Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Black Panther* and Afrodiasporic Archives

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Abstract

This article argues that Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Black Panther* comic book run (2016-2021) launches a popular serial investigation of the political potentials and liabilities of colonial and postcolonial archives for the contemporary Black Atlantic diaspora. Distinguishing between archives in the storyworld ("Archives in *Black Panther*") and the comics themselves as interventions into superhero history ("*Black Panther* as Archival Agent"), the article reads Coates's foray into comic book writing as an attempt to create alternative genealogies for the Black superhero as well as a move to offer new critical frameworks for rethinking the history of the genre and reconsidering the legacies of racially sanctioned Western imperialism. The argument closes with remarks on Coates's treatment of gender in the fictional nation of Wakanda.

Key Words: Black Atlantic diaspora; colonial and digital archives; superhero comics; popular serial narrative

When it was announced in 2015 that the national correspondent for *The Atlantic* and celebrated African American author Ta-Nehisi Coates would script Marvel Comics' *Black Panther*, not only comics aficionados and superhero fans took note. Newspapers like *The New York Times* and television programs like NBC's *Meet the Press* hyped Coates's foray into comic book writing and set high expectations for the initial 12-issue run of the series, titled *A Nation under Our Feet* (2016) and illustrated by Brian Stelfreeze. Much of the discourse centered on whether Coates—whose books *The Beautiful Struggle* (2008) and *Between the World and Me* (2015) were deemed "required reading" by the late Toni Morrison (cover blurb) and whom *Rolling Stone* had classified as "the most important essayist in a generation and a writer who changed the national political

conversation about race" (Fear)—would bring the depth and scope of his nonfiction writing to the comic. Many critics wondered how Coates's views on racism in the United States would impact his treatment of the Black Panther.[1]

In a piece in *The Atlantic* that contextualized his gravitation to comics, Coates spoke of "The Return of the Black Panther" even though the character had appeared in a recent run written by Reginald Hudlin (2005-2008; 2009-2010). Hudlin had introduced the Black Panther's sister Shuri in 2005 and had extended her role in the 2009 storyline *Deadliest of the Species* to strengthen the depiction of women in the series, building on writer Christopher Priest's and artist Mark Texeira's invention of the Dora Milaje ("Adored Ones"), T'Challa's female bodyguards, in the late 1990s.[2]

More important than the notion of the Black Panther's return, however, was the connection Coates established between his superhero storytelling and his journalism:

> Despite the difference in style and practice of storytelling, my approach to comic books ultimately differs little from my approach to journalism. In both forms, I am trying to answer a question. In my work for *The Atlantic* I have […] been asking a particular question: Can a society part with, and triumph over, the very plunder that made it possible? In *Black Panther* there is a simpler question: Can a good man be a king, and would an advanced society tolerate a monarch? Research is crucial in both cases. The Black Panther I offer pulls from the archives of Marvel and the character's own long history. But it also pulls from the very real history of society—from the pre-colonial era of Africa, the peasant rebellions that wracked Europe toward the end of the Middle Ages, the American Civil War, the Arab Spring, and the rise of ISIS. ("The Return")

This passage introduces four ideas that anchor my analysis of Coates's *Black Panther* run, which spans more than three dozen issues, was collected in eight trade paperbacks, and generated two spin-offs: *World of Wakanda* (with Roxane Gay, 2017) and *Black Panther & the Crew* (with Yona Harvey, 2017).[3] First is the claim that his comic book writing is driven by a journalistic ethos and extensive research on the connections between contemporary society and the past. *Black Panther* comes off as fiction rooted in history, as a serial treatment of the character cognizant of the political baggage with which any serious engagement with colonialism and imperialist ventures in Africa must contend. Second, by juxtaposing journalistic inquiry—"Can a society part with, and triumph over, the very plunder that made it possible?"—with the precept of the comic—"Can a good man be a king, and would an advanced society tolerate a monarch?"—Coates intimates that his *Black Panther* is informed equally by extensive research and genre-specific requirements. Coates infuses genre elements like spectacular fight scenes into a story about the struggles of Wakanda, the fictional African country and ostensible Afrofuturist utopia ruled by King T'Challa, the current Black Panther,

1 The novel *The Water Dancer* (2019) was published after the initial media hype around the *Black Panther* series but followed the publicity garnered by Ryan Coogler's blockbuster movie. On Black superheroes and popular culture, see Nama.

2 On Shuri and the Dora Milaje as intersectional (Black, female, queer) figures, see FitzMaurice.

3 The paperbacks group Coates's run into three story arcs: *A Nation under Our Feet* (Books 1 to 3), *Avengers of the New World* (Books 4 and 5), *The Intergalactic Empire of Wakanda* (Books 6 to 8).

which faces internal unrest while transitioning from a monarchy to a democratic republic.[4] Third, while he acknowledges the affordances and the limitations of superhero comics when he mentions "the character's own long history," Coates advocates a look beyond fantastic genre conceits at the "very real history of society," including a transnational interest in Africa, Europe, the United States, and the Arab world. Fourth, he identifies "the archives of Marvel" as the source of his re-imagination of the character.

Although not fully articulated in the above passage, Coates's take on the Black Panther is invested in the idea of a global Black diaspora whose genesis and present condition are connected to the archive.[5] Coates utilizes the suggestiveness of the archive as a lens through which ongoing superhero narratives may reflect on their propagation of imperial fantasies and myths of national exceptionalism. Moreover, his version of the character and its evolving storyworld participate in the construction of what Teju Cole has called "global diasporic blackness" and defined as "that colonial hangover […] added to […] the American experiences of slavery, slave rebellion, Jim Crow, and contemporary racism, as well as the connective tissue that bound the Black Atlantic into a single territory of pain."[6]

I argue in this essay that Coates, in conjunction with his illustrators, uses the fictional storyworld of *Black Panther* to interrogate postcolonial territories of pain encapsulated in and beyond archives. He does this in terms of narrative content, but he also launches the comic itself as an intervention into the history of superhero comics, presenting a pop-cultural "critical fabulation" and a "critical reading of the archive that mines the figurative dimensions of history" (Hartman 11).[7] Advancing a "popular intellectual critique" and juxtaposing the "potentially conflicting obligations of public intellectual, prominent black journalist, political and phenomenological philosopher, and avid comics fan" (Boonin-Vail 135, 137), Coates's *Black Panther* is a significant, though not altogether unproblematic, contribution to what Arjun Appadurai calls the digitally enhanced "diasporic public sphere" (22). Appadurai understands this public sphere as "a deliberate site for the production of anticipated memories by intentional communities" (17), but if we take Ryan Coogler's massively popular and globally resonant *Black Panther* film (2018) as a cinematic indicator, we can see that this sphere is also shaped by corporate franchises acting as memory-making institutions.[8]

Notes on Diasporic Archives

According to Diana Taylor, we are living in the "era of the archive" ("Save" 2), a digitized world "obsessed with archives—as metaphor, as place, as system, and as logic of knowledge production, transmission, and preservation" (4). Coates's *Black Panther* shares this obsession, but it does so within the parameters of the superhero genre, balancing sto-

4 Boonin-Vail contrasts the narrative captions (white letters over black background) that represent T'Challa's "regrets, anxieties, and political considerations" with the comics' intense physical action (141). On *Black Panther* as an Afrofuturist text, see Chambliss; on Afrofuturism in digital times, see Anderson and Jones.

5 On archival theory, see Stein, "What's in an Archive?" On archives in graphic narrative, see Ahmed and Crucifix's *Comics Memory*; Stein, "Der Comic"; and Stein, *Authorizing* (ch. 4).

6 Martin Lüthe observes a danger of essentializing the Black Atlantic almost thirty years after Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993) and describes a New Black Atlantic with increasing immigration from Sub-Saharan Africa. He cites a *New York Times* report from 2005 according to which "more Africans have arrived in the US since 1990 than during the entire period of the transatlantic slave trade" (110).

7 For Hartman, critical fabulation "advance[s] a series of speculative arguments and exploit[s] the capacities of the subjunctive (a grammatical mood that expresses doubts, wishes, and possibilities), in fashioning a narrative, which is based upon archival research" (11).

8 Appadurai observes "[t]he creation of documents and their aggregation into archives [… as] part of everyday life outside the purview of the state. The personal diary, the family photo album, the community museum, the libraries of individuals are all examples of popular archives" (16).

rytelling conventions with an inquiry into the functions of archives for the Black diaspora. In fact, *Black Panther* imagines two kinds of archives and foregrounds their impact on life in the fictional African nation of Wakanda: an oral archive akin to what Taylor calls an "embodied repertoire" (*Archive* 178), described in the comic as "the histories before there was history" (Coates et al, Book 5), and a digitally enhanced archive that cements the power of an intergalactic empire in Books 6 to 8.

Taylor further maintains that the "archive is simultaneously an authorized place (the physical or digital site housing collections), a thing / object (or collection of things—the historical records and unique or representative objects marked for inclusion), and a practice (the logic of selection, organization, access, and preservation over time that deems certain objects 'archivable')" ("Save" 4). *Black Panther* undermines the notion of the archive as an authorized place by inventing a mythical space called the Djalia, which holds all of Wakandan history, including what has not been officially recorded. Later in the narrative, the archive becomes a concrete location, a storage facility where the intergalactic empire data-mines memories swiped from the subjugated population. This second archive is an actual place the slave rebels must find to restore the memories to their owners. In both cases, we confront not archival "objects" but displaced memories, individual and collective. Coates is thus concerned with contested forms of cultural memory and attempts to account for Black diasporic history. He "posit[s] and imagin[es] pasts that exceed material documentation" (Walters 4), "setting in motion the possibility behind the archive's limits" (5).

Moreover, Aleida Assmann usefully distinguishes between archival *messages*, understood as "texts and monuments […] addressed to posterity," and archival *traces*, which bear "no similar address" ("Canon" 98-99). As Saidiya Hartman has argued, archival records of the African diaspora bear only scattered traces of the enslaved rather than consciously implemented messages (2). Gabriella Giannachi therefore maintains that "diasporic archives, like colonial archives, constitute records of uncertainty and loss. They are ontologically and epistemologically fragile" (100). Accordingly, "[w]hat remains of an archive, any archive, but in particular a diasporic archive, is often the result of destruction or plundering caused by conflict" (98). The resulting gap between the traces of the enslaved and the messages of the enslavers has motivated diasporic writers and artists to imagine a more inclusive history, filling in archival gaps through fictional means.[9] "What is not there also provokes: by exceeding historical awareness and intelligibility, it forces us to acknowledge the archive's limits," Marianne Hirsch and Diana Taylor conclude. Yet, as Ann Laura Stoler notes, even the colonizers' messages represent "records of uncertainty and doubt in how people imagined they could and might make the rubrics of rule correspond to a changing imperial world" (4). These "epistemic uncertainties repeatedly unsettled the imperial conceit that all was in order" (1). In Coates's *Black Panther*, they

9 Walters speaks of "new imaginings which confront the gaps, spaces, and the master's pinning discourse by refusing to see this archive as finite or definitive" (5). Hartman cautions: "The loss of stories sharpens the hunger for them. So it is tempting to fill in the gaps and to provide closure where there is none" (8).

provide the impetus for the rebellion of the enslaved, prompting an unlikely topic for a superhero comic.

If (colonial) archives produce epistemic uncertainties, they also function "as engines of circulation, as archival acts or practices that both mobilize different media and are mobilized by them. Instead of valuing notions of fixity, authenticity, and legitimacy," Hirsch and Taylor write, "we [must] look at the archive as the site of potentiality, provisionality, and contingency," as "a haunting provocation" and a "fertile ground for artists and performers who use and at the same time critique its construction."[10] Thus, when diasporic writers turn to history, they often "posit alternate narratives of agency, humanity, and empowerment, as a supplement to the meager traces recorded in the archives of the slave trader, colonizer, or court room," as Wendy W. Walters explains. Indeed, they tend to veer back and forth "between the data of the archive […] and the aspirational imaginings of black historical literature," tapping into an "aspirational register" that considers "not just 'what happened' or 'what was said to have happened,' but rather 'what may have happened'" (1). In doing so, they strain to "unmoor […] the concept of archive from its stubborn attachment to national narratives" (3) and indicate "the instability of the archive's truth claim to show how it is culturally constructed and open to hermeneutics" (4). We can see this move from the national to the transnational in Coates's *Black Panther* as we witness Wakanda's geopolitical turmoil in the first five books and follow the intergalactic empire in Books 6 to 8 as it exerts archival control to subdue the enslaved population and extend its political reach.

Finally, our notion of archives should also include the peculiarities of popular archives and the popular archiving practices central to comics like *Black Panther*. While the slave rebels in the later segments of the series seek to (re-)create popular archives along the lines of Appadurai's records of "everyday life outside the purview of the state" (16), Coates's *Black Panther* also aligns with Abigail De Kosnik's *rogue archives* where "[m]edia users [in the digital era] have seized hold of all of mass culture *as an archive*, an enormous repository of narratives, characters, worlds, images, graphics, and sounds from which they can extract the raw matter they need for their own creations, their alternatives to or customizations of the sources" (4; emphasis in original). De Kosnik continues: "Engagement with cultural memory is […] not only what comes after the making and distribution of cultural texts, it also now often precedes that making, or occurs at every step throughout the process of making" (4). The 60-plus cover variants reprinted in the trade paperbacks of Coates's *Black Panther*, for instance, incorporate and thereby sanction the kinds of rogue visual experimentation we know from fan art.[11] If, as De Kosnik suggests, "each media commodity becomes, at the instant of its release, an archive to be plundered, an original to be memorized, copied, and manipulated—a starting point or springboard for receivers' creativity" (4), we can see a semantic compatibility with one of Coates's

10 Cf. Koh: "archives are not sites of knowledge retrieval but of knowledge production; not recorded moments of history but monuments of states, colonies and empires" (385).

11 See also Labarre's perceptive analysis of "producing fans" in comics (ch. 7).

main political concepts ("plunder") and recognize *Black Panther* as an engine of circulation in this reconfigured production cycle: a sort of meta-narrative about archival plunder that plunders popular archival practices.

Based on these observations, I distinguish between archives in the storyworld—archives in *Black Panther*—and the comics as interventions into (superhero) history—*Black Panther* as archival agent. This distinction adds a third facet to an archival heuristic I have proposed elsewhere between comics *in* archives (research libraries, private collections) and comics *as* archives (comics acting as archiving institutions) (see Stein, "Comics") and grounds my investigation of the vexed relationship between comic book archives and Afrodiasporic agencies.

Archives in *Black Panther*

Since its inception in the mid-1960s, Wakanda had been a fictional African kingdom whose ownership of the magical metal vibranium made it "the most technologically advanced society on the globe" (Book 1).[12] But in Coates's run, King T'Challa, ruler of Wakanda and bearer of the Black Panther suit, returns home from a sojourn abroad to find his sister Queen Shuri murdered and his country in disarray. T'Challa and his supporters face internal threats from the rebel group "The People," led by Tetu and Zenzi, and external attacks, as villains like Ulysses Klaue (Klaw) set their sights on the nation's resources.[13] In this situation, T'Challa clings to the dream of Wakanda as a virtuous monarchy spearheaded by a beloved leader and blessed with a people united by their allegiance to the king. Yet, already early on, he is told that "power lies not in what a king does, but in what his subjects believe he might do," and he concedes that "what the people know not is the true power of kings" (Book 1). Searching guidance from the ancestors in the spirit world, he is pressured by previous Black Panthers to squash the rebellion and reinforce his rule.[14] But T'Challa favors advice from his sister Shuri, who exists in "a petrified state known as The Living Death" (Book 3) and whose "mind travels to the Djalia, a plane of Wakanda's collective past, present, and future," where she is "guided by a griot spirit who has taken the visual form of [her mother] Ramonda" (Book 1).

The Djalia is "the plane of Wakandan memory" (Book 1), a "metaphysical oasis where Wakandan spirits comingle in a radically disembodied and deterritorialized space that is part afterlife and part archive" (Boonin-Vail 143). This is where T'Challa, through Shuri, seeks to reconstruct the country's history beyond written records: "All of it is here. All of the triumph and tragedy of your people," the griot, as a self-described "caretaker of all our histories" (Book 1), promises Shuri. The Djalia contains memories beyond the official archive and thus affords "an Africanist or black world perspective" (Gikandi 86). As such, it challenges what Simon Gikandi describes as "this archive without

12 Bibi Burger and Laura Engels reference Coates's nonfiction work to suggest that the "fictional African country of Wakanda functions as a metaphorical Mecca." Coates introduces the notion of Howard University as the Mecca and an "incredible cosmopolis of blackness" in *The Beautiful Struggle* (152), calling it "the crossroads of the black diaspora" in *Between the World and Me* (40).

13 On the political and philosophical conflicts the comic negotiates through its character constellation and that include Zenzi's populism, the "Midnight Angels' radical feminism and the philosopher Changamire's pacifist anti-monarchism" (3), see Burger and Engels, who read the comic's "conflicting ideological positions [as] metaphors for real world political views" (1).

14 Cf. Book 1: "I feel blinded by the past"; "I keep seeing ancestors."

African voices, without African documents, without an African historical a priori" (86).

Seeking national unity, Shuri must access "the power of memory" (Book 1) through the forgotten histories of Wakanda. In Book 2, the griot narrates these histories, speaking of "place[s] now lost to your written histories, though not lost to the griot." Confronted with Shuri's impertinent question, "What is the point of the babble?," the griot responds: "The point is power, girl. […] Either you are a nation, or you are nothing." Here, the archive is tied to the dream of a nation-state that would stabilize a monarch struggling to reconcile the demands of the rebels ("No one man," they proclaim by the second issue) with the urge to solidify his power. Thus, Wakanda's problem is not colonization, as it has never been colonized due to its wealth and technological advancement. It is the false belief in its own grandeur. "We believed our own myths," Shuri, now back among the living, tells T'Challa in Book 3. "This was our first mistake. If you can't see a world clearly, then you have no hope of mastering it."

Black Panther illustrates the need to search beyond the national archive, to question the myths of Wakanda as an exceptional nation. In Book 3, T'Challa refutes the philosopher Changamire's doubtful rejoinder that "we were supposed to be exceptional" by insisting that "Wakanda *is* exceptional" (emphasis in original).[15] In Book 4, Shuri meets with Eden Fesi, a friend and former member of the Avengers, at the Wakandan Royal Library, where he is skimming through history books to learn more about the snake-men that are attacking the country. When he tells Shuri that these "snake-men resemble creatures from an obscure translation" of an old saga, she already knows what he is about to tell her. "Old stories have, of late, become a hobby of mine," she confesses. "There is the history of this country—the one you find in books like these—and then there is something older. The story of the land and its peoples long before they took the name 'Wakanda.'" Shuri imagines herself as "Aja-Adanna, the ancient future, bearer of a past so deep it's not even the past. The 'deep past' is all around us, guiding events that we believe to be manifestations of our will." If Wakanda's recorded history is the canon that contracts and limits cultural memory (Assmann, "Canon" 102), Shuri views the past as an archive that expands knowledge of the past, present, and future of the country. In Book 5, the Djalia appears as "memory incarnate"; while it contains "the histories before there was history" and offers Shuri knowledge about "Wakanda before its name," it teaches her and T'Challa a powerful lesson: "Did you truly believe that a great nation could be built without another one underfoot? […] Every man is the hero of his own story, the champion of his own chosen myth."

Devising the Djalia and proposing the existence of a deep past, both of which cannot save Wakanda from intrusion and fail to cement T'Challa's power, Coates critiques what Assmann conceptualizes as the

15 In *Between the World and Me*, Coates counters notions of American exceptionalism with a nod to Hannah Arendt, arguing that the country's "banality of violence can never excuse America, because America […] believes itself exceptional, the greatest and noblest nation to *ever* exist […]. One cannot, at once, claim to be superhuman and then plead mortal error" (8).

historical archive as opposed to the political archive.[16] Where "political archives function as an important tool for power, historical archives store information which is no longer of immediate use" ("Canon" 103). Historical archives are

> part of the passive dimension of cultural memory, […] the knowledge that is stored in the archive is inert. It is stored and potentially available, but it is not interpreted. […] The archive, therefore, can be described as a space that is located on the border between forgetting and remembering; its materials are preserved in a state of latency, in a space of intermediary storage […]. It stores materials in the intermediary stage of "no longer" and "not yet," deprived of their old existence and waiting for a new one. (103)

As the first five *Black Panther* books indicate, Wakanda's historical archive must neither be a physical storage space nor an actual place where the past remains passive. Instead, the comic devises an imaginary archival space that contradicts colonial histories of Africa and complicates Wakanda's official history.

In Coates's version of the Black Panther, the historical archive is always already political. Political archives, Assmann writes, "serve […] the ruling class with the necessary information to build up provisions for the future through stockpiling. They also serve […] as tools for the symbolic legitimation of power and to discipline the population" ("Canon" 102). Wakanda's royal rulers legitimize their power and discipline the population through knowledge of the deep past provided by the Djalia, which is Coates's popular version of the *arkhé*, the archive's Greek roots as "beginning" and "government" (Assmann, *Cultural* 327) or, as Jacques Derrida writes in "Archive Fever," "commencement" and "commandment" (9). If the archive is "a place where things begin, where power originates," as Carolyn Steedman suggests (1), the Djalia emerges as Coates's critically fabulated answer to Gikandi's question "How does one commence or command without agency or power?" (86).

A more explicitly political archive appears in *The Intergalactic Empire of Wakanda* arc in Books 6 to 8. Here, the action transitions to a five-galaxy-spanning empire, a former space colony that was founded by a contingent of Wakandans who left earth 2000 years prior to the narrative present and turned self-defense into conquest and mass enslavement. This story begins in Book 6 with an act of rebellion by an enslaved man (later revealed to be T'Challa, without most of his memories but yearning to go home and retrieve his old life) who rises up against an overseer of the empire in a fight reminiscent of Frederick Douglass's confrontation with slave breaker Edward Covey. What starts as an individual act of resistance soon becomes a sci-fi version of a slave insurrection by a group of maroons. Recalling the uprooting of the enslaved during and after the Middle Passage, the enslaved on planet Gorée (after Gorée Island, off the coast of Dakar, location of the famous museum and memorial *Maison des Esclaves* and the Door of No Return), who are forced to extract vibranium from the mines to empower the empire, face

16 Cf. also: "[Shuri] had her griot power—the entire history of Wakanda at her disposal. It was not enough." In Book 3, Shuri exclaims about Wakanda's capital: "The golden city must not fall." But T'Challa soon speaks of "the diaspora of the golden city."

a devastating future: "They have stolen your name, your culture, your God. Do not let them steal your mind," one of the enslaved tells the rebel, who is haunted by fading visions of his past (Book 6).

Pressed by the leader of the maroons (N'Yami) about his incentive for joining the rebellion, the rebel expresses a diasporic desire for a homeland—"I fight to get back home" (Book 6)—even though he can barely remember this home and does not even know his name. N'Yami responds: "We are the nameless, my son. Orphans of the cosmos. Flotsam of the empire. But now is the hour of our restoration. Our handles are taken from the legends of our past. So that we, marooned in the empire, are nameless no more. And to you I give the name of a man who was born a king and died a hero. Arise T'Challa." From the traces of the past, the scraps in the archive, N'Yami and her followers construct a revolutionary message, as T'Challa learns more about the empire's archives from fellow maroon fighter Nakia. When the Askari, described in the paratext as "both the police force of the Empire and the arm of the Wakandan slave trade,"

> steal memories, they store them in the imperial archive. Every bit of that archive is then mined and researched [… f]or anything unknown to them— anything. Thoughts, ideas, emotions, stories, methods, half-formed notions. All of it is appropriated for their interests. […] Your memories are knowledge. And the Empire doesn't destroy knowledge … … they plunder it. […] It is sickening. The Empire speaks of the grandeur of its civilization. And it is grand. But it is also stolen. (Book 6)

These statements exemplify Coates's assessment of American history, especially the disenfranchisement and dehumanization of the enslaved, and of Western colonialism as large-scale theft rationalized as the extension of civilization to the allegedly uncivilized. In Book 7, M'Baku, another ally, specifies the archive's foundational force for the empire:

> Like all Empires, the Empire of Wakanda is counterfeit. It is a Confederacy of villains who've elevated criminality to galactic law. The Empire creates nothing. It enlightens no one. Because, as the great Changamire taught, "Empires do not enlighten, they plunder." […] The font of the Empire's great power is the archive—its vast collection of knowledge. All of it plundered from the memories of the millions they've enslaved. […] It is the archive that gave the Empire its culture and technology. From the Rigellians, the Empire acquired the vast knowledge of the stars. From the Teku-Maza, they pilfered literature and song. From the Kronan, they learned the true power of vibranium—life-blood of the Empire. From the Shadow People, they stole knowledge of governance and hierarchy.

The Enlightenment emerges here as the enabling philosophy to a system of mass enslavement and mass plundering.[17] Western civilization, and especially the United States (note the allusion to the Southern Confederacy and also how the powers of vibranium recall the antebellum cotton economy), are unmasked as a gigantic fraud: a false claim to cultural and technological superiority derived from knowledge of the colonized that

17 Plunder is a central term for Coates. *Between the World and Me* finds "plunder everywhere around us" (21), warning: "Beware the plunderer!" (87-88). *We Were Eight Years in Power* asserts: "America is literally unimaginable without plundered labor shackled to plundered land, without the organizing principle of whiteness as citizenship, without the culture crafted by the plundered, and without that culture itself being plundered" (85).

is stolen, stored in the archive, and then used against the disempowered, disenfranchised, and disinherited. "Do you know what it is to be haunted?," T'Challa asks in Book 6 and connects the filling of the imperial archive with the mind-swiped memories of the enslaved and the plundered knowledge of their people with the erasure of a Black future: "The Empire doesn't just steal our past, they steal our futures. How can we move forward when we do not know our names? Who we are? Who we love? Even as I have escaped, I am captured, held fast by these questions. Who am I? What promises have I made? And to whom? How can I move forward, knowing not what I am leaving behind?" The enslaved are robbed of their memories, but they refuse to be defined by this theft. As a general of the empire tells the rebels in Book 7: "you've lived three lives—the conquered, the slave, and now the maroon. And all of those lives existed outside the largesse of the Empire." Walters therefore maintains: "Where the archive records people as slave, coolie, and arsonist," diasporic writers "set these languages mobile, aspirational, and open to the subjunctive asking: 'what if they were rebel, lover, leader?'" (5). Writers like Coates,

> posit stowaways, underground resistance leaders, and literate rebels who would not likely appear in the records of the plantation owner, slave ship captain, or court reporter. Or where they do appear, misnamed as criminal, coolie, or hashmark, a cipher in the history of the nation-state, creative writers teach us to look anew and see the lives of everyday people who resisted the dominant order in multiple, often subtle, perhaps unrecorded ways. (6)

For the rebels in the storyworld, such imaginative archival interventions are, however, hardly possible. For them, as M'Baku exclaims in Book 7, the aim is "to neutralize the archive. The Empire evolves too fast for us to fight, because the archive is alive. It does not just hold knowledge. It analyzes and dissects it. Searching for patterns. For new ways to conquer. New ways to enslave." While this new type of archive evokes a techno-dystopia where powerful institutions monitor, control, and exploit the population, M'Baku refuses to give up: "We are going to avenge its victims, and make them whole. Because the Empire didn't simply steal our technology and culture—they stole our lives."

Black Panther as Archival Agent

I have already cited Hirsch and Taylor's understanding of archives as "engines of circulation" and De Kosnik's observations on rogue archives in the digital era. I now want to build on these ideas by moving away from storyworld depictions of archives to *Black Panther*'s role as an archival agent in and beyond superhero comics.

As a current (re-)iteration of an older Marvel property, Coates's *Black Panther* recalls Stoler's characterization of "colonial archives [as] an arsenal of sorts that were reactivated to suit new governing strategies" (3). This reactivation includes Marvel's cultivation of a "corporate

narrative memory" that uses the property as "a creative and commercial resource," as Jean-Matthieu Méon writes about the publisher's ongoing "memory management" (190, 194, 195). The paperback collections amplify the fact that Coates and Stelfreeze revise the original Black Panther and critically interact with the superhero's history. The reprints of the earliest Black Panther stories in the appendices of Books 1 and 2 foreground the serial continuities and dissonances between Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's character and Coates and Stelfreeze's updated version, which is less beholden to (but not entirely free from) stereotypes of Africa and rethinks the genre's troubled gender depictions by affording major roles to female characters (Shuri, Ramonda, Ororo Munroe, the Dora Milaje). In the first appearance of Lee and Kirby's Black Panther, The Thing (Ben Grimm) described the superhero as "some refugee from a *Tarzan* movie," recognizing the comic's indebtedness to popular representations of Blackness and African otherness—to "the pop culture of plunderers," as Coates writes in *We Were Eight Years in Power* (112)—but also registering the character's deviation from such stereotypes as a master scientist and superior fighter who gives the Fantastic Four a run for their money.[18]

If the backlog of these and other superhero stories is conceptualized as an archive, Coates's *Black Panther* intervenes in the messages this archive stores for posterity by retroactively imbuing it with previously marginalized content, annotating Marvel's decision to make their first Black superhero African in order to avoid racial tensions with a much more heavily politicized commentary on past and present forms of anti-Black violence and racist oppression. Coates's version also pinpoints a reprehensible tendency to feature Black superheroes in secondary roles, represented in Book 4 through the character of Dr. Eliot Augustus Franklin / Thunderball, who complains about being denigrated as "the black Bruce Banner." What's more, the "Black Panther Chronology" at the end of Book 1 maps the history of the character's comic book appearances and thus turns the colonial practice of mapping (narrative) territory into a call to critically investigate—or creatively remap—superhero history. Book 5 also revives one of Marvel's more traditional archival mechanisms, the editorial footnote, creating a referential system for readers to navigate their way to earlier stories deemed relevant for the narrative present.

Moreover, underscoring De Kosnik's assertion that popular "[e]ngagement with cultural memory is [...] not only what comes after the making and distribution of cultural texts [... but] often precedes that making, or occurs at every step throughout the process of making" (4), *Black Panther* draws on written and visual archives that are not germane to comics. This includes works by Frederick Douglass (T'Challa fighting an overseer), Henri Dumas (the poem "Rootsong" in issue #3 of the series; see also Coates, "Wakanda"), W. E. B. DuBois (Book 2: "Two men are forever warring within me"), Audre Lorde (the paraphrased es-

18 Several essays in Darowski's *The Ages of the Black Panther* interrogate the politics behind Lee and Kirby's version of the character. See also Lund.

say title "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" in Book 3), Ralph Ellison (a rebel leader is called Ras the Exhorter), and Edmund S. Morgan's *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (1975) in Book 3. Coates even has philosopher Changamire reformulate Morgan's argument from an Afrodiasporic perspective: "That book chronicles the attempt to raise an entire race of kings. And every year thousands of them were born and charged with keeping thousands more underfoot." These intertextual references serve as archival finding aids, but they also offer an intellectual framework—a customization of the comic book sources that anticipates and sanctions the creative practices of De Kosnik's rogue archivists—that readers may explore to enrich their understanding of the narrative's historical, political, and literary implications.

In addition, visual allusions mark the comic's awareness of the larger archive of politicized imagery, counting on readers capable of connecting the dots. One example is a splash panel in Book 1 that evokes media images of a Saddam Hussein statue being torn down by U.S. soldiers during the invasion of Iraq, conjuring up the disastrous post-9/11 nation-building endeavors of the Bush Administration. A more recent reference is the first cover variant at the beginning of Book 1: Alex Ross's Black Panther in mid-air surrounded by gun-toting policemen. This nod to the Black Lives Matter movement and the protests that followed in the wake of Michael Brown's murder and the Ferguson riots sets the tone for the story, connecting the colonial past with contemporary grievances and bringing police brutality into the comic book canon.[19] Here, the comic incorporates creative applications and adaptations of its central imagery to ongoing political conflicts instead of outsourcing this practice to the fans.

Finally, the paperback collections include paratextual "archive stories" (Antoinette Burton) about the making of the series. These include a "Behind the Scenes" feature with Brian Stelfreeze; a "Process and Development" section; an interview with Coates and Ryan Coogler titled "Down with the King"; and a "How to Draw Black Panther in Six Easy Steps" exercise enticing readers to try their hands at comic art. If contemporary media users treat popular culture as a "repository of narratives, characters, worlds, images, graphics, and sounds from which they can extract the raw matter they need for their own creations" (De Kosnik 4), *Black Panther* does exactly that. All eight paperbacks include variant cover galleries that disperse the iconography of the Black Panther across graphic styles, propagating a sense of aesthetic multiplicity that no longer insists on the sanctity of an original source text but encourages adaptation and revision as integral elements of genre evolution—without, however, completely abandoning corporate control and forfeiting the commercial potential in superhero franchising.

19 Other superhero comics also address police shootings. One particularly noteworthy example is Scott Snyder and Brian Azzarello's "A Simple Case" from Batman #44 (Sept. 2015). For a close reading of this story and its politicized reception, see Stein, "Conflicting."

Conclusions: Complicating the Gaze

When the news that Coates would script the *Black Panther* broke, George Gene Gustines wrote in the *New York Times*: "Ta-Nehisi Coates can be identified in many ways: as a national correspondent for *The Atlantic*, as an author and […] nominee for the National Book Award's nonfiction prize. But Mr. Coates also has a not-so-secret identity, as evidenced by some of his *Atlantic* blog posts and his Twitter feed: Marvel Comics superfan." That superfans write superhero comics is nothing new, as generations of writers and artists have self-identified as fans to authorize their versions of particular characters or series (Stein, *Authorizing* 4-5). But Gustines highlights a tension that is worth further exploration. I have already cited Eli Boonin-Vail's point that Coates uses *Black Panther* to amplify his "popular intellectual critique" (135), and I also recognize Julian Chambliss's claim that "we can see [that] Coates' approach is informed by ideological frameworks growing from Critical Race Theory […] and Black Feminist Theory" (210). But I also share Hollie FitzMaurice's conflicted assessment of the representation of women in *Black Panther* based on a critical reading of Hudlin's *Deadliest of the Species* arc but also applicable to Coates's run, albeit to a much lesser degree.[20] Coates certainly presents a broad range of strong female figures, including a queer romance between the renegades Ayo and Aneka, explored at length in the *World of Wakanda* spin-off. Moreover, some of the resistance against Wakanda's "totalitarian monarchism" (Burger and Engels 16-17) is formed as a critique of patriarchy. "No man should have that much power," Ayo justifies the rebellious actions of the Midnight Angels, while Aneka makes the case for women's liberation in Book 2: "Once we were bred by men solely to give our bodies to other men. We have seen how the woman becomes the enslaved. Let us now show them how the enslaved becomes a legend."[21] In Coates's Wakanda, however, Shuri is "an alternately disembodied or suprabodied savior of the nation in comparison with her deeply embodied brother," as Boonin-Vail overserves (146). Roaming the Djalia in search of memories, she is first denied a physical existence and then becomes a superheroine whose corporeal depiction, like that of other female characters (especially Storm), does not completely abandon the generic preset, even though her ability to turn to stone and become unbreakable (first shown in Book 2) serves as an apt metaphor for shielding female bodies in the public sphere. Moreover, the depiction of Aneka and Ayo's same-sex intimacy is not entirely beyond the purview of the genre's formative voyeurism, while rebel leader Zenzi is occasionally eroticized, such as when her cloak exposes her midriff and the lower parts of her breasts in Book 2.[22] Coates's "popular black feminist project" (Boonin-Vail 146) is thus hampered at least to some extent by the weight of comic book tradition, with its tendency to subject female figures to a (White) male gaze.[23]

20 Cole's critique of Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* film—"Why are monarchies the narrative default? Can we dream beyond royalty?"—is also relevant, even though Coates sets Wakanda on an unprecedented course toward democracy. See also Rebecca Wanzo's take on these issues in her recent book on racial caricature and the politics of belonging.

21 These words recall the famous chiasm from *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*: "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man" (47).

22 See Deborah E. Whaley's *Black Women in Sequence* for a critique of female Black comic book characters as stereotypically gendered "signs" of Africa. The visual depictions of these characters are technically not Coates's, but those of his illustrators. Despite being the writer for the series, Coates would not have been totally independent in overseeing all aesthetic choices. A more elaborate analysis of the visuals would have to consider the roles of the artists as well as those of editor Wil Moss and executive editor Tom Brevoort.

23 For an analysis of how recent Black female creators resist and revision this tradition, see Nina Mickwitz's article in this issue.

In an interview before the release of *World of Wakanda*, Roxane Gay confronted Coates with the male-centric worldview of his nonfiction writing. Coates largely agreed with her critique but paid homage to authors like Isabel Wilkerson, Toni Morrison, Thavolia Glymph, Kidada Williams, Paula Giddings, and Natasha Trethewey ("The Charge to Be Fair"). In *Between the World and Me*, he also acknowledged "that all are not equally robbed of their bodies, that the bodies of women are set out for pillage in ways I could never truly know" (65). It is true, too, that the oppression and exploitation of women is repeatedly addressed in the comics. For instance, one of the elder women leaders of the Midnight Angels confronts Tetu with the brutal acts of his soldiers: "A revolution in Wakanda that overlooks half of the country is no revolution at all" (Book 3). This, then, is where Coates's version of the *Black Panther* must do its cultural work. By claiming a heightened degree of intellectual sophistication through its author's notoriety and the many intertextual references to his nonfiction work, and by associating the storytelling with the journalistic search for historical truths, the comic opens itself up to the kind of gendered critique offered by Gay. Part of this work is the inclusion of female authors and perspectives, not only in spin-off series like *World of Wakanda* and *Black Panther & the Crew* (co-written by Yona Harvey), but also in works like Nnedi Okorafor's *Black Panther: Long Live the King* and her *Shuri* series.[24]

By suggesting that archives are continually constructed and contested and that they may even go rogue, becoming unhinged from what used to be the colonizing efforts of the culture industry to maintain control over their properties and police their backstories, Coates's *Black Panther* makes significant advances in decolonizing the comic book superhero as a less White, less hegemonic, and less patriarchal figure.[25] If we read superhero comics as an evolving serial archive of fictional storytelling with real-world consequences, the archival "contact zone" (Burton 9) would be the space in which creators and readers interact. Traditionally, this would have been the letter columns and fanzines, but since the arrival of online communication, discussion boards, forums, blogs, wikis, and websites have taken over this function.[26] But perhaps we can also think of comics like *Black Panther* themselves as archival agents that draw both their creators and their readers into a globally accessible contact zone in which archives are continually mobilized to proffer new perspectives on the global imaginaries of diasporic Blackness.

24 On the feminist aesthetics of the Black Atlantic diaspora, see Pinto. We can also situate Coates's larger comics oeuvre—he has also written *Captain America*—and his nonfiction writing in what Ashe and Saal describe as the "post-soul or post-black" era, associated with "recent African American cultural productions [...] that [...] partake in a larger poetics of literary and visual narratives of slavery marking the circum-Atlantic world" (5). See also Raiford and Raphael-Hernandez.

25 Chambliss discerns "the decolonization of *Black Panther*" (204). On the Whiteness of the superhero, see Guynes and Lund.

26 It is no coincidence that *Black Panther* revolves around diasporic archives at a time when "digitization transforms slavery's status as a particular—even peculiar—object of knowledge within and beyond literary studies" (Rusert 268).

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