Race & Podcast Shownotes
*American Architecture as a
Settler Colonial Project:
Black Panther's Wakanda*
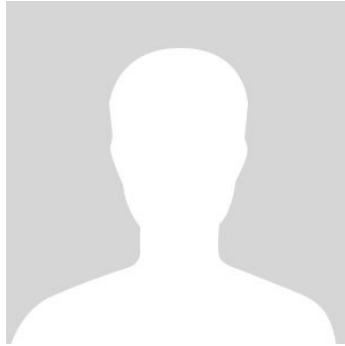
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Links and References:

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Music Used in the Podcast

1.   Jose Konda, Masiya
2.   Xylo-Ziko, Djerba
3.   Xylo-Ziko, Sal
4.   Xylo-Ziko, Lamu

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Transcript

Jacqueline (J): You guys it's almost summertime I can't wait! What's new?

Michael (M): Well summer means summer blockbusters! Earlier this month Marvel announced a set of new films that they're calling Phase 4, including Black Panther II.

J: Wow. That's so cool. I loved the first Black Panther movie!

Anna (A): Me too! But wait, what are they going to do without Chadwick Boseman?

J: Ah, you're right, oh no. Chadwick is such a huge part of that movie. His role is iconic.

M: I agree. It will be no easy task, especially having to replace a force like Chadwick Boseman. He's had so many iconic roles playing important Black figures like Jackie Robinson, Thurgood Marshall, and James Brown. One could argue that T'Challa in Black Panther is the most important and inspiring character of his career.

J: More inspiring than Jackie Robinson and Thurgood Marshall?

M: Perhaps. When Black Panther came out in 2018, Black people all over the world were so excited. You could not go anywhere without seeing the "Wakanda Forever" salute. It was quite a time. Black people felt represented in a big and powerful way.

A: I remember that! It was such a moment for African-American people and that movie came out at an important time of social justice for Black people in the US.

M: Exactly. The afrofuturist themes and imagery really resonated with so many people across the African diaspora and gave us a real glimpse into an alternative past and future.

J: Hold up. Afrofuturism? What is that? Sounds cool.

M: Afrofuturism is a term that was coined by Mark Dery in his 1993 essay titled "Black to the Future." In it, he describes Afrofuturism as "[s]peculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth century technoculture—and more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and prosthetically enhanced future."

J: Okay, what does that mean?

M: It means African-American culture and voices of the past, present and future are reimagined and projected onto invented science-fiction worlds. In Afrofuturism, culturally and historically significant moments in the African diaspora are blended through the lens of technology as a way of exploring a history that has been decimated by white colonial powers. In doing so, it allows African-Americans to rewrite a future of Black politics and aesthetics that marries a culturally-diverse past with a thriving technologically-advanced future.

A: Afrofuturism isn't a new thing, right? Parliament, Funkadelic, and Sun-Ra used science-fiction themes and imagery in their music and Black authors, like Octavia Butler and Samuel Delaney, wrote in the sci-fi genre as early as the 1960s.

M: That's right! The term may have come into use in the 1990s but African-American creatives have been thematically dabbling with technology and space since at least the mid-50s. In the 21st century, Afrofuturism has really taken off though. For example, Janelle Monae use tales of cyborgs in a futuristic city to examine the oppression of slavery and Jim Crow in an entirely new context. In addition, recent injustices in the United States and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement have further centered Afrofuturism as a way of thinking about technology that could be useful in fighting oppression while also giving hope for a future that can produce a technocultural Black Utopia, like Wakanda.

A: That's why Black Panther coming out at the time it did was significant to so many people. The themes, the clothing, and especially the architecture all envisioned a Black utopia that acknowledged African diasporic experiences and technological ingenuity without favoring one over the other.

M: So a massive part of what renders this afrofuturist vision in the film is the design of Wakanda.

J: Yeah, I feel like the visuals of this designed world are what really brings the fictional country to life. Golden City is sort of a combination of a modern metropolis but still has the character of a lively village.

A: I think that roots with production designer Hannah Beachler's inclination to design with a human-centric approach, thinking about people before anything else in her research.

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It's actually really cool, Beachler designed the entire history of Wakanda in an over 500 page document she calls the "Wakandan Bible." It describes the people, their ancestry, language, clothing, traditions, rituals, and the city and its buildings and functions. She's trained in fashion design and film, so arguably she thinks at a more intimate, human scale than an architect.

J: The buildings she designed are so awesome though! Beachler's role in world-building and constructing the imaginary reminds me so much of the role of Buddy in June Jordan's His
Own Where—he physically makes the world that he wants for him and his dad.

A: Yes, me too! Everyone should read that book. One building she designed directly adjacent to the palace in the Golden City, the Records Hall, really epitomizes her approach and agency as a Black female designer crafting a utopia. The whole building is dedicated to holding records of all Wakandan inhabitants' personal history and ancestry, so that citizens can always know where they came from—something that has been entirely lost to Black Americans.

M: That building completely reminds me of Zaha Hadid's architecture.

A: Yeah, that's because Hannah Beachler was completely inspired by Zaha's curvilinear and voluptuous forms! She wanted to completely rid the city of orthogonality and create vast spaces that felt intimate all the same. She mashed up these epic forms inspired by a British-Iraqi woman with human-scale aspects of African life that she experienced while traveling and researching for the film: earthy tones on building exteriors reference mud and cob construction, thatched roofs made of mud and bamboo protrude from smooth towers, and earthen streets with vibranium-levitation bus routes are lined with shops selling woven straw baskets. To be honest, the forms of Zaha's buildings are really reminiscent of structures like the mosques of Timbuktu and the Musgum compounds of Northern Cameroon, although Zaha's are warped and parametric.

J: I also noticed the buses in the city seemed to retain their vernacular characteristics of the colloquially called trotros while updating the technology to include vibranium-run engines.

M: The idea that a metropolis doesn't have to become sterile and anonymous through modernity is important to this utopian vision. Beachler offers a method where technology and tradition can be combined. The view of transit and city planning retains human intimacy and closeness by designing streets that focus on people instead of cars, streets where people can walk down the middle and not worry about being run over. This utopian perspective could be very helpful for American cities *wink wink*

A: We can also think about the architecture and the settings in the film in relation to how they portray themes of colonialism.

J: OMG, when Shuri said, "Don't scare me like that, colonizer!" to Agent Ross . . . I died.

A: Shuri is the best, I swear. But yeah, the need to address colonialism runs deep in the film, and not just in the dialogue. In her research, Hannah Beachler talked about how various ecologies of migration and land use in Africa were disrupted by colonization, but that those practices still exist in Wakanda. So for example, Step Town—where we see Nakia and T'Challa walk through a market—is made up of a terraced landscape, literally a "stepped town," originally cultivated for agriculture that through different waves of migration over time by merchants and artists was transformed into the "mashup" of cultures that we see in the film.

J: Beachler literally thought of everything, didn't she? And I guess the history of colonialism was inescapable to have in the back of her mind.

M: And then, obviously the history of colonization in Africa sets up a huge part of the backstory. The vibranium meteorite fell to Wakanda millions of years ago, mutating the vegetation and providing them with an extremely valuable resource. As they learned to harness vibranium's power toward technological advancement, they saw the horrors of the world around them—aka colonialism and imperialism—and decided to hide and isolate themselves from the rest of the world.

J: And then that sets up the whole conflict between Killmonger and T'Challa. Because Killmonger's dad (T'Challa's uncle), N'Jobu, was one of the Wakandans living in and keeping tabs on the outside world in Oakland, where, by the way, the Black Panther Party was born. So they witness the effects of systemic racism in the United States, they see that the beliefs behind slavery and colonialism still have a hold on society and want to use Wakanda's resources to fight back.

M: It's such a powerful conflict because you can't really say that anyone is "the bad guy."

A: It's really what I loved so much about the movie from the beginning. It was a superhero movie without an alien invasion or supervillain, instead the conflict basically centered around Western domination and systemic racism. For me, it was really hard to see Killmonger die at the end. And the film has seen a lot of criticism for that: that ultimately the Black, male, American character's life is devalued and he's given the fate of "the bad guy." In contrast, other white or even alien Marvel villains hardly ever face that fate.

M: Yeah, I read one critique that pointed out that contradiction that Wakanda was just fine standing by and allowing white colonizers to ravage the world, but as soon as it was a Black man, he had to be stopped. That made the pervasiveness of racist colonial assumptions stand out to me.

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J: I have seen speculation that he might be resurrected? We know it's possible with Wakanda's technology. I wonder if that would come off as an apology. To be seen I guess . . . but I'll always accept some more Micheal B. Jordan in my life!

M: It was also a slap in the face compared to the storyline the white CIA agent Ross received. He goes from complicit agent in a neocolonial system, to bumbling sidekick to hero, helping save Wakanda. Maybe he's harmless enough as an individual, but he represents a whitewashing of the CIA's neocolonial operations in African countries.

A: There were some other moments where I was surprised by the dangerous stereotypes and tropes the movie held on to. Like with the Jabari Tribe— the reclusive fifth tribe of Wakanda that don't adhere to the Black Panther's rule—while I think T'Challa and their leader Lord M'Baku have an interesting relationship arc, the characterization of the tribe as a whole—aggressive and brutish and so heavily laden with gorilla symbolism—is a little too close for comfort to racist depictions of Africans as savage "Others," more related to gorillas than humans.

J: Wow, you're right. Man, I feel like some of these depictions run so deep in our collective imagination that it can be hard to recognize them. Especially coming from a Disney film, thinking of The Lion King or Tarzan, we've been fed colonial ideas about Africa in the media for so long.

M: But then that's one of the powerful things afrofuturism can bring to the table. All these forms of colonialism tend to erase the culture and identity of the colonized, often simply replacing it with harmful stereotypes. And like we were saying with the Records Hall Beachler designed, she was thinking about this a lot. Imagining an afrofuturist utopia, she was able to rebuild some sense of the history that was lost, as fantastical as it may be.

J: Seems like the only unproblematic characters are the women in the movie?

M: Ya, Lupita N'yongo's character Nakia is definitely the ethical center of the film and though she is T'Challa's romantic interest, she exhibits zero hysterics or emotional outbursts. And even comic book illustrations usually focus on aesthetics of female bodies and this film manages to focus on the central female characters, Nakia, Shuri, and Okoye's minds and integrity.

A: Wow, that was so hard, right. It's usually impossible to depict women as independent, strong, courageous, brilliant, inventive, resourceful, and ethically determined, especially in superhero films.

J: The female characters are definitely the film's brightest area *tear.* Win for feminism . . .

A: And don't forget the fabulous female production designer Hannah Beachler! Her human-centered approach takes on a feminist character as she thinks about "the settings that enable life to take place." Diverse intersections of human experience take center stage and aesthetics merely support them. Although, she also mentioned that the entrance to Golden City's palace has a yonic form, making the nation's center of power decidedly female: talk about a feminist utopian society!

M: Plus feminism and afrofuturism are often pretty closely tied. You can also see the overlap in Beachler's other work with Beyonce's Lemonade, or in Octavia Butler or Janelle Monae's work like we mentioned before.

M: How do you think Black Panther II could address these criticisms?

A: I mean, bringing the issues to the table is the first step. Who knows what pressures there are behind the scenes from Marvel and Disney, but the directorial and production team and all the actors really pulled off what is already such a cultural touchstone that pushes conversations about Black excellence, racial justice, and afrofuturism to the forefront. Even if they didn't get everything right, it's still just one piece of art, from one perspective, and like Beachler has said, it's miles ahead of anything she saw in the media as a child. Imaginaries where women are shown as strong, empowered characters, and not created under the guise of patriarchy that fall into the usual cinematic stereotypes are so important.

J: Yeah, you can't write that off. Getting people talking is probably one of the most important things, and the people behind the movie are part of that conversation. I think they'll be pretty aware of all the responses. I wonder if there's a way to push the really successful parts of the movie forward, like its feminist portrayal of the women—how else could feminist theory shape this afrofuturist utopia?

A: That's an interesting question not just for the movie but I think for us as architects, too. There's always a cyclical relationship between architecture and speculative, fictional depictions of the future and utopias. What can architecture learn from Wakanda? From its successes and its shortcomings.

M: Hm, these are good questions. We can learn that architecture does not have to participate in the settler colonial tradition of destruction and erasure of culture. Black Panther embraces architectural vernacular and social traditions by updating rather than destroying, and embracing the temporary, expanding the way we look at the built environment with different perspectives of time and values.

J: Well now I can't wait for the sequel next summer!