

## CRAFTING IDENTITY: TECHNO-COSTUMING AND AFRO-DIASPORIC AESTHETICS IN BLACK PANTHER (2018)

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### Abstract

*Black Panther* (2018) stands as a cinematic landmark in which costume design functions not merely as visual embellishment but as a vital narrative and ideological tool for articulating Afro-diasporic identity, resistance, and futurity. While the film has been widely acclaimed for its cultural representation and aesthetic innovation, the intersection of digital costume technologies and African-inspired design remains relatively underexplored. This article examines how *Black Panther* fuses advanced digital fabrication techniques with traditional African aesthetics to create what may be termed “techno-costuming,” a hybrid design practice central to Afrofuturist storytelling. Employing a qualitative research methodology based on content analysis and the case study method, the study analyzes key costume elements, including the Dora Milaje’s armor and Shuri’s attire, to explore the role of wearable technologies in the film. It argues that these technologically enhanced garments function as political symbols of sovereignty, challenge Eurocentric aesthetic paradigms, and project empowered visions of Black futures. By foregrounding costume as a central narrative and political device, this study underscores the importance of design in shaping Afro-diasporic visual culture and calls for greater scholarly engagement with costuming as a critical site of intercultural dialogue in global cinema.

**Keywords:** Afrofuturism, *Black Panther* (2018), Costume technology, Intercultural design, Techno-costuming,

### Introduction

Costume design in film functions as a powerful visual language, communicating not merely character and setting but also complex cultural, political, and ideological meanings (Torregrosa et al., 2023). As an essential component of cinematic storytelling, costume serves as a site where identities are constructed, contested, and reimaged. It can be an instrument for articulating collective memory, signaling social hierarchies, and projecting visions of the future. Within this broader framework, Afrofuturist narratives, particularly in films like *Black Panther* highlight the transformative potential of costume to envision alternate Black realities: futures that are simultaneously speculative and anchored in ancestral knowledge and diasporic heritage sustainability (Liao Qi et al., 2020; Erfin Yuga Rendra Nata et al., 2020).

Afrofuturism is a transdisciplinary cultural movement that challenges stereotypical views of Black identity by blending African heritage with futuristic elements (Elia, 2014). Afrofuturism, as a cultural, philosophical, and aesthetic movement, reclaims Black identity from the margins of historical and cinematic representation. It draws on science fiction, fantasy, and African cosmologies to reconfigure notions of Blackness beyond the confines of colonial histories and racial marginalization. It serves as a platform for marginalized voices to reimagine oppressive histories and envision empowered futures (Manoudakis, 2024). By blending technological imaginaries with cultural memory, Afrofuturism opens possibilities for representing Blackness through empowered, visionary, and culturally resonant lenses. In doing so, it challenges dominant Eurocentric frameworks that have historically reduced African cultures to static or primitive caricatures.

Within this context, *Black Panther* (2018), directed by Ryan Coogler, emerges as a landmark Afrofuturist text that demonstrates the power of costume design to construct decolonized imaginaries. Set in the technologically sophisticated yet culturally grounded nation of Wakanda, the film envisions an African society unscarred by colonization, a sovereign nation where ancient traditions coexist harmoniously with scientific advancement. Costume design, led by Ruth E. Carter, plays a pivotal role in this world-building project, serving as a visual bridge between ancestral heritage and speculative futures.

Carter’s approach draws inspiration from a rich tapestry of African cultural references, including the regal neck rings of the Zulu, the intricate beadwork of the Maasai, the geometric motifs of the Ndebele, and the distinctive hairstyles of the Himba. Yet rather than reproducing these elements as static symbols, Carter reimagines them through advanced materials, 3D-printed components, and innovative silhouettes. This synthesis, conceptualized in this study as *techno-costuming*-merges indigenous African aesthetics with futuristic design principles to create a visual vocabulary that is at once familiar and radically new.

Techno-costuming in *Black Panther* operates as both a narrative strategy and an ideological intervention. The costumes distinguish tribes, communicate social hierarchies, and express philosophical values, all while resisting the

visual conventions imposed by Hollywood's long history of depicting Africa through exoticist and dehumanizing lenses. More than decorative embellishment, Carter's designs perform identity: they materialize a hybrid aesthetic where tradition and innovation are not oppositional but mutually reinforcing. Each garment becomes a site of negotiation, embodying the tensions and synergies between past and future, local and global, memory and imagination.

By situating Black identity within a continuum of cultural continuity and technological agency, Carter's costume design challenges essentialist notions of African authenticity. The visual complexity of her work disrupts simplistic binaries between the "modern" and the "traditional," offering a counter-narrative that affirms the dynamism and sovereignty of African and Afro-diasporic cultures. In this way, techno-costuming serves as an act of visual sovereignty, a deliberate reclamation of the right to represent Blackness on its own terms.

This paper critically examines how *Black Panther* employs costume design to craft identity and challenge hegemonic representations of Africa through an Afrofuturist and decolonial lens. Focusing on Ruth E. Carter's innovative visual strategies, it interrogates how techno-costuming becomes a vehicle for articulating sovereignty, gender expression, and diasporic memory. By analyzing how costumes encode cultural specificity while projecting speculative futures, this study argues that techno-costuming functions as a transformative aesthetic practice, one that redefines how African identities are imagined, visualized, and celebrated in global cinema. Ultimately, the research demonstrates that costume design is not a peripheral concern but a central mode of cultural production, capable of shaping the political stakes of representation and the possibilities of Black futurity.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study examines costume design as a critical site for crafting Afro-diasporic identity, foregrounding how *Black Panther* (2018) mobilizes what this study terms techno-costuming to negotiate cultural memory, innovation, and visual sovereignty. The analysis is grounded in two intersecting theoretical frameworks: Afrofuturism and decolonial aesthetics. Together, they offer a critical lens for understanding costume design not merely as visual embellishment, but as an ideological intervention that challenges colonial representations and reclaims Black futures.

Afrofuturism is both an aesthetic practice and cultural methodology that fuses speculative futures with ancestral knowledge and diasporic memory. Scholars such as Alondra Nelson, Kodwo Eshun, and Ytasha Womack describe Afrofuturism as a strategy for transcending the temporal confines of colonial history, projecting empowered, self-determined representations of Blackness (Nelson, 2002; Eshun, 2003; Womack, 2013).

Central to Afrofuturism's critical power is its refusal of stereotypical portrayals of Africa as static or primitive. Instead, it imagines technologically advanced Black futures that remain rooted in cultural specificity. In *Black Panther*, this vision materializes in the nation of Wakanda, a highly advanced African society that draws on diverse traditions to propose an alternative Black modernity. Costume design, in this context, becomes a key narrative device for visualizing Afro-diasporic sovereignty, resilience, and futurity.

Complementing Afrofuturism's speculative imagination, decolonial aesthetics offers a framework for dismantling Eurocentric systems of representation. Building on Aníbal Quijano's (2000) concept of coloniality and Walter D. Mignolo's (2011) critique of modernity/coloniality, decolonial theory emphasizes how power, knowledge, and aesthetics continue to privilege Western perspectives while marginalizing non-Western ways of seeing and knowing (Quijano, 2000; Mignolo, 2011).

Decolonial aesthetics calls for "delinking" from dominant paradigms and affirming indigenous and diasporic epistemologies. Within costume design, this entails moving beyond ornamental or exoticizing representations of African cultures and instead foregrounding cultural specificity, hybridity, and agency. Costumes thus become sites of epistemic resistance, challenging colonial stereotypes and affirming the complexity of Afro-diasporic identities. Bringing these frameworks together, this study conceptualizes techno-costuming as a deliberate design practice that fuses advanced materials and futuristic aesthetics with diverse African cultural traditions. In *Black Panther*, costume designer Ruth E. Carter enacts a decolonial and Afrofuturist intervention by refusing Hollywood's reductive, ahistorical portrayals of Africa (Carter). Instead, her designs construct hybrid, dynamic identities that are at once traditional and futuristic.

Techno-costuming negotiates the tension between heritage and innovation, performing complex and dignified Black identities that resist essentialist narratives. By integrating technological sophistication with cultural specificity, these designs project alternative visions of Afro-diasporic modernity that are self-determined rather than imposed.

By synthesizing Afrofuturist imagination with decolonial critique, this theoretical framework positions costume design as a transformative practice of cultural affirmation and resistance. Techno-costuming in *Black Panther* emerges not merely as aesthetic spectacle, but as a critical method for crafting Afro-diasporic identity, one that challenges hegemonic visual regimes, reclaims narrative sovereignty, and expands the possibilities for imagining African futures within the global cinematic imagination.

### Literature Review

Scholarship on *Black Panther* (2018) has consistently celebrated the film's groundbreaking role in visualizing African cultures and diasporic identities through an Afrofuturist lens (White, 2022). Afrofuturism, as theorized by John Jennings and Reynaldo Anderson (2015), represents a critical methodology for reimagining Black identity via speculative aesthetics, offering narratives that disrupt colonial histories and assert agency over Black futures. Scholars argue that the film's Afrofuturist approach offers a critical methodology for reimagining Black identity and disrupting colonial narratives (Karam & Kirby-Hirst, 2019). This foundational perspective situates *Black Panther* not merely as entertainment but as a cultural intervention that reclaims Black subjectivity by projecting it into technologically advanced, culturally rooted futures.

Building on this framework, Reynaldo Anderson and Tiffany Barber (2018) argue that *Black Panther* embodies a specifically African futurism, which balances technological innovation with cultural continuity. Their work underscores the film's refusal to replicate Western sci-fi tropes uncritically, instead rooting its speculative world-building in African epistemologies and design traditions. This approach positions *Black Panther* as a site where Black speculative visual culture negotiates the tensions between modernity and tradition, diaspora and homeland.

Within this broader Afrofuturist discourse, costume design emerges as a crucial, but often under-theorized, site of cultural production. Ruth E. Carter's Oscar-winning designs have attracted considerable scholarly attention for their use of African cultural references. Lisa B. Thompson (2018) interprets Carter's work as acts of cultural recovery and re-embodiment, suggesting that costume functions as a wearable archive that reconnects diasporic audiences with ancestral heritage. Similarly, Tanisha C. Ford (2019) explores the sartorial politics of *Black Panther*, arguing that its visual language redefines Black excellence and style by centering African aesthetics as markers of sophistication and power.

Despite this important attention to costume's cultural meanings, many studies have treated costume design as secondary to narrative or setting. Discussions of Afrofuturism in *Black Panther* often prioritize its political themes, world-building, or technological imaginary without closely interrogating how costume itself operates as technology and as narrative. The concept of techno-costuming, which this article advances, remains largely unexplored in existing scholarship.

Techno-costuming here is theorized not simply as futuristic style but as an aesthetic and political strategy that fuses traditional African design principles with speculative technological forms. It offers a visual grammar through which Afro-diasporic identities can be reimagined as modern, sovereign, and future-oriented without severing ties to cultural roots (Washington & Rosa, 2025). By integrating advanced materials, digital fabrication, and traditional motifs, Carter's designs exemplify a unique Afro-diasporic aesthetic that challenges Western hierarchies of fashion, technology, and cultural value (Ishola, 2023).

This study therefore seeks to fill a crucial gap in the literature by centering costume design, and specifically techno-costuming, as a primary site of Afro-diasporic cultural storytelling in *Black Panther*. Rather than treating costume as mere embellishment or background, this analysis foregrounds it as an active, speculative practice that negotiates questions of identity, heritage, and futurity. In doing so, it contributes to a richer understanding of Afrofuturist visual culture as not only narrative and ideological but also profoundly material and wearable.

### Methodology

This study is grounded in the intersecting theoretical frameworks of Afrofuturism and Decolonial Aesthetics and employs a qualitative research methodology that combines content analysis with a case study approach. The paper uses the single case study and content analytical approach to examine how *Black Panther* (2018) fuses advanced digital fabrication techniques with traditional African aesthetics to develop techno-costuming, a hybrid design practice central to Afrofuturist storytelling and the construction of Afro-Diasporic identity. The film was purposively selected due to its critical and commercial prominence, its explicit engagement with African aesthetics, and its innovative use of costume as a vehicle for cultural expression, technological modernity, and ideological resistance. It guides the selection of key characters such as T'Challa, Dora Milaje's armor, Shuri's costumes etc. to examine wearable technologies and whose costume designs most effectively illustrate techno-costuming and Afro-Diasporic aesthetics. These characters were chosen because their costume designs most clearly reflect the film's hybrid aesthetic strategy.

Data collection incorporates both primary and secondary source data. *Black Panther* (2018), through systematic, close viewing with shot-by-shot analysis of selected scenes featuring key costumes and online retrieved interview with costume designer, Ruth E. Carter to understand design intentions and processes. Secondly, scholarly literature and critical reviews on Afrofuturism, decolonial aesthetics, costume design, and African visual culture were used to decode the ways wearable technologies and African design traditions converge to craft complex representations of Black identity and futurity.

The analysis is structured around the following guiding questions:

- How do costume designs integrate advanced digital fabrication techniques with African visual traditions?
- In what ways do these designs construct, negotiate, or reimagine Afro-Diasporic identity?
- How does techno-costuming function as a decolonial aesthetic strategy that resists reductive or stereotypical representations?

Therefore, combining content analysis with a case study approach enables a rich, contextualized reading of costume design as a site of cultural production, ideological resistance, and identity formation. By centering *Black Panther* as a case, the study provides in-depth insights into how techno-costuming mediates Afro-Diasporic aesthetics, offering a meaningful contribution to scholarly conversations about Afrofuturism, decolonial art practices, and contemporary cinematic design.

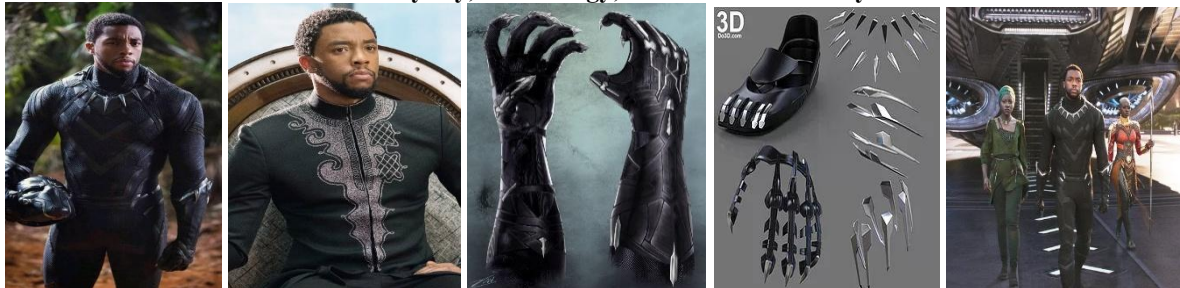
## Synopsis of Case Study and Discussion of Findings

### *Black Panther* (2018) - Synopsis

*Black Panther* (2018) is a Marvel superhero film directed by Ryan Coogler that blends Afrofuturism, cultural heritage, and political themes. The story follows Prince T'Challa (Chadwick Boseman) as he ascends the throne of Wakanda after his father's death. His rule is challenged by Erik Killmonger (Michael B. Jordan), a Wakandan with a radical vision to use the nation's resources for global Black liberation. Their conflict becomes a battle over Wakanda's role in the world, whether to remain isolated or to intervene in global affairs. With the support of his allies, T'Challa reclaims the throne and chooses a new path, opening Wakanda to the world and sharing its technological advancements. The film delivers a powerful exploration of identity, legacy, and leadership.

In *Black Panther*, costume design is not merely supplementary to the narrative, it is central to the articulation of Wakanda's political ideology, cultural diversity, and futuristic vision. Ruth E. Carter's designs transform garments into acts of cultural resistance, visual storytelling, and diasporic reclamation. This section examines how techno-costuming in the film functions as a dynamic interface between tradition and futurism, with attention to four key character groups:

### 1. T'Challa / The Black Panther: Royalty, Technology, and Warrior Identity



T'Challa's costume as both king and warrior blends vibranium-powered technology with minimalist African silhouettes. His Black Panther suit, an advanced tactical armor enhanced with kinetic energy redistribution, appears sleek and modern, but its surface is etched with subtle tribal markings resembling the *Isiagu* patterns worn by Igbo nobility and panther-like motifs symbolizing strength, agility, and legacy.

The costume reflects a techno-cultural hybridity: it honours T'Challa's ancestral role while equipping him with tools of the future. This duality captures the essence of Afrofuturism, reclaiming ancestral power through futurist tools, and visually communicates leadership that is both rooted and revolutionary. His ceremonial robes, worn during the coronation and ancestral plane sequences, further deepen this symbolism by drawing from West and Southern African regalia, embedding Wakandan governance within African philosophical traditions.

### 2. Shuri: Feminine Innovation and Youthful Rebellion



As Wakanda's chief technologist, Shuri's costuming reflects both her subversive brilliance and her playful personality. Her attire departs from traditional regal or feminine expectations, favouring contemporary streetwear-inspired silhouettes that incorporate African beadwork and geometric patterns. These garments emphasize her role as a tech disruptor and challenge both gender norms and generational hierarchies.

Shuri's arm gauntlets, which double as panther-shaped blasters, embody the synergy between tradition and cutting-edge innovation. Her costumes signal a future where femininity, science, and cultural heritage coexist, making her a visual symbol of gendered futurity within the Afro-diasporic imagination. Her designs reflect Afrofuturist feminism, locating power and knowledge in youthful Black womanhood.

### 3. Uniformed Sovereignty and Afrocentric Militarism



The Dora Milaje's uniforms are among the most visually and politically compelling in the film. Carter based the design on the Maasai and Ndebele peoples, incorporating bold red tones (a color associated with both vitality and bloodline), rigid neck rings referencing Ndebele adornment, and leather-and-metal textures that connote both warrior strength and ceremonial stature.

The armor is not sexualized, unlike many representations of female warriors in mainstream cinema. Instead, it is utilitarian, dignified, and culturally specific asserting a form of Afrocentric militarism grounded in tradition. The Dora Milaje challenge patriarchal norms not just through their role as protectors of the king, but through their visual resistance to Eurocentric notions of femininity and power.

Their costumes reflect a reassertion of African womanhood as authoritative, autonomous, and sacred, a striking inversion of colonial depictions that often-rendered African women as either invisible or hyper-visible through exoticism.

### 4. Queen Ramonda: Matriarchal Power and Diasporic Nobility



Queen Ramonda's attire presents one of the most overt homages to Southern African aesthetics, particularly the traditional headdress of the Zulu married woman (*isicholo*), worn throughout the film in regal white. Her garments, constructed with a blend of lacework, armor, and regal draping, signify not only her maternal authority but also her continuity with tradition in an era of technological transformation.

Unlike stereotypical cinematic portrayals of African matriarchs as either mystical or tragic, Ramonda's costume design aligns her with dignity, power, and national legacy. Her white palette suggests purity and wisdom, while her structured garments convey a commanding presence, affirming Black female authority within both traditional and futuristic contexts.

Across all these characters, Carter's techno-costuming performs an ideological function, it asserts that African culture is not static, but evolving, inventive, and intellectually sovereign. The blending of indigenous materials and symbols with high-tech silhouettes signals a reclamation of modernity as something inherently African. This is particularly subversive in the context of Western cinematic histories that have often denied Africa a place in futuristic or scientific narratives.

In *Black Panther*, costumes do not simply signal difference, they express diasporic continuity, resistance to visual colonization, and aspirational sovereignty. Techno-costuming becomes a language through which Wakanda, and by extension, global Black audiences, can envision a world unburdened by colonial trauma yet enriched by ancestral strength.

### Conclusion

*Black Panther* (2018) represents a pivotal moment in global cinema, where costume design transcends visual decoration to become a powerful instrument of cultural reclamation and identity formation. Through the lens of techno-costuming, this study has demonstrated how Ruth E. Carter's designs integrate traditional African aesthetics with futuristic innovation to construct a compelling vision of Afro-diasporic identity, sovereignty, and

empowerment.

The film's costumes function as semiotic devices that encode history, politics, gender, and futurity into visual form. From T'Challa's vibranium suit to the Dora Milaje's ceremonial armor, these garments challenge colonial legacies and assert new possibilities for how Blackness is represented, celebrated, and remembered on screen. By fusing ancestral dress traditions with advanced technological motifs, the costumes emerge as decolonial expressions that resist reductive visual paradigms and affirm Black modernity on its own terms.

This study further highlights the multidimensional significance of costume in *Black Panther*, demonstrating its role in reshaping cinematic representations of Africa while influencing contemporary fashion discourse and design theory on a global scale. As a landmark example of Afrofuturist visual culture, Carter's work reveals that costume is not merely supplementary to storytelling but central to the articulation of identity, political consciousness, and cultural memory.

Ultimately, *Black Panther* illustrates that the future of costume design within Afro-diasporic contexts lies in its capacity to synthesize past and future, tradition and technology, resistance and imagination. In doing so, costume becomes more than a narrative device; it serves as a transformative visual language through which self-definition, sovereignty, and futurity are imagined and expressed.

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