

Afro-Caribbean Reflections on the Film *Black Panther*: Imagining Superheroes in the Nation-Building Process of Curaçao

by

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After viewing the film *Black Panther*, I was in many ways reminded of my native island of Curaçao and its own historic heroes including Ergilio Hato whose nickname was Black Panther.¹ There are, in my view, some interesting parallels between Curaçao and Wakanda, particularly as it pertains to the characters Black Panther and Killmonger and the ways in which they interpret Wakanda's nation-building process. In the film we see the very advanced and rich nation of Wakanda in the middle of a possible transition. Wakanda's isolation from the rest of the world, under the mask of "third worldism," is being threatened with expansion and globalization. The residents of Wakanda include intelligent, powerful, unique, and brilliant people, willing to protect and advance their nation. Of course, the nation of Wakanda is fictional. In the real world, we see very few third world nations that are not influenced by Western culture. The skewed distributions of goods and power in the world are maintained precisely due to interconnected global technological advances. However, the fictional Wakanda is an inverted ideological and cultural imaginary response of many third world nations with a majority Afro-descendent population. I speak here primarily of post-colonial and neocolonial Afro-Caribbean nations that establish a Wakandan-type ethos in the conceptualization of the nation-building process.

This is particularly the case in Curaçao where we see the fostering of power and liberation in part through the physical talents, intelligence, mental and linguistic dexterity of its people. Most Curaçaoans are to varying degrees proficient in at least four languages² and have developed their own eclectic culture fused with African, Spanish, and European elements. The island nation, known to be one of the richest and most highly educated in the Caribbean, has produced some very impressive athletic and artistic talents.³ The touted brilliance of Curaçao brings into focus the influence of hundreds of years of Dutch European association.⁴ How has this center-periphery relationship shaped the collective and personal psychological psychology of Curaçaoan people?

I ask this question with studies in Afrocentric psychology in mind as I reflect on the work by Marcia Sutherland in “Individual Differences in Response to the Struggle for the Liberation of People of African Descent.”⁵ In this timeless article still applicable to the conditions of Afro-diaspora people in this twenty-first century, Sutherland analyzes the writings of Africentric theorists and uses Fanonian principles on the Manichean world⁶ to emphasize, among other things, the effects of the perpetual conflict between the colonizer and the colonized on the psychology and sense of identity of people in majority African diaspora nations. I contend that this Manichean tension continues today regardless of the decolonial, neocolonial, or postcolonial existence of nations in contemporary times.

In the case of Curaçao, it is the psychological and political tension within the Curaçaoan-Dutch-European Manichean world that makes for a fascinating analysis of the multiple versions of real life Black Panthers and antagonists like Killmonger in the cultural production of the island.⁷ Like the oppositional visions on international relations between T’Challa/Black Panther and N’Jadaka/Killmonger wherein the isolated survival of Wakanda is posited against global liberation of African diaspora people, Curaçao too has tussled with its own unique ways of affirming the survival of a national culture steeped predominantly in an Africana ethos operating in the shadows of a Dutch European vanguard. This tussle that occurs along a gradation of multiple forms of Black survival⁸ is somewhat tricky in the case of Curaçao, primarily because the island is home to a multicultural society rooted in a history of diversity and difference.⁹ Hence, a cosmopolitan performance of identity is at the essence of Curaçaoan people.¹⁰ This makes it difficult to classify those who Sutherland identifies as “authentic and non-authentic strugglers for Black survival and realization of an African essence”¹¹ particularly as it relates to this outward looking island nation. Nevertheless, the colonial and post-colonial history, juridical associations, and uneven power relations between Curaçao and the Netherlands, often with racial and ethnic undertones, have allowed for a progression of opposing factions in the cultural, psychological, and political liberation process of the island’s people.¹²

Thus, what we see in the case of Curaçao are multiple hyphenations of a Black Panther-Killmonger syncretic¹³ during different historical times and under different conditions. Local individuals praised today as heroes, like Tula,¹⁴ Moises Frumencio DaCosta Gomez,¹⁵ Wilson Godett,¹⁶ and Ergilio Hato,¹⁷ just to name a few, navigated the difficult dimension of a Curaçao still under some form of colonial cloak with the Netherlands. Their commitment to the respect and self-determination of the Curaçaoan majority could be analyzed along the lines of their gradation of authenticity to the struggle for the advancement of the Black working class majority. As highlighted by Sutherland, factions in Afrocentric psychology suggest that the personalogical actualization of the Black individual occurs when she/he realizes that her/his growth is inter-dependent with a permanent commitment to the positive development and advancement of African diaspora people.¹⁸

Any type of half-stepping, where the individual is more concerned with personal, selfish interest or opportunistic considerations would make him/her an inauthentic or non-committed struggler.¹⁹ I contend however, that in the Curaçaoan case, it is the developmental journey that comprises nuanced and dialectical social and political maneuvering of the courageous individual within Dutch Kingdom juridical limitations that strengthens the character and advocacy skills of the eventual authentic struggler or national hero.

The earlier mentioned Curaçaoan heroes are unique in that all of them, in my view, dedicated their entire adult lives to the advancement and proud visibility of the island's majority. Their missteps, levels of preparation, potential commitment anxieties, possible self-interests, abilities to be manipulated and to be a manipulator, triumphs, and even disappointments along the way of becoming authentic strugglers have shaped their personal actualization towards Black advancement within Dutch Kingdom constraints.²⁰ Thus, all of them embody various degrees of characteristics from both T'Challa and Killmonger in their strategies for the progression of the island's majority.²¹

Unique in the group of heroes mentioned is Ergilio Hato because he was literally nicknamed Black Panther in the 1940s and 1950s. He was given this name because of his "magical" athletic abilities as a soccer goalkeeper to stop the unstoppable. Ergilio Hato's blocking skills became an imaginary symbol of the successful prevention of imposing outside influence on the nation. There is no doubt that the development of soccer on the island involved racialized colonial undertones regardless of the postcolonial status of what was the Netherlands Antilles at the time.²² Hato's role as the fictional protector of the Netherlands Antilles was reinforced by the national wins against powerful first world professional soccer teams like Feyenoord.²³ Hato's symbolic Black Panther-like defense of the nation was further reinforced by his continued rejection of professional contracts to play overseas, even as other Curaçaoan, Aruban, and Surinamese soccer players were jumping at the opportunity to play for these first-class Euro-Dutch teams.²⁴ Hato remained committed to the island until his passing in 2003.

Hato illustrates in this case that personal and communal success comes with a reflective activist approach to free oneself as much as possible from the Manichean paradigm that is engineered to maintain a social structure wherein the Curaçaoan individual has constrained choices for freedom. I argue that herein lies his antagonistic Killmonger spirit. Remaining on the island, as opposed to allowing a setback to increased domination and control over his Black body, signals a rejection of continued oppression by Curaçao's own Black Panther.

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Notes

¹ Curaçao is a tiny Dutch Caribbean nation located off the coast of South America. The island is only 171 square miles in size and the population is a little over 160,000. The island is not independent, rather it is an autonomous nation in the Dutch Kingdom. The island's judicial system patterns the Euro-Dutch system. The islanders run their own government, but military and foreign affairs are maintained by the Netherlands.

² The islanders speak Dutch, English, Spanish, and Papiamentu. Papiamentu is an Afro-Portuguese creole language spoken on Curaçao and on sister islands Aruba and Bonaire.

³ Though I introduce the positive aspects of Curaçao as it relates to the film *Black Panther*, I must at the same time acknowledge that the island is not void of its own economic, political, and social shortcomings. For an analysis on the political and economic difficulties of Curaçao and the former Netherlands Antilles explore the works by Michael Sharpe, Gert Oostindie, Lammert de Jong, Anderson and Dynes, among others.

⁴ The Netherlands colonized Curaçao in 1634 and made it the slave depot for the Dutch West India Company. The Dutch colonies in the Americas and the Caribbean included parts of Brazil, New York (and other parts of Northeastern United States), Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao, Saba, Sint Maarten, Sint Eustatius, and Suriname. Even after the abolition of slavery in 1863, the Dutch maintained its colonies in the Americas (Dutch Guyana/Suriname) and the Caribbean. The colonial status of the various countries went through several metamorphoses, ultimately resulting in the Netherlands Antilles. Suriname gained its independence in 1975, Aruba gained an autonomous status in 1986, while the other islands of the Caribbean split into factions of autonomous nations (Curaçao and Sint Maarten) and municipalities of the Netherlands (Bonaire, Sint Eustatius, Saba) in 2010. All islands are still part of the Dutch Kingdom and the citizens are all Dutch.

⁵ Marcia Sutherland explains in "Individual Differences in Response to the Struggle for the Liberation of People of African Descent" that the development of Black Psychology in the 1970s began as a way to provide a more "proactive and global approach to an understanding of the psychology of [people of African descent] throughout the world" (41). The Africentric paradigm explores the healthy development of the Black self and the community all while introducing characteristics within African cosmology to forward a coherent sense of the Black self in the environment.

⁶ Franz Fanon, a prominent French Caribbean psychiatrist from Martinique, produced a psychological theory for Global Black identity development particularly as this relates to the oppression of people of color around the world.

⁷ The Curaçaoan—Dutch—European Manichean world is a framework wherein the intercultural, political, and economic relations are framed in the context of: colonizer versus colonized, oppressor versus oppressed, civilized versus uncivilized, first world versus third world. This follows Franz Fanon’s Manichean paradigm.

⁸ Multiple forms of Black survival here suggest that there are many ways in which one can strive for the advancement of people of African descent.

⁹ Curaçao is home to people descending from 50+ nationalities. The diversity of the island can be accredited to forced immigration to the island in the form of Dutch colonial slavery of Africans during the seventeenth century, and immigration to the island primarily after the establishment of the oil refinery in 1915. The growing economy after this time facilitated the influx of people from all over the Caribbean and around the world.

¹⁰ In the article titled “Dutch Caribbean Women’s Literary Thought: Activism through Linguistic and Cosmopolitan Multiplicity,” published in *Wagadu Journal* in 2017, I write specifically of the multi-layered cosmopolitan identity of Curaçaoan women writers and their writings. Though my focus in this article was primarily on Curaçaoan diaspora women, I contend that the citizens of this diaspora, including men, inhabit the world from a cosmopolitan position. I maintain however that women writers from the Curaçaoan diaspora have placed a focused visibility on this cosmopolitan viewpoint in literature.

¹¹ Marcia Sutherland, “Individual Differences in Response to the Struggle for the Liberation of People of African Descent,” *Journal of Black Studies* 20, no. 1(1989): 40-59.

¹² The work by Michael Sharpe in the article “Race, Color, and Nationalism in Aruban and Curaçaoan Political Identity,” published in *Thamyris/Intersecting* in 2014 provides a careful and valid analysis of the undertones of race in the insular, national, and Dutch Kingdom relations between Curaçao and Aruba. Other valuable works focusing on power, race, and ethnic relations in the Dutch Kingdom are those by Gert Oostindie, Rose Mary Allen, Harry Hoetink, and René Römer, among others.

¹³ The Black Panther-Killmonger syncretic references a paradoxical identity on the level of an ego versus alter-ego personification that reflect contrasting and dichotomous modus operandi.

¹⁴ Tula Rigaud (?-1795) was a male slave who started a major slave revolt on the island of Curaçao on August 17, 1795. Inspired by the Haitian revolution, he was calling for the liberation of the slaves on the island of Curaçao. A monument commemorating Tula was erected on Rif-Otrabanda, Curaçao.

¹⁵ Moises Frumencio DaCosta Gomez (1907-1966), also known as “dòktor”, was the leader of the National People’s Party. His diplomacy was instrumental in realizing the autonomous status of the Netherlands Antilles in 1954.

¹⁶ Wilson “Papa” Godett (1932-1995) was known as one of the figures that spearheaded the revolt on May 30, 1969 on the island of Curaçao. His fight was for social and economic equality and justice for the marginal majority Black underclass.

¹⁷ Ergilio Hato (1926-2003) was nicknamed Black Panther because of his unbelievable talents as a goal keeper. He was at one point during the 1940-50s known as the best goalkeeper in the Caribbean and the Americas. He played soccer for the Dutch Antillean team, CRKSV Jong Holland, in the 1940s and the 1950s. The Dutch Antillean team was very successful under his lead as the goal keeper, achieving third place standing in the Pan-American Games in 1955. Curaçao’s largest multi-purpose national sport stadium, also known as *Sentro Deportivo Kòrsou*, is named after Mr. Hato.

¹⁸ Sutherland, “Individual Differences in Response to the Struggle for the Liberation of People of African Descent,” 48,54.

¹⁹ Sutherland, 43-57.

²⁰ Sutherland, 45. Factions in Black Psychology might describe this as the emotional experiences inherent with the non-struggler who is mostly concerned with “his/her personal survival.” Yet, I put forward that the mentioned Curaçaoan heroes were equally, if not more concerned with their nation. This shows, as also suggested by Sutherland, that an “individual [may not necessarily] fit neatly into one category [as a struggler]” (45). The mentioned Curaçaoans are not non-strugglers; rather they are authentic in their struggles for self-determination and justice for the Black majority.

²¹ Killmonger displayed a selfish and aggressive approach to the liberation of people of African descent, and allowed himself to be manipulated by an oppressor. However, he also manipulated others to be in his court. His big ego and psychological hang-ups from his childhood influenced his rash decisions (mistakes), even as his intentions were ultimately in favor of collective Black liberation and advancement throughout the African diaspora. Even though Black Panther was in favor of Black affirmation in Wakanda, he was somewhat shortsighted in understanding his connection to the Black diaspora. His initial approach was to protect and nourish the survival of Wakanda. I argue that he in fact needed Killmonger in order to become enlightened about his connection to Black people beyond the geography of Wakanda.

Hence, his antagonist, Killmonger, taught him that non-Wakanda Blacks are indirectly connected to Wakanda, and that a global collaborative communal strategy is necessary for the advancement of all diaspora people. Towards the end of the film we see T'Challa/Black Panther reconciling a global Black community when he goes to California to support the deprived Black community that his father, uncle, and N'Jadaka/Killmonger once navigated. My essay suggests that all of the Curaçaoan heroes discussed embody, to varying degrees, some portions of the characteristics seen in Black Panther and Killmonger within Dutch Kingdom constraints.

²² It is important to note that Hato's success was happening during a time when the remanence of a colonial social power structure was very much in place, and it even permeated the sports culture. Euro-Dutch catholic chaplains and priests on the island were very much involved in the engineering of Curaçao's school system and the development of soccer from school courtyards to soccer fields on the island. For more on this *see*: Marjet Derks, "NEC's Antilliaanse Voetbalhelden Eind Jaren Vijftig: Sport in (Post)Koloniaal Perspectief," *De SportWereld*, no. 82-83 (2017): 4-10.

²³ One of the foremost Dutch European professional soccer teams.

²⁴ Marjet Derks, "NEC's Antilliaanse Voetbalhelden Eind Jaren Vijftig: Sport in (Post)Koloniaal Perspectief," *De SportWereld*, no. 82-83 (2017): 4-10.

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