HEAVY METAL

EARTH'S MINERALS AND THE
FUTURE OF SUSTAINABLE SOCIETIES

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Black Panther and an Afrofuturist Vision for Mining

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In the 2018 Marvel Studios film, *Black Panther*, General Okoye flies a vibranium-powered ship to Wakanda, the fictional African home of King T'Challa, the Black Panther and protector of the country. As the ship pierces the invisible barrier shielding this mythical land from the outside world, viewers get their first glimpse at a country that is unlike anything that exists in present-day Africa. With the visual enhancements made possible by computer graphics, the scene is breathtaking—like no other representation of an African society ever brought to life on the big screen. Wakanda is home to tall skyscrapers, flying aircraft and advanced technologies, all built sustainably, using the mineral vibranium to advance the socioeconomic interests of its people, rather than those of colonial powers. It was the first time that the Marvel world of Wakanda was brought to life by African American creators in Hollywood. The movie presented a distinctly 'Afrofuturist' vision of mining, which delighted both audiences and critics around the world. To date, the movie has earned gross profits of more than a billion dollars.

The term Afrofuturism, first used by the American writer and culture critic Mark Dery, represents a cultural aesthetic that weaves science fiction and fantasy

to critically re-examine the historical and present experiences of people of African descent.[1] Through its fantastical imagining of an isolated, mineral-rich African society, *Black Panther* is steeped in the aesthetic and ethos of Afrofuturism. Seeing Wakanda depicted on screen for the first time, I was awestruck by the images of a self-sustaining African society built on mining. Of course, vibranium is like no other metal that exists on Earth. It is powerful enough to fuel aircraft and high-speed trains, and used in technology that allows the people of Wakanda to develop advanced weapons, while also hiding in plain sight. This image of an African nation thriving despite its reliance on mining stands in stark contrast to the reality faced by many countries across the African continent today.

Four years before *Black Panther* was released in theatres, three Eritrean refugees filed a class action lawsuit in Vancouver, Canada, alleging that a Canadian mining company, Nevsun Resources Limited, had been complicit in the torture, forced labour, and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment they experienced as workers at the Bisha Mine, a joint venture between the company and the government of Eritrea. The lawsuit explicitly detailed mistreatment suffered by the mine workers, including beatings, long working hours in the desert heat and low wages.[2] Eritrea is one of the world's most brutal countries, which has been dubbed the 'North Korea of Africa'. For years, the government had sought to capitalize on the country's immense mineral reserves. But despite this vast wealth potential, few foreign investors dared enter Eritrea's minerals market, due to its poor record on human rights and democracy.

As *Black Panther* enjoyed a long cinematic run, villagers living near the North Mara Mine in northern Tanzania were being subjected to beatings and shootings by mine security for attempting to enter the mine. Lawsuits filed in Canada and the United Kingdom against the mine's operators, Barrick Gold Corporation and its subsidiary, have laid bare the extent of the violence; at least seventy-seven people were killed by police and security forces hired to guard the mine. In Tanzania, as in Eritrea, the locals have not received significant socio-economic benefits from mining. What has taken

place in both countries is emblematic of the reality faced by many mining-affected communities throughout Africa, and around the world.

The stark contrast between the fiction of Wakanda and the reality of African countries like Eritrea and Tanzania paints a dark picture of mining across much of the continent over the past one hundred and fifty years. In the early days of colonial expansion, it was the quest for natural resources that brought Europeans to Africa's shores, upending traditional knowledge and governance systems. From gold in the Gold Coast in the modern Republic of Ghana, to diamonds in the South African Transvaal, minerals were part of the political, economic and social currency of European conquest that displaced and dispossessed local populations.[3] The exploitation of Africa as a source of natural resource wealth for foreign powers did not end with colonization. Since the mid- to late-twentieth century, when formal colonial rule was abolished across much of Africa, local populations across the continent have continued to be marginalized in the global mining sector, garnering little benefits beyond minimum royalties and other related tax revenue.

Drawing inspiration from the *Black Panther* movie, it is interesting to re-imagine mining in Africa through an Afrofuturist lens, exploring an alternative reality that does not prioritize the interests of capital over those of communities and the environment. Such a reimagining of mining in Africa is vital as the world increasingly relies on minerals to combat climate change and transition to a carbon-neutral economy. Continuing with the status-quo operations of the global mining sector will likely only exacerbate the harmful effects of this industry. What vision for mining can Afrofuturism offer? *Black Panther* highlights three interconnected principles that could radically transform the future of mining in Africa and around the world: the disruption of hierarchies,[4] sovereignty and decolonization.

The realities of mining today can be traced back to the political and economic conditions of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century colonization. By then, most of Africa, and the New World of the Americas had been largely colonized for the natural resource wealth they contained. Whether it was cotton and sugar cane

in the Americas, or gold and diamonds in Africa, colonization drastically altered how land was demarcated, recognized and valued. A reimagined mining future must therefore dismantle several of the colonial principles that continue to define the modern conditions of mining and other resource industries. In practice, achieving such a transformation will be a challenging task, as certain economic and political actors benefit tremendously from the status quo. But even in the face of significant resistance, the sci-fi ideals of Afrofuturism allow us to consider the 'what-ifs',[5] and reimagine a world wholeheartedly different from the present.

Several harmful impacts have almost become synonymous with mining today. As an industry and practice historically built on the dispossession and displacement of Indigenous peoples and local communities, thousands have suffered negative human rights and environmental consequences of mining in their backyards. Mining is an inherently disruptive economic activity that upends the lands, people and environment in which it is taking place. The peoples whose lives and traditions are disrupted by mining are often granted little to no say in how the mining takes place, or whether it can even proceed in territories they have inhabited for centuries. At its core, an Afrofuturist vision of mining would reconsider the relationships of communities, states and corporations to challenge power dynamics and give more authority and jurisdiction to those who are negatively harmed by the practice. This shift in power necessitates disruption of the current hierarchies that privilege the interests of corporations and political elites over the concerns of communities.

The Afrofuturist vision of upended political and economic hierarchies portrayed in the *Black Panther* reflects an alternative reality where Africa was not colonized or subject to interference by Western powers. Unlike most African countries, Wakanda remained untouched by empire, allowing it to maintain independence and autonomy within a global political economy dominated by former colonial powers. The country and its people went about their business because the world did not care about a small, unimportant monarchy in Africa that seemingly offered little of value to the outside world. But when the world learned of Wakanda's vast vibranium deposits, outside powers rushed in to secure their own supplies of this valuable resource.[6] By the time

the world took notice, Wakandans were able to defend their supply of vibranium because they had already used the mineral's power to create the means to protect themselves and their interests.

As in Wakanda, some communities are attempting to challenge the hierarchies that dominate the global mining industry, increasingly asserting their rights to ownership and access to the lands on which mining companies seek to operate. Community consultation, and, in some instances, obtaining consent, has become a significant part of the mining sector's social license to operate and of its environmental, social and governance (ESG) priorities. Litigation has also been used in some cases by communities looking to protect their land rights. In landmark cases in South Africa and Canada, Indigenous communities have taken governments to court to reaffirm their constitutional rights to be consulted.[7] In the South African case, the Xolobeni people of the Amadiba area in the Eastern Cape successfully asserted their right to free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) in relation to any resource projects on their land. Similarly, the Gitxaała and Ehattesaht First Nations in British Columbia, Canada, were recently successful in challenging the constitutionality of the province's mineral license system, which grants mining licenses on their traditional territories without due consultation. Such legal challenges are likely to become increasingly common in the future, and their outcomes will have a significant impact on the global mining sector.

Beyond disrupting political and economic hierarchies, the Afrofuturist principle of sovereignty could also radically transform the future of mining around the world. In the Afrofuturist sense, sovereignty goes beyond the nation-centric understanding of political independence that has shaped the world over the past six hundred years. Rather, the Afrofuturist vision of sovereignty involves 'reclaiming approaches, methodologies, and ways of thinking'[8] that predate colonial interference. In essence, sovereignty entails looking forward by first looking back to reclaim traditions, identities and cultural practices that were lost due to enslavement and colonization.[9]

By reclaiming the past, the future can be built upon systems freed from historical experiences of political and economic oppression.

Black Panther reveals, in vivid form, what sovereignty and reclamation could look like in a mineral-rich country. Wakanda's use of vibranium was rooted in traditional knowledge intended to advance the well-being of all citizens. The material benefits of vibranium were not solely enjoyed by those who were able to wield power. Rather, the mineral and the technology it enabled was used equitably to advance the welfare of all those under the jurisdiction of the ruling monarchy. Vibranium was of the people's land and was used for the people. The film's seamless blending of past traditions with present governance and future ambitions illustrates sovereignty as an Afrofuturist ethos. Through the portrayal of a traditional democratic system of governance representing all the people in Wakanda, *Black Panther* makes it clear that sovereign peoples, using their self-determined processes, are best positioned to make decisions affecting their present and future lives. By portraying traditional approaches to governance and decision-making, Afrofuturism affirms sovereignty as a means to recover and restore a lost past.

Modern mining communities around the world are increasingly exerting their own sovereignty, returning to their history and traditions to shape the present and future. As an example, some Indigenous peoples in Canada and around the world have begun insisting that mining companies engage with them on their terms through traditional governance systems that pre-date colonization and may be distinct from state-recognized methods. Several First Nations in Canada have developed their own environmental assessment processes based on traditional knowledge, Indigenous laws and historical relationships with the environment. Similarly, Indigenous peoples in Latin America and Africa have resurrected traditional governance systems, rather than accepting state-appointed representatives and processes. This approach fundamentally recognizes the rights of Indigenous people to self-governance, as outlined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).[10]

The final lesson we can learn from the Afrofuturist vision is grounded in decolonization. This not only considers the 'what-if' scenario in which colonization never occurred, it also imagines the active 'undoing' of existing colonial structures. Such decolonization has attracted significant recent attention, as institutions, individuals and corporations seek to demonstrate their commitment to Indigenous peoples in the spirit of truth and reconciliation. In Afrofuturist art and literature, decolonization is often depicted through a complete reordering of the status quo, and the restoration of Indigenous knowledge systems and ways of being.[11]

In *Black Panther*, Wakanda is synonymous with decolonization. Having never been colonized, decolonization was unnecessary in Wakanda itself; its vibranium mines, processing and production relied exclusively on traditional Wakandan knowledge and technological systems. Wakanda used its vibranium-generated wealth and technology to support decolonization in the African diaspora. The re-imagined flow of aid, resources, technology and knowledge from Africa to the rest of the world represents an active form of decolonization. This Afrofuturist vision of society elevates Indigenous knowledge to ensure prosperity and collaboration for globally marginalized communities.

In today's world, decolonizing mining is perhaps the most difficult Afrofuturist principle to achieve. Ownership, control and access to land are central considerations of mining; only a small fraction of current mining activities occurs on land that is fully controlled by Indigenous peoples and mining-affected communities. Without control of land resources, it will be difficult for such communities to decolonize the mining sector and fully restore their legal, political and economic rights. Entrenched political and economic interests in mineral-rich countries around the world will continue to challenge decolonization in mining. A truly decolonized Afrofuturist vision for mining would require nothing less than the complete reordering of contemporary legal and economic systems. And that is no small task.

Afrofuturist literature and art are treated as fantasy and speculative fiction. No doubt, most of the world envisioned by Afrofuturism does not exist today.

Achieving this vision will require a radical transformation of society as we have come to know it. Such radical transformation is difficult, sometimes seemingly impossible, to achieve. But imagining a radical future is the necessary first step. As the world requires ever increasing amounts of mineral resources, the global mining industry must evolve to avoid the harms of the past. Communities around the world impacted by mining will likely lead the way forward. Indigenous peoples and mining-affected communities around the world are reclaiming and asserting their traditional rights and knowledge to shape new approaches in the mining sector. Afrofuturism offers further understanding of what a future mining industry could look like. The principles of self-sufficiency, sovereignty, self-determination and decolonization should not be restricted to a Hollywood fantasy world. They are necessary steps on the path to a better future for mining.

Endnotes

1   Julian Chambliss, 'What is Afrofuturism? An English Professor Explains' (17 June 2022), *The Conversation*, https://theconversation.com/what-is-afrofuturism-an-english-professor-explains-183707

2   *Nevsun Resources Ltd v. Araya* ([2020] 1 SCR 166), para 11, https://decisions.scc-csc.ca/scc-csc/scc-csc/en/item/18169/index.do

3   See also 'The End of Endlessness' by Naomi Klein in this volume.

4   I. Bennett Capers, 'Afrofuturism, Critical Race Theory, and Policing in the Year 2044', *New York University Law Review* 94.1 (2019): 1–60 (p. 14).

5   Vann R. Newkirk II, 'The Provocation and Power of *Black Panther*', (14 February 2018), *The Atlantic*, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/02/the-provocation-and-power-of-black-panther/553226/

6   After the truth about Wakanda is revealed to the world in *Black Panther*, the country is forced to take measures to protect its stockpiles of vibranium in the sequel, *Wakanda Forever*. In one of the early scenes, Queen Ramonda (who now leads Wakanda after the untimely death of King T'Challa) tells a United Nations meeting in Geneva that Wakanda will take a tougher response to any attempts to steal vibranium after France's attempt to steal the metal from one of Wakanda's outposts in Mali, a former French colony.

7   *Baleni and Others v. Minister of Mineral Resources* ([2019] 2 SA 453), https://www.saflii.org/za/cases/ZAGPPHC/2018/829.html; *Gitxaała v British Columbia* ([2023] BCSC 1680), https://www.bccourts.ca/jdb-txt/sc/23/16/2023BCSC1680.htm

8   Capers, 'Afrofuturism', p. 17.

9   Lisa Yaszek, 'Afrofuturism, Science Fiction, and the History of the Future', *Socialism and Democracy* 20.3 (2006): 41–60 (p. 41), https://doi.org/10.1080/08854300600950236

10 Full text available at https://www.bclaws.gov.bc.ca/civix/document/id/complete/statreg/19044

11 Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, 'Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor', *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society* 1.1 (2012): 1–40 (p. 1), https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/18630/15554