamics and hierarchical relationships. For example, King T'Challa sits in the center of his throne, and other characters are arranged at different distances from him according to their standing and connection to him. While closer allies or family members may engage more intimately with the king in close proximity, advisors and council members are expected to stand or sit at a respectful distance. Proxemics are used to depict interpersonal dynamics and emotional ties between characters during private moments. Intimacy, trust, or affection can be indicated by physical closeness or proximity, whereas tension, uncertainty, or emotional detachment can be indicated by greater distance. This study is unique as it focuses on the film's representation of Afronowism as reflected in the African cultural legacy and its representation of Afrofuturism as rendered through the utopian ideologies of the main characters.

Conclusion

This article has analyzed the film *Black Panther* from the lens of kinesics and proxemics in order to understand its Afronowist and Afrofuturist perspectives reflected through the cultural heritage and the contrasting utopian ideals of the leading characters. The study has analyzed different facial expressions, body language, gestures, and spatial behaviors that portray the characters utopian ideological stance and African cultural legacy in the movie. The main focus of the research was to understand the Afronowist motifs in the film as well as its Afrofuturistic message that challenge the stereotyped representation of African and African American cultures. Through analyzing African rites, gestures, dances, costumes, haircuts, spatial elements, etc., this study has advanced our understanding of the film's contribution to Afronowism and Afrofuturism. This research has provided some valuable insights into the cultural significance of Afronowist and Afrofuturist art. Because it contributes to a more extensive study of identity and power dynamics in the context of African and African-American studies, the kinesic and proxemic analysis of *Black Panther* concerning Afronowism and Afrofuturism is noteworthy. A narrative that honors the diversity of African culture and envisions an African American future that embraces its historical foundations, as well as its potential for advancement and innovation, is made possible by the film visual language, symbolic representations, and character dynamics. In essence, *Black Panther* invites viewers to grapple with the complexities of utopian ideals within the African diaspora, presenting



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Challa and Kill Monger as archetypes that embody different facets of the ongoing dialogue surrounding identity, heritage, and the pursuit of a better future.

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