Accounting for the popularity of *Black Panther* among Black South African women in Soweto township

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ABSTRACT

In February 2018, South Africa was hit by the *Black Panther* (Coogler 2018) fever. Multitudes of people thronged movie houses in their cultural regalia. The movie's release seemed to have signalled a "cultural moment". Several scholars have engaged with *Black Panther*'s cultural significance and thematic engagement. However, extant literature has not fully explored and accounted for the movie's popularity in audiences' specific socio-historical contexts of consumption. More so, current studies on *Black Panther* have mostly relied on text-based approaches and paid scant attention to audiences' contexts and lived experiences. Premised on a cultural studies approach, this reception analysis sought to explore and account for the popularity of *Black Panther* among Black South African women in Soweto township. The study's findings show that the popularity of *Black Panther* among Black South African women in Soweto is attributable to the meanings associated with resistance and pleasure that subaltern audiences negotiate from the movie. Audiences' situated discourses and the film's Afrofuturist orientation combine to unravel a "cultural moment" for Black women in Soweto where they can challenge and subvert localised and global forms of oppression that afflict them. The film opens up symbolic space for subaltern Black South African women to recuperate voice and their agency.

Keywords: *Black Panther,* Afrofuturism, reception, cultural studies, resistance, pleasure.

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Introduction

Since its release, *Black Panther* (Coogler 2018) has proven to be a phenomenal Black cultural text (Chikafa-Chipiro 2019). The film has achieved global box office success and ignited a cultural moment that went on to attract a hashtag movement that trended online as #Wakandaforever (Omanga & Mainye 2019). The cultural moment ignited by *Black Panther* did not only encompass Hollywood. It extended to the African continent where countries such as South Africa and Kenya went into a frenzy with multitudes of viewers thronging movie houses, chanting traditional songs and wearing traditional regalia. As a result, *Black Panther* has been widely described as a revolutionary and epoch-defining science-fiction film (New York Times 2018). Scholars have attributed the film's popularity and significance to its rootedness in Afrofuturism, which informs its cultural aesthetic, thematic engagement, and historical depiction of Black people and Africa (Williams 2018, Makhuba 2019).

Black Panther poses several disruptions to hegemonic representations of Black people, and more particularly, Black women in Hollywood films (Dralega 2018). Historically, Black women have been portrayed through three major limiting character tropes in Hollywood: 'the mammy', who gladly cares for everyone except herself; 'the tragic mulatta', caught between Black and white parents; and 'the jezebel', who is characterised by sexual aggression (Anderson 1997:9). Carol Azungi Dragela (2018) further notes that Hollywood films tend to relegate Black women to marginal or supportive roles where they lack agency and are predominantly subjects of victimhood and entrapment. However, the representation of Black female characters in *Black Panther* disrupts the stereotypical roles reserved for Black actresses in Hollywood (Chandiran & Sandra 2020).

Black Panther consists of female protagonists, a characterisation that is rarely seen in western cultural frames (Dralega 2018). The film dismantles hegemonic representations of Black women in Hollywood by depicting female protagonists with agency. The women in *Black Panther* occupy space in domains traditionally reserved for men. They are technologically proficient and constitute an all-female army: the Dora Milaje. This novel representation also disintegrates the dominant notion in hegemonic feminism that a woman cannot be both beautiful and smart. In *Black Panther*, audiences encounter women with beauty, intellect and strength. Notably, the representation of Black women in *Black Panther* constitutes a re-examination of reductionist depictions of what constitutes a Black woman. The film shows that Black women can transcend the roles that are traditionally ascribed to them and make legitimate claims to power (Dralega 2018).

A number of studies have examined the significance and popularity of *Black Panther* by focusing on its articulation of Afrofuturism. However, there is still limited studies that have sought to account for the movie's popularity in the specific socio-historical contexts in which audiences negotiate the film. Extant audience research that has examined the significance and appeal of *Black Panther* among audiences have largely ignored audiences' contexts and privileged text-based research methods (Williams 2018). Research that engages with real audiences in their specific socio-historical contexts of consumption has been sparse. Thus far, reception studies of *Black Panther* (see Omanga & Mainye 2019) have mostly approached audiences as homogenous. This approach is limited in understanding audiences' differential readings of the film.

It is against this background that this study employs a cultural studies approach to explore and account for the popularity of *Black Panther* among Black South African women in the predominantly Black township of Soweto. The study achieves its objective by exploring the meanings and pleasures that situated Black women in Soweto negotiate from *Black Panther*, an Afrofuturistic movie that projects a futuristic world that differs from their lived experiences of marginality. Unlike other approaches to audiences, the cultural studies approach contends that the meaning of *Black Panther*, including the pleasures it realises, cannot be read off the film. They can only be gleaned by studying the complex process through which the structuring text encounters the discourses of situated audiences (Livingstone 2015).

Conceptualising Afrofuturism

Although several scholars have attributed *Black Panther*'s popularity to its rootedness in Afrofuturism (Karam & Kirby-Hirst 2019, Makhuba 2019), a review of literature shows that the term Afrofuturism is difficult to define with precision. Contemporary scholars and critics view Afrofuturism as encapsulating a wide variety of phenomena. It is largely conceptualised as a broad artistic and political mode that connects artists and scholars whose interest is to imagine and project possible Black futures for Africans through a Black cultural lens (Gateward & Jennings 2015, Burger & Engels 2019).

Afrofuturism has several overarching elements and interests. First, it seeks to position Black people at the centre of science and technology as opposed to being at the receiving end. Second, it is seized with re-imagining and reclaiming Black identity by subverting the stereotypes associated with blackness and the hegemonic ways of interpreting the past, present and future (Reid 2013). As a result, Afrofuturistic

art forms endeavour to present a nuanced reality of the Black experience. Third, Afrofuturism seeks to create art forms that centre around Black protagonists who wield power through technology as opposed to being decimated by it (Womack 2013). *Black Panther* consummates these three overarching elements and interests in an attempt to subvert decades of Hollywood traditions and stereotypes (Cootzee 2019).

The politics and aesthetics of Afrofuturism and *Black Panther*

Several scholars have argued that *Black Panther* derives its appeal from Afrofuturism's rich heritage of being politically and aesthetically engaged (Karam & Kirby-Hirst 2019, Makhuba 2019). At the heart of its political project, Afrofuturism is interested in using the fantastic as a vehicle to understand oppression, offer critiques of social inequality, and to imagine the possibilities of an egalitarian future devoid of racial and gender oppression (Gateward & Jennings 2015). To achieve this future, Afrofuturists harness the imagination to invert conventional thinking and understandings of blackness (Womack 2013). This is aimed at equipping Black audiences with agency to escape traditional meanings of what it means to be Black, and at times, female (Anderson & Jones 2015). Afrofuturists contend that a critical part of forging a world free of oppression involves revisiting history. In this light, Afrofuturistic texts revisit and reconstruct representations of Black lives and the horrors of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, imperialism, apartheid, capitalism and post-coloniality that are steeped in normative western categorisations (Makhuba 2019).

It is important to note that Afrofuturism is inclusive of Black women (Womack 2013). Besides being interested in re-imagining Black lives in general, Afrofuturism is also committed to reconfiguring representations of Black womanhood. This effort to debunk stereotypical representations of Black women, who share a history of imperial domination, among other forms of othering, is evident in *Black Panther*. The film boldly represents Black women as powerful and revolutionary (Williams 2018). Its depiction of a futuristic world where Black women assume powerful leadership positions constitutes a subversion of Black women's experiences of marginality and a symbolic return to female warriors in African history.

The popularity of *Black Panther* has also been attributed to its use of a cultural aesthetic that is essentially African. The film adopts a cultural aesthetic that takes inspiration from African myths, philosophies and artistic forms. This is in line with Afrofuturism's quest to subvert dominant aesthetic practice and to challenge hegemonic modes of perception about Africa and the Black experience (Karam &

Kirby-Hirst 2019). The cultural aesthetics of *Black Panther* are premised on Afrofuturism, which combines traditional cultural practices with contemporary and futuristic ones in order to depict African culture that is dynamic, global and varied. Thus, *Black Panther* articulates a cultural aesthetic that seeks to resurrect Africa's absent history and to counter its predicted negative future.

Audience reception research: The relationship between audiences and texts

Audience reception research in media and communication research has always been interested in understanding the meanings and pleasures that audiences negotiate from media texts. It grew as a reaction to earlier models of media influences which assumed that media texts have power to impose meanings on audiences. Thus, while early audience research assumed that audiences are undifferentiated, atomised and passively absorb meanings and pleasures provided by media texts, audience reception research offers an alternative approach. It views audiences as capable of actively and creatively making their own meanings from media texts (Livingstone 2015). This shift in understanding audiences and their relationship with media texts had a seismic impact on audience research. It meant that researchers on audiences could no longer deduce meanings from media texts alone. They now had to examine both the readers and how media texts are structured.

The trajectory of audience research reflects a series of transformations that can be summarised as movements away from transmission models of effects, to the study of media within contexts of meaning-making. Early audience reception research (1980s) departed from effects studies in the 1960s, that assumed that the media had direct effects on audiences. It began to acknowledge audiences' ability to negotiate different meanings from media texts. Premised on Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, early audience reception research opened up the question of differential interpretation of media texts. It marked the beginnings of an interpretive paradigm which refuted the notion that differences in viewing constituted mere expressions of different needs or uses. Instead, the paradigm began to relate differential readings to the structural positioning of audiences. Thus, the specific social and cultural complexity of the audience became a critical empirical phenomenon (Morley 1989).

David Morley's (1980) nationwide study signifies the onset of the second generation of audience reception research. The study began to view audiences as embedded in both the macro and micro-world of consumption. The realisation that audiences

are historically and socially situated meant that audiences had to be researched differently. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions became the primary methods in reception research. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions provide access to audiences' opinions, statements and linguistic categories through which they construct and understand their worlds (Morley 1989). The second generation of audience reception consummated the position that audience meanings cannot be understood outside the interdiscursive context of audiences.

The 1990s witnessed the onset of a sociological turn in audience reception research. This turn was not a complete departure from the second generation. Instead, it embraced audience ethnography as a spring board for investigating the role of the media in audiences' everyday lives. Audience reception began to engage more with questions of meaning-making by particular groups of people and subcultures (Makwambeni & Salawu 2018). The sociological turn has shaped contemporary audience reception research in three significant ways. First, it reframed audience reception within broader discussions about audiences' situatedness in their social, cultural and economic contexts. Second, it takes on a more sociological approach which rethinks audiences' uses of media messages. Third, research topics in audience research have become more aligned with prevailing concerns in society.

Gender and audience reception research

Gender only became recognised as an essential concept in mass communication research in the early 1980s (O'Connor 1997). Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model ignited interest in gender and other markers of identity in reception research. The interest in gender grew out of the new understanding that audiences' socio-cultural positioning and contextual resources influence meaning-making. Morley's (1980) study marks the beginning of empirical audience reception research which sought to understand how gender and class discourses influence audiences' interpretation of media texts. Other scholars have subsequently investigated how social class and gender influence audience reception (see Ang 1985). These studies have shown that audiences inhabit different discourses, which influence the pleasures and meanings they negotiate from media texts.

Most studies on gender and media research have been confined to "feminine genres" such as soap operas and serial narratives (Ang 1985). They have investigated how female viewers actively negotiate meanings and pleasures from media texts that are considered central to women's everyday lives (Gill 2007). However, the impetus created by audience reception research in the 1980s has waned. Studies that examine

the relationship between gender and media texts, and more specifically, how gender relates to media consumption, are now sparse (Buonanno 2014). Studies that explore the nexus between gender and media reception have mainly used textual approaches to examine media texts and representations. They have paid scant attention to the question of what active viewers do, think and say about these media texts (Couldry 2012). This gap suggests the need for more studies that examine how gender, and other markers of identity, articulate in specific media viewing contexts.

Conceptual framework

This study is broadly informed by the cultural studies approach to the study of the media. This approach has a peculiar understanding of the relationship between media texts and audiences. Unlike early audience research, which viewed texts as powerful and audiences as passive, this approach rejects the notion that the media can affect audiences in some direct or measurable way (Silverstone 1990). Instead, it conceptualises audiences as active; media texts as polysemic; and meaning-making as a site of struggle (Livingstone 2015). It contends that audiences are active decoders of media texts who do not necessarily accept the positions offered by the text.

The cultural studies approach also provides a more complex and nuanced approach for understanding audiences' reception of media texts. The approach builds on the limitations of early audience research. While early audience research ignored audiences' lived circumstances and sub-cultural and socio-economic differences (Morley 1989), the cultural studies approach offers a framework that decentres the text and examines the socio-historical and political context of media consumption. It posits that audience meanings cannot be read from texts outside of context. Context in this instance refers to the cultural features, the immediate situations, domestic context, as well as the broader historical context of consumption. As a result, audience reception analysis begins by situating audiences in their contexts, as it is in these contexts that meanings are made (Murdock 1989).

The social context of *Black Panther*'s consumption

The predominantly Black township of Soweto provided the sample of Black South African women who participated in this study. Soweto has a population of approximately one million (Wale 2013). The township was created as a geographical expression of apartheid's ideology of racial segregation and influx control (Wale 2013). The apartheid system sought to ensure that Black African workers would be

racially separate from the white working class and remain under strict control and surveillance. Soweto township's creation is the culmination of the push and pulls between the apartheid state's attempts to segregate and control the black working class (Wale 2013). Unlike most townships in South Africa, Soweto is heterogeneous in terms of language, housing, living standards and occupations (Phadi & Ceruti 2011). This heterogeneity resulted from apartheid's Group Areas Act which forced the white-collar workers and professionals to live alongside the poor in overcrowded and underserviced housing.

During apartheid, Soweto was the hotbed of urban resistance. Residents of all classes mobilised on issues of rent and municipal service charges (Shubane 1991). Black majority rule in 1994 raised the hopes of Soweto residents who expected substantial change in their lives. However, these expectations have not materialised for the majority of the residents (Wale 2013). The economic, social and spatial separation entrenched by apartheid remains intact, with inequalities in the township deepening. This has ushered in renewed political resistance.

The study participants are inhabitants of one of the most unequal countries in the world (Segalo 2015). They consume *Black Panther* in a society that is burdened with race, class and gender-based inequalities, mostly inherited from apartheid (Kehler 2001). The legacy of apartheid continues to impact on the lives of Black people, especially women (Spaull 2013). Although South Africa has a progressive constitutional and legislative dispensation which provides for and protects socio-economic rights and equal access to resources and opportunities, there is still unequal access. Resources, opportunities and wealth are severely limited to Black women, who are primarily viewed in terms of their reproductive role (Segalo 2015).

Black South African women remain minimally recognised and blighted by systemic injustices and social inequalities on several levels (Segalo 2015). They exist at the crossroads of oppression, with the spaces they occupy remaining largely non-accommodating (Segalo 2015). Besides being marginalised at a macro level, Black women in South Africa also suffer on the domestic front as victims of toxic masculinities (KPMG Human and Social Sciences report 2014). Their marginalisation is exacerbated by prevailing cultural and social norms that regard women as less valuable members of society (Kehler 2001).

Method

The study used an audience reception analysis to account for the popularity of *Black Panther* among Black South African women in Soweto. The researchers first used qualitative content analysis and document analysis to understand the narrative and key themes in the film (see Barbie & Mouton 2001). At this stage, qualitative content analysis and document analysis were used to prepare the researchers for the facilitation of focus group discussions and follow-up in-depth interviews. The key themes identified through qualitative content analysis and document analysis were also used to make a critical comparative analysis of media discourses with audience discourses.

The second stage of the audience reception analysis consisted of focus group discussions and follow up in-depth interviews with participants. The participants first viewed *Black Panther* as they would in normal viewing. This enabled them to refresh their memory of the events and characters in the film. Focus group discussions allowed participants to experience and speak freely to the content while also making associations with their lived experiences. Focus group discussions are the primary tool used in audience reception analysis to produce data. They simulate the routine and largely inaccessible communicative contexts in which audiences construct meaning (Livingstone 2015).

A total of six focus group discussions with six groups of participants aged between 15 and 35 years were conducted. Each group consisted of between five and eight participants. The participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling. The researchers used their existing relations in Soweto for recruitment. The participants recruited other participants in a snowball fashion from existing communities. The selection paid particular attention to shared cultural characteristics and previous viewings of *Black Panther*. The participants were selected based on race, nationality, gender, age and class. Each focus group discussion lasted 1.5 hours, as advised by Catherine Dawson (2002). Focus group discussions were complemented by follow up in-depth interviews with selected participants, who had raised interesting views that could not be pursued in focus group discussions.

The final stage of the analysis involved comparing the encoded themes with audience readings. The data gleaned from focus group discussions and in-depth interviews was not treated as finished accounts (see Jensen 1988). The researchers proceeded to interpret audiences' readings of *Black Panther* by relating them to the socio-historical context of consumption. This process enabled the researchers to develop

a comprehensive interpretation of the meanings negotiated from *Black Panther*. The analysis was guided by the understanding that audience readings are discursive constructions produced jointly by the researchers and informants' interaction; and by the researchers interpreting audiences' interpretations (Makwambeni & Salawu 2018).

Results and discussion

The study's findings show that the popularity of *Black Panther* among Black South African women in Soweto is attributable to the meanings and pleasures associated with resistance that they negotiate from the film. *Black Panther*'s cultural aesthetic and underpinning themes resonate with the shared subjectivities and discourses of marginalised Black South African women. The film invites meanings and pleasures that are liberating, resistive and, at times, politically subversive (see Fiske 1990). Audience readings analysed in the study reflect that the "cultural moment" evoked by *Black Panther* among black women in Soweto signifies the opening up of symbolic space to resist, subvert and challenge global and localised forms of oppression. These findings resonate with Ien Ang's (1998) observation that media texts can at times become a site of resistance where women contest different forms of domination.

Representation of Black women

Audience readings show that *Black Panther* appeals to Black women in Soweto because of its revolutionary representation of Black women. Situated female readers derived pleasure from seeing a Hollywood film that projects strong, independent, powerful and fearless Black women. This pleasure is captured by Olwethu: 'I enjoyed seeing how the women in the movie are so strong and fearless. Seeing women in that position is so exhilarating'. Further readings show that Black women in Soweto admire independent and strong women like Nakia, Okoye and Shuri in *Black Panther*. These women do not conform to hegemonic notions and expectations of what a woman should do or can be. Thus, *Black Panther* presents Black women in Soweto with an opportunity to see Black female characters who perform roles that are largely reserved for men in their own communities.

Black South African women's admiration of the firm, independent and fearless female characters in *Black Panther* should be viewed as an act of resistance to the interlocking forms of oppression that characterise their lived reality in South Africa and Soweto township. In this light, *Black Panther* provides them with a "cultural

moment" to protest against institutionalised marginalisation in South Africa which is based on gender and race (see Veeran 2006). The pleasure of seeing powerful Black women in *Black Panther* while located in a community which expects women to be meek and subservient is indicative of resistance to the multiple nodes of marginalisation and humiliation they face in their quotidian lives. Black South African women's reading of the *Black Panther* shows the pleasure that they derive from symbolically subverting their experience of subalternity while simultaneously carving a futuristic world in which they are in control of society and their own lives. This reading of *Black Panther* reinforces the notion that context and form determine the meanings and pleasures audiences negotiate from media texts (Johnson 1987).

Recuperating voice and space

The data analysed in the study also shows that Black women in Soweto derive pleasure from watching women with "voice" who claim "space" for themselves. This is reflected in Lelethu's comment:

> You know we don't have voices, but in the movie they gave women voices. If we go back into history, before apartheid, Africa has never been patriarchal. Women have always had a voice. They took away our voice because they saw the power we possess. Then during apartheid, women still had a voice, understand? Women still occupied spaces. Your Charlotte Maxleke, Lilian Ngoyi and Mam Winnie. We don't have a voice anymore.

Lelethu's reading of *Black Panther* indicates that Black women in Soweto derive pleasure from negotiating meanings associated with resistance from *the film*. As evidenced in the quotation, *Black Panther* opens up symbolic space for Black women in Soweto to contest their silencing in public and domestic spaces. Maxine Faron Gibb (2019) argues that the silencing of women is meant to dictate hierarchy, wield power, and exploit. In this light, Black women with "voice" in *Black Panther* provide impetus to Black women in Soweto to challenge their own silencing and confront the concomittant erasure of women from South Africa's history (Gibb 2019). As argued by Ien Ang (1985), audiences inhabit different discourses which influence the pleasures and meanings they negotiate from media texts. In this instance, Black South African women's negotiation of *Black Panther* is shaped by their social context of consumption where women have been protagonists in grassroots organisations; passive resistance; as well as the armed struggle. Their negotiation of *Black Panther* is a form of critique and resistance aimed at reclaiming their "voice" and "space" as agents of change in society.

Black women's readings of *Black Panther* in Soweto further indicate the emergence of new femininities in South Africa (Makwambeni 2013). This emergent woman is critical of the emasculation of women. She questions the normalisation of the oppression of women and does not want anyone to dictate how she lives her life. The new woman questions gender roles and binaries and seeks to take charge of politics and society (Mavuso 2017). It is significant to note that Black South African women do not read *Black Panther* in a vacuum – their shared subjectivities, context and lived experiences shape meaning-making (Murdock 1989). They negotiate *Black Panther*, and its female warriors, in a social context in which strong and powerful Black women have occupied space in the Fees Must Fall movement. As shown in the quotation below, participants' reading of *Black Panther* is also mediated through women's struggles in South Africa:

> The movie reminds me of Womandla. With groups like these that motivate women to have a voice and speak out and also realise their power, more women will come out of their comfort zone and stand against this thing of undermining the power of women.

The popularity of *Black Pather* is therefore attributable to its ability to inspire Black women to recuperate their "voice" and claim "space" to fight domination. The film presents a futuristic world that resonates with the aspirations of the "new woman" in Soweto, who is determined to subvert the status quo, as stated by Lungi below:

> I no longer feel like the girl that I was. I now feel like I got some supernatural power that is telling me to stand up and go, or like a voice telling me that I am so much more than meets the eye. After watching this movie, I now understand what women can do and what they are capable of. At one stage I thought that everything was normal but this movie makes me feel different now. It makes me want to challenge the status quo. It makes me yearn for that kind of life where I make decisions and choose how I want things done.

Challenging hegemonic notions of beauty

Black Panther provides Black women in Soweto with the pleasure to subvert western hegemonic notions of beauty. The film affords them an opportunity to define bald-headed Black women in *Black Panther* as beautiful. Such women would not ordinarily fit into normative categorisations of beauty. Describing Black women in *Black Panther* as beautiful should be read as a way of subverting hegemonic categorisations of beauty. This subversion constitutes symbolic resistance to both colonialism and patriarchy, which have always conspired to define beauty and police women's bodies. Lungelwa's reading of *Black Panther* represents the disruption of the normative de-finition of beauty:

> White men or western cultures should not define beauty. One needs to define beauty from what they feel inside. They should be comfortable in their skin and hair. That is where beauty is.

Audience readings of *Black Panther* confirms Ang's (1998) observation that women are capable of negotiating meanings of resistance from media text. For Black women in Soweto, the pleasure of watching *Black Panther* lies in "hijacking" the "cultural moment" offered by the film, by critiquing and debunking colonial, racist and patriachal notions of beauty (Marco 2012). Jere-Malada (2008) posits that dominant perceptions about beauty are not innocent, as they have links to historical, political and social factors. Lungi's sentiments, captured below, provide further evidence that Black South African women's rejection of patriarchal and western definitions of beauty are shaped by the South African context where women are forced to conform to western notions of beauty:

> I actually loved that part where that woman snatched off the wig because it actually means more than what is portrayed. It actually means that you don't need anything western. You don't need the makeup, you don't need bras. Its oppression. I loved the part where that lady actually said the meeting was adjourned because the corsets were hurting her. I am not going to stand here and be suffocated by these western things.

Subverting hegemonic portrayal of Black people and Africa in Hollywood

Black South African women's pleasure in watching *Black Panther* is also linked to the film's revolutionary portrayal of Black people. They derive pleasure from seeing a film that focuses on Black people and has numerous Black characters. Makhadzi reflects on *Black Panther*'s representation of Black people:

> I like that there were a lot of Black people in *Black Panther*. You don't get a movie where there is a focus on just Black people. That for me made it more interesting. Just the idea of having an almost all-Black movie focusing on Black people.

Audience readings show that Black women in Soweto derived pleasure from seeing themselves through the Black characters in *Black Panther*. This is captured in their reference to the characters as "we" as opposed to "them". They draw parallels between the underrepresentation of Black people in Hollywood to their own marginalisation in post-apartheid South Africa. This reading of *Black Panther* is largely shaped by their social context and quotidian experiences. The meanings of resistance thet they negotiate are shaped by the post-apartheid reality where race

and gender remain the most distinguishing factors between the rich and the poor in South Africa (Kehler 2001). Besides deriving pleasure from seeing themselves through the Black characters in *Black Panther*, Black women in Soweto also derive pleasure from encountering positive representations of Black people in the movie:

> Marvel movies usually have white superheroes. The stories are just based on white people, people that we can't relate to. What I liked about *Black Panther* is that it has a Black superhero, something new. I also liked the fact that it showed the strength and beauty of Black people. For once Black people are the good guys.

Arguably, the pleasure that Black women in Soweto negotiate from seeing nuanced Black characters with agency in *Black Panther* is a form of symbolic resistance to both hegemonic representation of Black people in the global media, and their own systematic exclusion from the South African economy. *Black Panther*'s positive portrayal of Black people paradoxically invites meanings of resistance in a country that is still plagued by the Manichean residue of apartheid division in which two nations exist in one: one that is largely white and rich and the other that is pre-dominantly Black and poor (Sithole 2014). This is negotiated in a context where Black people consume Hollywood movies in which Black people take on peripheral roles. According to Robert Stam and Lester Spence (1982), Hollywood films use images of Black people in ways that promote racism. Such representations mostly serve the interests of the dominant white class and play a role in maintaining institutions that keep Black people from positions of power (Miller 1998).

Black women in Soweto also derive pleasure from watching *Black Panther*'s representation of Africa that differs from dominant representations in Hollywood. The study's findings show that *Black Panther* provides these subaltern women with space to reclaim Black people's dignity. It allows them to challenge dominant representations of Africa as a helpless, war-torn, poverty-stricken and corruption infested continent (Harth 2009). In this light, the pleasure derived from watching an Africa that is rich, beautiful, and modern, is an act of resistance aimed at recuperating both their own dignity and Africa's image. Asanda captures the pleasure of watching a positive representation of Africa in *Black Panther*:

> We were not presented naked like they always portray Africa. Where people run around with leopard skins. Africa is great although we are not being portrayed as a good continent. I actually saw the greatness of Africa especially in the vibranium.

Asanda's reading of *Black Panther* shows that the popularity of the *Black Panther* among Black women is Soweto is partly attributable to the subversion of the single-

story about Africa that has been projected through western media. The west has largely presented Africa as a place of danger, darkness, violence, poverty and hopelessness. This single-story of Africa was created by colonial institutions to perpetuate white supremacy and justify western domination (Harth 2009). Black South African women's rejection of this single-story is a form of resistance to coloniality which created and perpetuated a single view about Africa. Resistance to the single-story about Africa is also articulated to local South African politics where race and the legacy of apartheid continue to define Black women's marginal existence.

Recuperating history

Black Panther fundamentally engages with Africa's history of oppression, dislocation, and dispossession. This serves as a contributory factor to the film's popularity among Black women in Soweto. Lusanda's reading of the film illustrates this:

> The film shows how Africans created solutions using their own minerals and resources until that was taken away from us. This movie is portraying that a lot of things were stolen from us. We could have been very wealthy.

Lusanda's reading shows that *Black Panther*'s engagement with Africa's colonial history opens up a "cultural moment" for Black women in Soweto to engage with their own lived experiences of marginality and dispossession. These female readers make critical articulations between the vibranium in *Black Panther* and land dispossession in South Africa, which accounts for the creation of townships. This reading resonates with the dominant position in cultural studies, that audiences do not come into the meaning-making process culturally naked (Makwambeni & Salawu 2018; Makwambeni & Adebayo 2021). In this context, Black women's subjective experiences of marginality in Soweto provides raw materials for confronting the experience of apartheid that continues to shape the present. This reading of *Black Panther* is evidently pleasurable. It allows Black women in Soweto to challenge dominant narratives about the source of Africa's problems and to also recuperate history by foregrounding a counter-hegemonic narrative that locates colonialism at the centre of Africa's problem.

Adopting an African cultural aesthetic

Mainstrean Hollywood films rarely depict African culture and languages. The use of a cultural aesthetic that is mostly African in *Black Panther* challenges hegemonic modes of perception about Africa and the Black experience (Karam & Kirby-Hirst 2019). As evidenced in the quotation below, Black women in Soweto derive pleasure

from watching a film that views the world from an African perspective. The marginalisation of African cultures and languages from Hollywood resonates with Black women's lived experiences in South Africa, where African culture and languages are viewed as inferior. The pleasure derived from experiencing African culture in a Hollywood film is shared by Luxolo:

> It's the culture in the movie that made me like it. It is very rare for a film to incorporate so many African cultures in one movie. I loved that they had African costumes and music. It taught me to never view myself through the lens that America views us.

Conclusion

This paper sought to explore and account for the popularity of *Black Panther* among Black South African women in Soweto. It employed reception analysis and a cultural studies approach to understand the meanings and pleasures that situated audiences negotiate from the film. The findings of the study show that *Black Panther* is popular among Black South African women in Soweto because it engages with Black themes and employs a cultural aesthetic that is primarily African. This enables situated audiences to negotiate meanings and pleasures associated with resistance. This resistance is directed at both global and local forms of oppression that Black South African women experience in their everyday lives. Thus, the popularity of *Black Panther* among Black women in Soweto is attributable to the "cultural moment" that the film provides for subaltern women to recuperate their voice and claim a futuristic world in which they have agency and control over their lives.

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