Black Panther's *Tour de Force* as a Marvelous Paradigm for the Decolonization of the Kuyperian Tradition

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Abstract

The ground-breaking Afrofuturist film *Black Panther* from Marvel Studios celebrates African culture. I propose that if the *Marvel Cinematic Universe*, an American media franchise, can decolonize superhero motion pictures, one might hope the same concerning Western theology, including the Kuyperian tradition, despite the prejudiced views on race by its progenitor. The *Black Panther*, I argue, offers a dramatic portrait for decolonizing the Kuyperian tradition, not just for African saints, but for all believers. To begin, I explore the *Black Panther's* backdrop and the film's cultural significance. Next, the decolonization of the Kuyperian tradition is discussed. Considering the *Black Panther* as a paradigm, the paper explores how the Kuyperian tradition might be decolonized and woven together with rich African wisdom contributing towards a colorful and textured theology for the global church.

About the Author
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1. Introduction

Africa is a paradox imbued with hope and despair. For this reason, Africa is arguably the most exciting place to do theology—the theologian standing between the presence of God and the anguish of the people—not to mention how Christianity in Africa is rapidly growing across the continent (Katongole 2018). Africans share many of humanity's concerns and struggles, and for this reason, African theological and philosophical reflection, while distinct, has universal significance offering the world innovative contributions. As Oduor, the Kenyan philosopher has said, "*Ubuntu* transcends beyond Africa!" and that, "the world could do with a little Ubuntu." (Oduor 2015).

This paper will argue for a paradigm shift in public theology by transforming the Kuyperian tradition. I argue that Marvel Studio's recent Afrofuturist film, the *Black Panther*, offers a portrayal, at least in part, of how this might be done. The article begins by telling the story of the *Black Panther* and then explores its cultural and theological highlights. The current significance of the Kuyperian tradition is then discussed, focusing on its theological distinctives, translation projects, and its theological input on human flourishing. Next, the paper explores its decolonization[1] and acknowledges Abraham Kuyper's ill views on the African race. Yet, some African theologians have already begun the project of decolonizing Kuyper. I argue that African decolonization of the Kuyperian tradition may offer a significant, and much-needed, theological contribution to the world. The paper then turns back and looks to another feline as the world's king, the Lion of Judah. Last, a dialectic synthesis of the Kuyperian tradition, together with African theology and philosophy is explored, thus proposing a paradigm shift in Kuyperian public theology.

2. Black Panther

2.1. Hero. Legend. King.

Manyika (2018) makes a startling observation, that one would "be hard pressed to come across a Hollywood Blockbuster, set in Africa, portraying Africa in a nuanced, positive light." That is until Marvel Studio's 2018 ground-breaking Afrofuturist film, *Black Panther*[2] (Coogler 2018; Manyika 2018). The following synopsis is adapted from IMDb (2018).

A vibranium meteorite of alien metal collides with Africa, evoking war between five African tribes. A warrior eats the "heart-shaped herb" infected by the vibranium, and becoming the first "Panther" with superhuman power, he unites four of the five tribes, forming the nation, Wakanda. The vibranium is later used to develop highly advanced technology, while at the same time isolating the nation from the nations of the world and posing as a third world country.

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1 For Fanon, "Decolonization is always a violent event," which offers a substitution that is absolute and seamless, "the substitution of one 'species' of mankind by another," thus changing the current order of the world (Fanon 2004, 1). Indeed, as Fanon's book demonstrates, this is the general take on decolonization. I, however, use "Decolonization" slightly differently where I genuinely wish to hear the voices and heed the contributions from Africa, because I believe them to be valuable. Using Fanon's language, my (Falconer's) decolonization "infuses a new rhythm, specific to a new generation of men, with a new language and a new humanity," (Fanon 2004, 2; cf. Bhabha 1994, 9–18), at least this is my hopeful objective.

2 Brown (2018) offers a different view in her online article, "Black people beware: don't let Black Panther joy mask Hollywood's racism." While she is right in stating that movies are a powerful tool for shaping cultural imagination and while I sympathize with her perspective, her analysis seems to imply suspicious ideological motives on the side of the movie's creators and artists.

Many years later, Prince N'Jobu working undercover in California believes the isolationist policies of Wakanda are harmful and its technology ought to be shared with Africans around the globe to help them overcome their oppressors. He employs Ulysses Klaue, a black-market arms dealer to penetrate Wakanda and acquire a supply of vibranium. King T'Chaka confronts his brother, N'Jobu after learning of his actions and reluctantly assassinates the prince but abandons his nephew Erik Stevens to avoid Wakandans learning the truth.

Later, T'Chaka dies during a terrorist attack by Helmut Zemo in Vienna. His son, T'Challa returns to Wakanda and reunites with his mother, Ramonda, his sister Shuri (a technological genius), and Okoye (the leader of the all-female armed force the *Dora Milaje*), and he assumes the throne. M'Baku, the leader of the mountain-dwelling Jabari (the fifth tribe of Wakanda), appears during the crowning ceremony to challenge for the crown in ritual combat. T'Challa is victorious and is crowned as the new king.

Klaue and Erik "Killmonger", now an ex-U.S. black ops soldier, steal a Wakandan vibranium axe from a London museum. Back in Wakanda, the tribal elders hear that Klaue is in South Korea and W'Kabi urges his friend T'Challa to bring Klaue to justice. T'Challa, Okoye, and Nakia respond by intercepting him in a casino in Busan where he intends to sell the axe to an unidentified buyer. T'Challa discovers the buyer is CIA agent Everett Ross, and in no time Klaue senses the deal is a setup, and the deal goes sour. Killmonger rescues Klaue, but Ross suffers an injury and is taken to Wakanda where Shuri saves his life.

Later, Killmonger assassinates Klaue, and after the body is taken to Wakanda reveals himself to the tribal elders to be N'jobu's son, and then challenges T'Challa for the crown. T'Challa is defeated in ritual combat and Killmonger takes the throne. He is now in a position to prepare the shipment of Wakandan weapons to oppressed Wakandans around the world. In the meantime, Nakia, Shuri, Ross, and T'Challa's mother seek help from M'baku and his tribe, and they find that the Jabari are caring for T'Challa. After he recovers, he returns to Wakanda and engages with Killmonger again in combat for his throne. A dramatic fight scene ensues between the two sides, and between T'Challa and Killmonger. The Jubari come and assist T'Challa and his armed forces. In the end, he is victorious over Killmonger and offers to have him healed, but he chooses to die from his injuries rather than live his life imprisoned, saying, "just bury me in the ocean with my ancestors who jumped from the ships because they knew that death was better than bondage."

T'Challa is restored to the throne, and M'Baku is granted a seat in the tribal council in recognition of his loyalty and to represent the Jabari tribe. Back in the United States, T'Challa establishes an embassy to be run by Nakia and Shuri, and he reveals to the world Wakanda's true identity.

2.2. Cultural contribution

The Black Panther blends African traditional motifs, Bantu languages, costumes, culture, and aesthetics, with advanced technology. Many African ethnic groups were represented in traditional costume, employing Adinkra symbols, Maasai warrior outfits, Nigerian agbadas, lip plates from the pastoral ethnic groups Mursi and Surma of southwestern Ethiopia, and Ethiopian crosses reminding us that Christianity found a home in Africa before it did in the West (Horne 2018, online). Pan-Africanism also finds expression in modern costume. As T'Challa, Nakia, and Okoye enter the club in Busan, South Korea to attempt to extract Wakanda's enemy, Ulysses Klaue, they sport the colors of the Pan African flag, Nakia in red, Okoye in green, and T'Challa in his black outfit. Pan-Africanism unites the different countries on the continent in cooperation as a method

of resisting imperialism and colonialism. Accordingly, in the club fight scene, the antagonist, Klaue wears a blue tie and waistcoat, symbolic of colonization (Willis 2018, online). The movie is a celebration of Africa!

But the story also calls us to reflect on: (1) *Africa's history*. The colonialist theme emerges when Shuri teases Everett K. Ross, a CIA member, "Don't scare me like that, 'colonizer.'" And then the dark memory of slavery in Killmonger's dying words. Further, the patronizing attitude towards Africa expressed in Klaue's response to T'Challa, "you savages did not deserve it (vibranium)." (2) *Current concerns. Black Panther* offers its audience a timely discussion of issues like globalization, technology, and the clash of local, national, and global cultures (Mann 2018).

While it is true that technology and electronics have, for the most part, been developed by Westerners, *Black Panther* highlights the African view of reality that is mystical, and that enchanted reality exists in a binary of the material and spiritual. As Mbiti explains, traditional religions saturate all the aspects of life; "no formal distinction exists between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and non-religious, between the spirit and the material areas of life" (Mbiti 1989, 2; Kunhiyop 2008, 66). Africa has the privilege of reminding the world of its lost sense of the mystical, the enchanted, and the transcendent.[3] Then there is also the sense of *Ubuntu*, "an individual is an individual because of the community," and yet African identities are not homogenous (Manyika 2018).

2.3. Theological highlights

To begin, Manyika (2018) has proposed that vibranium may "be paralleled to Jesus who is the gift from the Father. In *Black Panther*, vibranium hails from the heavens and gives wealth to a people," and Jesus comes to Africa bringing abundant life.[4]

We also have a reminiscent glimpse of the incarnation[5] in the scene where T'Challa has the Black Panther's strength and power stripped away moments before ritual combat; further, the roles of T'Challa's strong mother Ramonda, his former lover and war dog, Nakia, his sister Shuri, and the *Dora Milaje*, Wakanda's all-female special armed forces are significant. Women also enjoy privilege with special, unique roles in the gospel accounts. There are also unintended, implicit references to Christ's Passion in (1) M'baku spearing T'Challa in the chest, (2) W'Kabi's betrayal of T'Challa as he turns to support Erik Killmonger, and (3) the final battle between Killmonger and T'Challa—the *Christus Victor* motif. The *Black Panther* is a story of T'Challa becoming king, yet, this too is the gospel narrative, Christ becoming King![6]

Further, Manyika picks up on both the diversity of Africa as presented in the film and the diversity of the early church (Acts 6:1–7, 10 and Gal 2:11 ff.). He is right, "Diversity is at the heart of the Gospel." We see it where the slain Lamb shed his blood ransoming "people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation" and "made them a kingdom of priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth" (Rev 5:9–10; ESV). Both Mann (2018) and Manyika (2018) highlight the issue of identity. While the Wakandans have their own African identity, Christians, whether African or otherwise, enjoy "a more deeply ingrained identity as citizens of God's kingdom." In one

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3 Cf. Taylor 2007.

4 See John 10:10.

5 See Phil 2:1-11.

6 Cf. Wright's, Simply Jesus: Who He Was, What He Did, Why it Matters (2011), How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels (2016), and McKnight's, The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited (2016). Further, this is precisely the focus of Abraham Kuyper's (2016; 2017) multi-volume, Pro Rege: Living Under Christ's Kingship.

of the last scenes, T'Challa proclaimed to the United Nations, "More connects us than separates us." This too is true for Christians to spread throughout the world today. We are a kingdom of priests made up of diverse bloodlines, cultures, and backgrounds (Mann 2018; Manyika 2018).

3. Contemporary Significance of the Kuyperian Tradition

3.1. Kuyperian distinctives

Perhaps the most influential theologian shaping current Reformed social theology is the Dutch statesman, Abraham Kuyper, a Neo-Calvinist[7] who promoted a vision of Christ transforming culture (Jooste 2013, 23). In the second half of the nineteenth century, a revival was experienced among the Dutch Reformed churches in the Netherlands. While this revival included commitments to Christ, it also included an energetic social movement resolved on proclaiming and demonstrating Jesus's kingship over all of life. Many believed this to be an authentic Calvinist renewal, thus describing the movement as Kuyperian or Neo-Calvinism. It found its origins in the Augustinian tradition and was then shaped by Abraham Kuyper's theology and leadership (Strauss 1996, 10).

Strauss explains, while piety, sound theology, and the activities of the church are important to the Kuyperian, they do not limit Christianity to such. Rather, Christianity offers us a worldview—a way of understanding all reality that affects every aspect of our lives (Strauss 1996, 10).[8]

Neo-Calvinism offers a different focus from traditional Calvinism. It puts the gospel focus on Christ's Lordship over all things, as per the storyline of Scripture; creation, fall, redemption, and cosmic renewal. Yet, it does not set aside aspects of the gospel such as sin and salvation, and piety. The emphases are on the following, (1) the created order or cultural mandate, (2) Christian worldview, (3) common grace, (4) antithesis, and (5) sphere sovereignty.[9] God's sovereignty is seen not only in salvation, but is rather over all that is created (Robinson n.d., online). The Kuyperian tradition affirms all work (within reason) as callings from God in all areas of life, explains Carter. Kuyperians, therefore, aim toward cultural renewal (Carter 2012; Kuyper 2015, 334–336).

3.2. Translation of primary sources

Abraham Kuyper and the early Kuyperians wrote in Dutch. G. C. Berkouwer's, *Studies in Dogmatics*, were translated into English only a few years after their Dutch publication. Herman Bavinck's, *Reformed Dogmatics*, was only recently translated.[10] His Reformed Ethics is currently being translated. Abraham Kuyper's *Lectures on Calvinism* (1931) were originally published in 1898. This was a series of lectures delivered by Kuyper in English at the Princeton Theological Seminary. Other than this, little else has been available in English translation, until recent years. Lexham Press has embarked on the English translation and publication of a major series of Abraham Kuyper's eight key works in public theology in 12 volumes,[11] never before available in English (Faithlife 2019; Bartholomew 2017, x).[12] Richard Mouw proclaimed that "'this is a

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7 Neo-Calvinist is used interchangeably with Kuyperian.
8 Kuyper 1931; Bavinck 2008; Bartholomew 2017.
9 See Kuyper (1931, 79).
10 The first of the four volumes having been translated in 2003.
11 Acton Institute houses the Kuyper translation project (Bartholomew 2017, x).
12 In addition, a growing number of Dutch and English sources are available online (Bartholomew 2017, 324; Neo-Calvinism Research Institute 2019, online; Kuyper n.d., online).

Kuyperian moment' in which we are living." (Bartholomew 2017, x). Bartholomew proposes "that in our fragile time the Kuyperian tradition holds resources for finding constructive ways forward that can defuse some of the major threats we face, renew the life of the church, and promote human flourishing." (Bartholomew 2017, x).

3.3. Human flourishing

The Kuyperian tradition honors Christ as the sovereign king over "every square inch," including the sphere of common grace (Klapwijk 1991, 6; Kuyper 1931, 79; 2015, 440–441). Ballor and Charles (2018) explain, "common grace is a multifaceted concept" reflecting "the diversity and scope of all of God's creation." Such grace is universal because it applies to the entire world and all humankind. Philosophy and science, art and culture, and human progress and ingenuity are possible despite sin for the benefit of all peoples on every continent (Klapwijk 1991, 4).

Abraham Kuyper developed the "spheres of sovereignty" concept where "God's common grace preserves, protects, and promotes social life." Such a theology of God's sustaining activity in the world places value on the created order, how God preserves the social order of the state, church, family, and work (Ballor and Charles 2018). The Kuyperian vision offers a framework from which to engage our current social predicament. Common grace allows us to discern and appreciate truth, goodness, and beauty in our fallen and chaotic world. Both realities are true (Ballor and Charles 2018; Kuyper 1931, 73).

Believing Jesus Christ lived, died, and was resurrected to redeem both the sinner and the cosmos is to recognize Christ's Lordship as supreme over all of life's spheres. Therefore, concerning creation's goodness, the sustaining power of common grace, and Christ's redemption for humankind and the cosmos, Christians are called to engage in every human sphere (Clark 2018, 239).[13]

Strauss (1996, 15) explains how God sets up standards for all created things, offering rich variety. Although humankind has the duty of "culturally opening the possibilities of creation," a struggle exists "between love for God in submission to his law" and revolt "against God in disobedience of his law." Yet, the cosmos will undergo redemption at the end of the age through Christ, and Christians ought to participate now in the project of renewing life towards its created purpose. The gospel is the healing power of creation towards regeneration (1996, 11).

The Kuyperian tradition has sought to demonstrate the eschatological kingdom of Jesus Christ in every part of the social order and its culture. Regarding church and state, they have usually affirmed religious freedom, and yet, on the other hand, encouraged penetrating Christian influence in the state. The issue is not that the governments embrace Christianity and people within a society become Christian, but rather the laws, customs, moral norms, and ideals are influenced by Christian principles (Jooste 2013, 30; Kuyper 2017, 399–400). A Christian public theology, grounded in an appropriate creational theology and an incarnational ontology, argues Smith (2017a, 13), will appreciate the complexities and layers of a flourishing society, affirming "a network of institutions and communities beyond the state that are integral to its flourishing."

The South African missiologist David Bosch has said that the function of the church in mission is to point towards and embody the reign of God and his kingdom, and then also to address the particular challenges of our place and time (cited in Bartholomew 2017, 8). As Bartholomew

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13 N.T. Wright has said much about culture and Christianity which enjoys significant commonality with the Reformed neo-Calvinist vision of the redemption of culture. For Wright (2008), it is this notion of Christian cultural work which anticipates and provides the building blocks for the new creation (see Jooste 2013, 51).

(2017, 6) puts it, we should ask "How, then, do we seek the welfare of the city at such a time?" Kuyper demonstrated how in all spheres of life the Christian faith offers a better way for humankind in every area of our lives and promoted a genuine pluralism for societies in which the state is responsible for creating and facilitating freedom and the flourishing of all its people (Bartholomew 2017, xi). Not surprisingly then, Jooste (2013, 30) reminds us, "the Kuyperian tradition has historically encouraged Christians to evaluate and transform society and culture from an ultimate (kingdom of Christ) perspective." The above demonstrates that God is not just interested in saving souls from the world, "but desires to see the flourishing of the city" (Smith 2017a, 46).[14]

4. The Decolonization of the Kuyperian Tradition

4.1. The ugly elephant

There is an elephant in the room and it is ugly! Abraham Kuyper's views on racial purity were disgraceful. Kuyper's work shares some sentiment with Ulysses Klaue's reference to Wakandans (Africans) being "savages." Kuyper was a man of his times, concerning his nineteenth century European cultural biases of human and social development (Naude 2009; Kuyper 2019, 563–566), but such allusions are inexcusable. Some Apartheid leaders appropriated Kuyper but misused him. The misuse arose in Kuyper's *Stone Lectures* where he states that the white race is the apex of human progress.[15] Wolterstorff (2018) confesses that Kuyper had nothing good to say about Africans[16] (see Kuyper 2019, 611–613).

Wolterstorff's interviewer, James Bratt, proclaims how in the trickiness of God, Kuyper sometimes had God in a box, but in divine providence, sub-Saharan Africa has become the center of world Christianity. There are gifts there that incarnate the gospel per native culture or primal religion. There is an uptake capacity in Sub-Saharan cultures that give a unique and strong expression of the gospel. Bratt wonders if Africa might forgive and appreciate Kuyper as an unexpected gift to Africa (Wolterstorff 2018, online).

Kuyper had some unsavory views on race, and yet, the Kuyperian tradition has much to offer Africa. Like Marvel's *Black Panther*, Africa also has a wealth to offer the world. Bartholomew (2017, 10) concurs, arguing that Kuyper's thought and the theology that flowed from him offer rich resources which may assist African Christians to fulfill their God-given calling to be the salt of the earth and the light in our world today.[17]

4.2. The genesis of decolonization

African scholars were invited to present papers on Kuyperianism and Africa at the 2018 annual Kuyper Conference at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, USA, with Wolterstorff participating in a dialogue on Neo-Calvinism and South Africa. Perhaps the decolonization of the Kuyperian tradition has already begun! The discussion which follows is informed by two of those African scholars.

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14 See Bavinck (2013, 120).

15 This is a nuanced and important topic and more ought to be said here, but for the sake of focus and space I refer the reader to de Gruchy (1986, 1991) and Naude (2009).

16 For an example of Kuyper's racial views, see Kuyper's Stone Lectures on Calvinism, (1931, 32, 84, 196). In response, see Strauss (1996), and Jooste (2013, esp. p. 245).

17 See Matt 5:13–16.

Africa is a paradox, a continent with despair and hope, says Katongole.[18] Yet, the task of the theologian is to bring the two together. The theologian stands in the paradox and discovers God in the cries of anguish. Katongole (2018) proclaims that all African theology is a theology of hope, yet it is also public theology. Despite the paradox, the gospel can impact culture when incarnated into African society, thus transforming lives (Bourdanné 2018).

Not dissimilar to Ulysses Klaue stealing Wakanda's vibranium, Bourdanné (2018) tells us that "Africa is full of natural resources but foreign companies are using them to entertain some of the dictators to maintain them in power, we Africans see that something is not right!" Colonialization was an unfortunate complete takeover, crushing African power because of the superior technology of its colonizers. This forced a new reality upon Africa affecting every aspect of life. Many Africans, according to Bourdanné, were manipulated and forced to forsake their cultures, customs, and beliefs. Africa still finds itself in a deep identity transition. Nevertheless, Africa does not only enjoy a long human history, longer than the West, but it also has a significant connection to God's great narrative. Abraham and Joseph were in Africa.[19] Moses lived in Africa, as did the Hebrews for many years,[20] and Jesus was in exile in Africa.[21] God, no doubt, continues to work his redemptive power in salvation, justice, and reconciliation in the continent (Bourdanné 2018).

Katongole (2018) proposes two directions for a prophetic and public theology from Africa: (1) *Critical Direction.* This includes a political and economic critique of modern Africa, an ecological critique, a critique of the church and its religious leaders who do not address evil—including the prosperity gospel—and some Pentecostal and charismatic churches which address suffering inadequately and inappropriately. It also addresses issues such as the degradation of urban and rural Africa. (2) *Constructive Direction.* In contrast to critique, this direction seeks to build and plant, offering healing and visions of a new future, and points towards a new order of human and economic flourishing, and so on. Katongole (2018) suggests that the methodology takes a narrative approach, describing what the promise of new covenant hope looks like in an African context. Theologians work in the "terrible middle," the space between God and the people, being grounded in the Christ of everyday life in Africa, offering theological insight of God amid the people's cries and anxiety. Such a theology must be accessible to the theologian and minister as well as speak to the heart and mind of the layperson. This theology is too urgent to be abstract! For this reason, narrative is very important in developing public theology in Africa (Katongole 2018). And as we have seen in the *Black Panther*, stories are powerful.

I propose that decolonization of the Kuyperian tradition is not only for Africa's own sake, but that in its unique situation and paradoxes Africa may serve the world. It is not simply an African public theology for Africa—not at all—it is a public theology *from* Africa.

4.3. Africa! Feed the world.

Africa has had its paradoxes and challenges,[22] but it has not been cursed by God (Bourdanné 2018). The blessings of God upon Africa are evident in how "the global centers of Christianity

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18 Bourdanné (2018) raises some important questions about this paradox, e.g., Christians in Rwanda and the genocide at a time when Christianity is growing in Africa. In addition, there are still many political, economic, and social concerns.
19 See Gen 12:10–20; 37:25–28; 46:1–7.
20 See Exod 1:1–15.
21 See Ps 68:31; Matt 2:13–23; 27:32.
22 Katongole (2011, 1) reminds us that while Christianity continues to grow and thrive in Africa, the realities of violence, civil war, and poverty also proliferate.

have shifted so that the secular West is no longer the center of world Christianity. While we are witnessing a revival of Christianity around the world (including parts of the West), the new centers of Christianity are located in Asia, Latin America, and Africa," says Bartholomew (2017, 2). In the *Black Panther*, Wakanda has the mystical metal, vibranium, and advanced knowledge and wisdom. To honor his cousin at the end of the movie, T'Challa develops an outreach center in the same building where his uncle once lived in America, to be run by Nakia and Shuri. T'Challa then stands before the United Nations and opens up Wakanda, to end its secret isolation from the rest of the world. He rises and proclaims,

> My name is King T'Challa, son of King T'Chaka. I am the sovereign ruler of the nation of Wakanda. And for the first time in our history, we will be sharing our knowledge and resources with the outside world. Wakanda will no longer watch from the shadows. We cannot. We must not. We will work to be an example of how we as brothers and sisters on this earth should treat each other. Now, more than ever the illusions of division threaten our very existence. We all know the truth. More connects us than separates us. But in times of crisis the wise build bridges while the foolish build barriers. We must find a way to look after one another as if we were one single tribe. (Marvel 2018)

A member of the UN speaks into the microphone in response and asks, "With all due respect, King T'Challa, what can a nation of farmers have to offer the rest of the world?" Everett K. Ross, a friend to the Wakandans, smiles at this because he knows the value that Wakanda has to offer (Marvel 2018). This is Africa's story.

Bourdanné (2018) is right, "Questions about Africa challenge our theology and our biblical interpretations of Scripture, but these questions are not unique to Africa." Indeed, the global church is invited to engage and participate in public theology from Africa which no doubt will have implications for the entire world. Like the fictional African country Wakanda, Africa has resources, wisdom, and knowledge to offer. Might Africa feed the world and heal those who have wounded it.

5. Transforming the Kuyperian Tradition: A Paradigm Shift in Public Theology

5.1. The lion is our king

Christ Jesus comes into this world under the golden symbol of a different cat, the Lion of Judah. While the Black Panther was the sovereign over the fictional country Wakanda, the cosmic reign of Christ is all-encompassing.[23] The Canadian-American philosopher, James K. A. Smith (2017b) tells us of his recent publication, *Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology*, where he articulates that,

> Our public life and our public theology have to be nourished by the thickness of the gospel itself, by the scandalous truth that the Creator-King became human, that he died, that he rose again, that he ascended and that he is coming again, that kind of specificity of the Gospel has something to say to our political life, to our political institutions, to our public life.

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23 Cf. Kuyper 2016, 2017.
24 See, Rev 21:23.

Smith believes, and I do too, that the Kuyperian tradition offers us extraordinary resources for thinking about public life with its vigorous theology of creation and culture undergirding our public life. Further, it comes with a legacy of reflecting upon pluralism, how the created realm "generates different spheres and different responsibilities and different institutions." According to Smith (2017b), Kuyper argues that the church and the formation in the life of believers is where the imagination finds cultivation for faithful public witnesses to redeem culture.

Smith rightly argues that the gospel centers around a Lamb on a throne who has taken for himself a people "from every tribe and tongue and people and nation … to be a kingdom and priests to our God, and they will reign upon the earth." (Rev 5:9–10; NASB). Evidently, "we are not liberated from politics; we are liberated by a King who makes us citizens of a polis whose lamp is the Lamb."[24] (Newbigin 1995, 16; Smith 2017a, 57). Yet, oddly, he fails to highlight the paradox, the Lamb being "the Lion that is from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David." (Rev 5:5; NASB).

The material universe is inclusive of God's salvific work, and this ought to challenge the way we think about salvation, redemption, and restoration. Jesus was not merely interested in "soul rescue"—his salvation project includes cosmic redemption, demonstrated in Jesus's ministry, announcing a kingdom that promotes justice "for the poor, for the oppressed, for the vulnerable, for all." Jesus does not just redeem souls, but he also puts the world right. If justice and human flourishing are God's concern, they should be our concern too (Smith 2017a, 83–84).

Those already in the kingdom know Jesus already reigns, albeit often hidden from the present world. We participate in setting forth this redeeming work until its consummation, giving witness to the hidden reign of Christ (Newbigin 1989, 111). Newbigin (1989, 222) explains how the church must "be faithful to the message which concerns the kingdom of God, his rule over all things and all peoples; the Church has to claim the high ground of public truth." Indeed, "Jesus is Lord" is the very confession suggesting that the kingship of Christ encompasses our entire public life and the whole created world (Newbigin 1995, 16). The Christian calling is then to "to act out in the whole life of the whole world the confession that Jesus is Lord of all." (1995, 17).

5.2. Dialectic synthesis

The *Black Panther* is an African narrative written for global audiences employing the cinematic arts and technology of the West. Likewise, a paradigm shift in public theology from Africa, considering this Kuyperian enterprise, entails a delicate dialectic synthesis of the Kuyperian tradition with additional Western contributions, together with African theologians and philosophers that inform such a public theology. The Kuyperian tradition offers us the theological framework while African contributions provide the thematic content. Considering African theology, Kunhiyop (2008, xiii) argues that, for some people,

> [t]he word African signals a rejection of anything that has links to the West, colonialism and economic imperialism, and thus an African Christian theology is perceived as reactionary and hostile to any theology developed in the West.
> Yet, he seeks "to articulate a theology that originates from an authentic search for the meaning of Scripture to apply it to African life today." (Kunhiyop 2008, xiii)

I agree with him; to do African Christian theology, one ought to take the African situation seriously and yet seek to be faithful to the teachings of Scripture (see Kunhiyop 2008, xiv). All theology is, however, done in community, and African Christian theology is no different, being a part of a

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24 See, Rev 21:23.

greater context in the history of Christianity (2008, xiv–xv). African Christian theology must, therefore, interact with "truths that apply to all peoples, tribes and nations" (2008, xv). Likewise, I argue, the theology of "all peoples, tribes and nations" ought to engage with the theology of African Christianity. This theological project then does not seek to scratch the proverbial African "itch." Instead, it seeks to offer and promote African theological wisdom to the world alongside the West.

Furthermore, a public theology from Africa will also need to dialogue with African Philosophy. Sadly, it was believed that no philosophy or reasoning can be found in Africa, and African culture consisted merely of mystical rites, initiations, and rituals. While the latter is true to some degree, Africa also enjoyed philosophical thought, dialogue, and reasoning. These have been passed down orally and look considerably different from Western reasoning (Oduor 2015).

Among other things, an African philosophy provides a comprehensible set of beliefs about the nature of the world in which we live, and our place in it.[25] There are two trends and orientations in African philosophy: (1) *Religious beliefs in sub-Saharan Africa.* This deals with the concept of God, the concept of time, and human destiny and immortality. The cultural raw material on African tradition and cultural practices form the focus for such philosophical dialogue.[26] (2) *Modern African Philosophy.* This is generally broken down into the following categories: (i) Ethnophilosophy, (ii) Philosophical Sagacity, (iii) Nationalistic–Ideological Philosophy, (iv) Professional Philosophy, (v) Literary and Artistic Philosophy, and (vi) Hermeneutic Philosophy. Modern African Philosophy looks beyond tradition to science, technology, and reasoning (Oduor 2015; New World Encyclopedia 2016).

While African philosophical thought is for the most part distinct, much of it has universal significance, because humanity's concerns and struggles are shared by Africans. I believe their unique context may offer the world unique opportunities. Oduor (2015), a Kenyan philosopher says, "*Ubuntu* (I Am Because We Are) transcends beyond Africa!" He explains that in ubuntu, "a person is a person through other persons," and proclaims, "The world could do with a little Ubuntu." Therefore, African political consciousness may offer constructive input towards humankind's progress. And not dissimilar to Kuyper's Sphere Sovereignty, such development realizes the project of the African renaissance in all areas of cultural, political, and social life (Correct Connect Africa 2018). The dialectic synthesis lies in marrying the (Western) Kuyperian tradition with African theology and philosophy, thus transforming the Kuyperian tradition towards a paradigm shift in public theology.

The article presented the possibility of decolonizing the Kuyperian tradition, offering a shift in public theology.

6. Conclusion

I began demonstrating how the *Black Panther* might offer such prospects by exploring its cultural and theological highlights. The contemporary significance was then examined, looking at the theological distinctives of Kuyperian theology, its translation projects, and its theological impact on human flourishing. The paper explored the decolonization of the Kuyperian theology

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25 The following are notable African philosophers: Paulin J. Hountondji, Achille Mbembe, V. Y. Mudimbe, Kwame Gyekye, Kwasi Wiredu, John Mbiti, Henry Odera Oruka, Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, Wole Soyinka.

26 See chapter 4 of my doctoral thesis (Falconer 2013).

while acknowledging the "ugly elephant" in the room, and yet demonstrating how some African theologians have begun decolonizing the Kuyperian tradition. I proposed an African decolonization of Kuyperianism which may offer a significant contribution to the world. Last, I offered some thoughts on how a paradigm shift might be made by transforming the Kuyperian tradition.

There is no doubt that Africa is a place with much hope, and yet it suffers much despair and anxiety at the same time. Africa, therefore, relates to much of the world's struggles. Coupled with the growth of Christianity in Africa and distinct African theology and philosophy, along with other theologies, a decolonization of the Kuyperian tradition may offer the world fresh and innovative theology.

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