

[MUSIC PLAYING] SPEAKER 1: Thank you for being here at our third Black Religion, Spirituality, and Culture conference. And our theme--

[APPLAUSE]

--this year is Blackness in the Margins. So for our first panel, it is Black Panther, Diaspora and the Queering of the Black Imaginary. And we asked the panelists to address the ways in which Afro-religious traditions are represented in the movie Black Panther and shape the relationship between those and the African continent and the African diaspora. We have with us Dr. Nikki Young, and she will be presenting first, but I'll present everyone at the same time.

Dr. Nikki Young is an associate professor of women's and gender studies and religion at Bucknell University. She received her PhD from Emory University, her M.Div and Th.M from Candler School of Theology, and her BA from UNC Asheville. Her research focuses on the intersection of ethics, family, race, gender, and sexuality, and she is interested in the impact of queerness on moral reasoning. Her first monograph, Black Queer Ethics, Family, and Philosophical Imagination was published in 2016 by Palgrave MacMillan. Professor Young's second book co-authored with Eric Barreto and Jake Myers is titled In the Tongues of Mortals and Angels, a Transnational Ethics of Black Queer Liberative Practice. Professor Young.

[APPLAUSE]

We also have with us Dr. Tony Van Der Meer, who is a senior lecturer in the Africana Studies department at the University of Massachusetts Boston. OK. Dr. Van Der Meer received his MS in community economic development from the Graduate School of Business at New Hampshire College and received his MA and PhD in leadership and change from Antioch University. Professor Van Der Meer is a practicing Babalawo initiated into the Yoruba Ifa Orisha belief system in Oyo, Nigeria by Dr. Wande Abim--

TONY VAN DER MEER: Abimbola.

SPEAKER 1: Abimbola, a spokesperson of Ifa for the world. Professor Van Der Meer is a co-editor of the book State of the Race, Creating Our 21st Century, Where Do We Go From Here? It was foreworded by Assata Shakur in the Diaspora Press. Professor Van Der Meer.

[APPLAUSE]

And Dr. Kyrrah Daniels is an assistant professor of art-- Dr. Kyrrah Malika Daniels is an assistant professor of art history and African and African Diaspora Studies with a courtesy appointment in theology. Her research interests and course topics include Africana religions, sacred arts, and material culture, race, religion, and visual culture and ritual and healing tradition in the Black Atlantic. Her first book manuscript, When the Spirit is Healed is in progress and is a comparative religion project that examines key ritual art objects used in healing ceremonies to treat spiritual illness and mental health conditions in Haiti and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Between 2009 and 2010, Professor Daniels served as a junior curator in the Smithsonian institution's National Museum of

American History in Washington, DC. And following the earthquake of 2010, she worked in St. Raphael, Haiti, with Lakou Soley Academic and Cultural Arts Center, a grassroots organization that develops art-based pedagogy.

Her work has been published in The Journal of Africana Religions, The Journal of Haitian Studies, and The Journal for The American Academy of Religion. She completed her BA in Africana studies at Stanford University and her MA in religion at Harvard University and received a PhD in African and African-American studies at Harvard as well. Professor Malika-- Kyrrah Malika Daniels.

[APPLAUSE]

NIKKI YOUNG: Thank you so much for that introduction. Thank you for joining me to my co-panelists. I'm really excited, actually, to hear what they have to say more than I am about presenting what my thoughts are. And thank you so much to Harambe for inviting me. This is the first year that I've actually been able to come. I was invited to the first one and had a conflict, and now I'm so excited. So thank you and in particular to Jared for our really wonderful conversations so far.

So I am trained as a Christian ethicist, and I'm going to do some Christian ethics. Yes! Except the Christian ethicists don't always see me as a Christian ethicist. So you'll hear some of those frameworks in my language, but know that I'm an outsider in that space too. So I titled what I wrote today "Black Panther, Freedom, Fugitivity, and Black Queer Moral Imaginaries." You will hear the least about Black Panther, I'm sorry to say.

So I'm going to start by telling you something that you already know. Freedom is a necessity, not the kind of freedom that allows a man to shoot off his gun because teenagers' music is too loud or to be appointed to the Supreme Court despite a history of sexual assault and harassment. Not that kind of freedom. I'm talking about the kind of freedom that allows each of us the possibility of being, and a being that we can also use to become moral subjects and agents.

Katie Cannon, womanist ethicist reminds us in her book Black Womanist Ethics that at the foundation of Christian ethics is the assumption of a free being. One needs to be free in order to make moral decisions or have the capacity to make moral decisions. When we establish who a subject or a human is, we also establish who can be free. And likewise, when we ascribe freedom, we recognize and validate humanity. And within that process, we are also determining who can and can't be moral. So basically, one cannot be a moral subject or any subject at all if one is not free.

Now, a notion of freedom that relies solely on rights and the capacity to offer or deny them to others actually suppresses possibilities for individual and collective performance or virtue or moral excellence. So basically, the concept of freedom that we have at work that's based on rights really pushes down our capacity to be moral agents. That's why we have to disentangle nation state driven, empire-embedded freedom from the moral aims of people seeking emancipation from external and internal limits on their sense of self, their choices, and their livability. We

need to recognize freedom as an existential condition that is accessible to and potentially experienced by every human subject.

So I'm saying that we need a freedom of being, that young, gifted, and black kind of freedom. We gonna be all right freedom. Just as I am, Lord, freedom. I am fearfully and wonderfully made freedom. Wakanda forever freedom. Or that I am that I am kind of freedom. We need a freedom that emanates from an undeniable and unapologetic knowledge about, memory of, and return to who we are.

Now, this is the part that you'll know. So in a US American context, which is basically the anti-Wakanda, such freedom--

[LAUGHTER]

--such freedom is suppressed through a narrative of and significations upon blackness and black people that is so ingrained in our own narratives that it's a part of the air that we breathe. The narrative is about how whiteness became understood as the most highly functioning race and thus marked by an inherent capacity for freedom, basically the creation of a stable labor force-- I mean, you know this history-- also known as a slavocracy produced and was produced by legal, political, religious, and scientific distinctions between those races who could be in service for life and those who could not. I'm pulling this from [INAUDIBLE]. I'm just saying this so I can get to another thing that I want to say.

Racial difference supposedly pointed to an increased or decreased capacity for rational thought and a measurement of functional capacity. So the falsified distinctions here through science, through religion, through politics, through law-- these falsified distinctions explained or explained why different kinds of people behave differently and thus experience different material realities. And they allege that whiteness represented full human functional capacity, and blackness a disabled form of human existence. So whiteness gets to function here in the highest capacity. Blackness is some aberration of the human kind.

This construction of race and particularly the perversion and disabling of blackness and its link to freedom in concert with the normativizing of whiteness is a moral enterprise. That whole process, the racial project is a moral enterprise, an enterprise in which whiteness and white supremacy are moral goods. This moral enterprise is the work of slavery for sure. But it's also the inevitable outcome of colonization. It's one of the inevitable outcomes of colonization.

It's colonization that underwrites slavery and the proliferation of white supremacy through signification, which is important, dehumanization, erasure of subjects that are turned into objects. What results through these processes of objectification is a foreclosure of possibilities that is essentially material and ontological capture.

And so efforts to salvage black subjectivity and personhood and being through the refusal of capture is a process of escape. We know this in common discourse as fugitivity. Lots of people have written on fugitivity, and I'm going to say some things about it. Our refusal is an ethical

project of fugitivity. Fugitivity as escape from foreclosure exists in a space between liberty and freedom. Liberty is the thing that they tell us that we can get, right? It's an American neoliberal sort of concept. Freedom is this other thing that we've co-opted into thinking that it's liberty.

Fugitivity as escape from foreclosure exists between this space, a space which is not simply tethered to a historical reality or a new political future, but instead to ongoing material effects of slavery or what Saidiya Hartman calls the afterlife of property. Fugitivity assumes an elsewhere, as Alison Kafer describes it Feminist, Queer, Crip. The elsewhere that fugitivity presupposes is not merely a different time. It is also the possibility of another situation, a place, a being, an elsewhat, an elsewho, an elsewhere.

It's also kind of a space-making, an alteration of what can be. This is the imaginative stuff by a recognition and then rejection of what is. It's more than fleeing from. It's a creative projection and the continual generation of freedom through a process of escape. This is what I see in Black Panther's illustration of Wakanda and all the relational religious and political economies therein. It's a different time of sorts. We might even think of it as outside of time, though set in a time that seems somehow recognizable to us. Perhaps it's eschaton. Perhaps it's Genesis. Perhaps it's both.

I believe that the creative work of fugitivity and thinking about it this way is even more about generating an elsewho than it is about projecting an elsewhat, where, or when, because a significant part of what happens in and through capture, the kind of capture that I was talking about, is evisceration, or even before evisceration, preemptive exclusion of Black people's selfhood. And so here I don't mean just an individual self in terms of a sense of self. But that's certainly part of it. But I mean the concept of self. The existence of self, the very possibility of being is persistently and systematically foreclosed.

One way this foreclosure happens is through constant misnaming or signifying. This signifying happens when we are named by another who claims the sole and ultimate power of subjective citation, citation that's not merely designation, but also literally denigration, blackening. Coogler's depiction of Wakanda and Black Panther and the royal community points to a fugitive existence as odd as that seems. Wakanda and T'Challa have to depend on isolationism in order to maintain the safety of an uncolonized experience. In this way, it is African but not Africa so named and constructed by, in, and through whiteness.

Yet it is not quite untouched. It has not fully been captured, but it is related to the possibility of capture through its dangerous proximity to Africa. And so here these scarecrows are pointing to the way that Africa has been named, right, inscribed by entities other than itself and how Wakanda gets to be African but not in Africa so named.

But Wakanda, while African, barely or narrowly escapes the capture of whiteness, and some might argue that its dependence on isolation suggests no escape at all. I'm not sure. I do know that Wakanda and Black Panther

open up possibilities for a historical otherwise that depends on a spiritual, conceptual, and embodied investment and reality that testifies to an existence prior to and outside of colonization, capture, and naming. This is why I understand the fugitive elements within the story and depiction as a genealogical and ethical project. It's a retelling of history from a place of flight, but it's also more remarkably the claiming of a history in the first place.

So I recognize that it's not a real story, right? But the way that it's operating is in the claiming of a history. And so inasmuch as it has a different story to tell of its history, its lands, its language, bodies, and cultures, Wakanda and all of its inhabitants have access to what Jelani Cobb calls redemptive countermythology as testimony, if you will, that transforms the concepts of the dead, right? Boundaries between time and space. It overruns limits of science and logic. It outdoes the most dramatic family drama possible.

It's like reading Genesis or the gospels or Revelation. Within this retelling and claiming work, fugitivity and fugitivity within Wakanda allows us to confront the lie of African and black nonexistence and draws on and even invokes a different or a new account of that existence. This confrontation is crucial for me as an ethicist because it calls attention to the fallacy of signification, of other naming, epithets. It also deliberately uncovers the relational component of subject formation, so how things come into being at all.

It points directly to the reality that whiteness is existence, right, as others describing it as a moral good before-- that whiteness is existence is actually only a result of having falsified the existence of and then named a certain kind of Blackness. And inasmuch as that process of making seems difficult to undo, its undoing is what makes room for the unmaking and then remaking of subjectivity and selfhood for Black folks.

Now, when I'm saying selfhood, I'm sure you can hear me sliding into the possible sea of narcissism. That's not what I'm doing, right? I'm trying to resurrect the idea that we have been denied selfhood in the very first place. So it is not the lifting and appreciation of selfhood as opposed to the community. It is an establishment of humanity, of subjectivity in the first place.

Blackness and Black people in Wakanda live lives-- sorry. Blackness and Black people in Wakanda live into the sacred work of generating different ontological understandings than the ones that would be signified upon them by the overlapping powers of capitalist Whites as hetero patriarchy. Such a living out is ethical labor towards freedom, the freedoms that I was talking about before. The freedom that seems to articulate itself in these folks' lives is one of being, and I encountered it as part of my work in the Black queer ethics book that I wrote.

In that text, when I argued that Black queers are moral subjects with moral agency, I was suggesting that we, they create the possibility of being virtuous or having virtue through a process called creative resistance. The resistance, while often manifested socially and politically, produces ontological realities of freedom in individuals and

communities. I was drawing on the legacy of Black feminist and womanist practices along with queer discourse to be able to see and interpret my observations and interviews of Black queers who were themselves just trying to make a way in a context that denies a way.

When Black queers imagine new relational possibilities through the practice of recognizing and resisting oppressive ones, there is a confrontation with present reality. Imaginative work uses the simultaneity embedded in queerness to doubly focus on fostering alterity, right, this other reality to what is tangible and present as well as generating newness based on possibilities. And moral imagination, which is what I'm interested in, doesn't leave our realities and experiences and motivation in some forgotten past or in some unknown past. It honestly and intentionally recognizes how those elements can contribute to new worlds, the new worlds that we see, for example, in Wakanda.

So when I write about the survival and livability and futures of Blackness and queerness, I participate in these construction of worlds. I'm basically Coogler without the money.

[LAUGHTER]

I'll take a check. Thank you. These new worlds have social relations that are built on notions of subjectivity that we don't actually have, at least not in the American context or within which we don't quite operate. When I talk about the revolutionary practice and quality of Black love, I am making a statement about how the reality of Black love stands in opposition to the moral discourses that we've used to describe Black lives. And so was Coogler. And so between a lack of a future due to the expendability of labor, right, in the slavocracy that I was talking about and the fungibility of Black lives inasmuch as we use and exploit them in an American context, it makes sense in our space to think that Black lives do not matter.

But in Wakanda, the articulation of the exact opposite operates as science fiction and also sacred text. It operates as a projection of possibility. Wakanda and Black Panther are not science fiction because they are comic book stories. They're science fiction because they articulate a substance of things hoped for.

Now, this is also-- let me just-- as an aside, I'm rounding out towards the end. This is also really sort of soft reading of Wakanda. Of Black Panther, I do have a lot of critiques of the film. But there are some elements in there that feel like, I mean, I would move there really. If, like, Delta had a flight, I mean-- so again, this kind of speculative fiction is ethical action. When situated against volumes and histories of fictional reinstatements of histories that denigrate, consume, exploit, and eviscerate Blackness, Black Panther looks like the Black and Black queer version of "it is written, but I say" refrains. Right?

One exciting bit is the shift from what has been written to what is newly iterated. But what's also exciting is the shift from it to I, the injection of subjectivity, moral subjectivity, and capacity for change. In my work, I talk about this as Black queer ethics. And I love that it has

the audacity and rage to do this script flipping kind of work. To make us recognize ourselves as sources of knowledge and then to challenge our use of normative frameworks, language categories, religions within those descriptions of knowledge, this is what allows Black queer ethics to be a mode of destabilizing the structures of domination that build upon anti-Blackness, the suppression of sexuality and self-knowledge and self-love, as well as the collective experiences and expressions of joy. In this way, Black queer ethics is a process of decolonizing the imagination and imaginative processes.

Writer and activist Walidah Imarisha reminds us about this in Octavia's Brood, where she writes, "once the imagination is unshackled, liberation is limitless. Our ancestors dreamed us up and then bent reality to create us." The Black queer ethics that makes freedom possible is about bending reality to freedom and justice, but it's also about shattering what we already know as reality, breaking apart epistemological framing that shackles us in neoliberal bondage. This is the type of breaking that Wakanda introduced in its creation of a world. It's about snatching back what looks like the collective good to make room for all that is not yet, to make room for the same kind of substance of things hoped for.

So then watching the film and thinking about ethics leaves me with a couple of questions that I'll leave to you. Whose ancestors will we be? What dead will we talk to? Who are we writing into our future? What kind of souls, bodies, and lives are we making possible? And to whom among the dead will our children speak? Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

TONY VAN DER MEER: So good afternoon.

AUDIENCE: Good afternoon.

TONY VAN DER MEER: So I also want to thank the committee for inviting me. I have to say that the past week has been a rough one, but I can say that it has in some ways tied into some of my thinking. So I'm going to sort of do a kind of alphabet soup thing and try to pull some pieces together.

I've been thinking about the theme, and I've been thinking about the question that we're asked to answer. And so I'm coming from the perspective of someone who is a Yoruba practitioner. I'm coming from the perspective of someone who's been engaged in the Black liberation movement for over 40 years. And so I'm trying to connect those two things together and to sort of make sense of our discussion.

Well, first of all, I was trying to figure out what was meant by the whole idea of Black Panther, Diaspora and the Queering of Black Imaginary. And so I was trying to figure out where that question was coming from and how we're defining things. So one of the things-- I watched the Black Panther movie a couple of times. In fact, I fell asleep trying to watch it again last night.

And I read a number of the articles and reviews and responses to it. And essentially, I thought it was a pretty powerful film. I have issues with

it. But I thought that in terms of trying to deal with Black imagination, that it's important for particularly Black people and everyone to see the imagery of Black people in a different light, in a different situation.

But it's also important to be careful as to how that image is portrayed and who portray it. So the fact that you have Black actors, the fact that you have Black directors and Black costume designers and so forth is that you're still operating within a white corporate framework. This is being funneled through Hollywood. And we have to understand that Hollywood is designed to appeal to the majority of the US population as well as the broader world, global population.

And so a lot of the particular ideas, ideas about culture, about religion, about spirituality are ideas that sometimes seem to be foreign to Black people as well, who have some notions, but in terms of going to the deeper aspect of it, is that their orientation has been based on what we experience in living in a culture imperialist world. Right? So the idea of how do we begin to see and critique that in relationship to the diaspora, in relationship to Black liberation, right?

So-- but I think that when we look at queering, it's like we're looking at how do we begin to develop a different way of how we would look at the future and what we want out of the future. And essentially that is a process of self-determination for people who have been marginalized for so long. But it's also a process of decolonization, of decolonizing one's mind, one's perspective.

And you have to excuse me, because if I switch vernaculars-- you know, I'm from Harlem. So they say that you can take a person out of Harlem, but you can't take Harlem out of a person, right? So is that when you begin to look at what is it that we-- how do we want to imagine, you know, our future? And from a Black liberation perspective, from a spiritual perspective, coming from your perspective is that when people see or deal with the question of-- and even Black people and even people in Africa is that they don't necessarily deal with the philosophical and ethical aspects of that practice. Do you understand?

And so it becomes very difficult because they are looking around more of the iconography and more of the dance and the music and the-- you know, all these other things that there are very valid, right? But in terms of from a holistic perspective, what is the core principles of these belief systems? And how do they relate to what's going on?

So when I look at-- when I watch the Black Panther movie, I saw more of a kind of South African cultural perspective. And a lot of the sort of rituals and symbolism was based on some of that thinking. But it's also there's some consistency in terms of African belief systems, especially as relates to the ancestors, especially as relates to values. And so there's a whole idea of Wakanda trying to sort of create this space, sort of kind of in isolation. But there's a debate as to they should do more. Right? That they should begin to go out and help others.

And interesting enough, because I had raised some questions-- interesting enough, at the beginning of the scene, you know, when they visit LA, and



you see these guys, you know, mapping out, are they going to take off a place. They got guns on the table and everything. And I was trying to figure this out. And so the contradiction was you violated the code by taking Vibranium and giving it to someone and so forth. But my whole point was why was he here, and what was he trying to do? And did he in fact represent a different belief that we need the help the outside world to deal with the impact that imperialism have on them? You understand?

And so I don't think they really got into that a lot. You had to imagine, right, what was going on. It left a lot to one's imagination as to what the particulars are as it relates to that.

But a deeper discussion was we need to do more, right? We need to take this outside, right? And it's interesting because you cannot live in isolation in the imperialist world. We're understanding that with Cuba. We understand that with Venezuela. We understand that with other progressive societies who in fact, you know-- the propaganda, US propaganda machine begins to show them as the bad people and the US as the good people. And Malcolm X was clear on this when he said if you're not careful, the newspapers will have you believing that the victim is the criminal and the criminal is the victim.

And because we don't have enough information as to how people deal with their lives, we assume that they are bad. We begin to create this-- which Dr. DiAngelo, who wrote White Fragility, with this good/bad binary, which we witness just the other day when the congressman from North Carolina began to talk about how he could not be a racist because his nephews and nieces were black and that he was a good friend of the good chairman who is from Maryland and so forth and everything. So this denial and so forth. So we have to understand how those narrative are woven and how people begin to internalize that process.

But the idea of looking deeper in terms of traditional African belief systems, we have to go back to what are those principles of that belief system? So particularly in the Yoruba belief system, first of all, the Yorubas believe that conflict is the order of the day. Right? And so the idea of having the Yoruba Ifa Orisha belief system is how to navigate that conflict in order to be able to be successful in what it is that you do.

However, there is a process. And there's two processes. One is around divination to inquire using the oracle to find out what is it that that person could be possibly going through, right? And the other part is that once you find that and you come up with a solution is to make sacrifice. Now, what is not dealt with, with many practitioners is that after you do your sacrifices, they call [INAUDIBLE], then there's something called reflection. You have to-- because, see, that's where you begin to deal with the deeper philosophical and ethical meanings so that you can internalize and practice something different. There's a transformative aspect to the practice that a lot of people aren't dealing with because of it's becoming more-- you're dealing with more kind of commodification with the practice. It's going about dollars and cents and not really deep spiritual development.

This is a contradiction in Africa and the diaspora, right? You see, because when you begin to deal with the text, it's a whole other aspect of it. In fact, in one of the odus, [INAUDIBLE], it says that the Ifa priests of Earth perform divination for Earth, and they did it because it was to prevent them from disaster or death and that they shouldn't be going after materialism, but it should be going to protect themselves. You understand?

So all of the odus, that there is a sort of ethical underpinning that one should begin to follow, you know, in terms of one's behavior, in terms of humility, in terms of being truthful and being generous and so forth. And so in Wakanda, the whole idea of the king going back to the ancestor realm and talking to his father, says, you lied. You lied. Right?

And so, you know, it's like-- and then the tension that he has between the woman that he loves. It was this big kiss, and then everybody went wild in the movies. They show Black love. It's like, whoa, it's a revolutionary act, right? You know?

But the idea of she was saying, look, man, I got to get out of here, because we got to help the people, man. And, like, you could do more. And so he realized that, well, let's do more. Now, the part is going to the UN and dealing with the UN. That's a whole other story.

[LAUGHTER]

That's a whole other story. Right? You see what I'm saying? So I don't know about part two, but it's like-- right? But the point is that how are we using these values to begin to imagine a new society? So when I got up, I said, it has been a rough week.

You know, I had someone who's been calling me. For the past three years I've been in contact with a young man who's been locked up in prison for murder. And he was a young man at the time, and he had murdered someone. And so I get a call-- actually an email. First I'm suspicious, like, email from prison? What's up with that, right? You know.

And then he's telling me that he was interested in Yoruba practice and so forth. And then we were able to write. He called. We talked. And I showed-- he's been reading. He was studying this. So this is very interesting, right?

And so then he moved to Massachusetts. And so it's through him and others I got connected to the Restorative Justice Network. Right? And so we were communicating. I think I was in Cuba at the time. And he put me in touch with someone. And they want me to go to another prison to talk to a group of prisoners. But I thought I was going to visit with him as well.

And so I said, OK, I would do it. I thought this would be a couple of hours, like I'll come in the afternoon. I'll do it. And so the next thing I know, they said we have to be at the prison at 8:15. And then the people I was going with said, well, we got to meet at 6 o'clock. And then I was getting up at 4 o'clock. I said, yo, wait a minute. I only do that when I'm traveling, right?

And then I was there until about, like, 5 o'clock. It's like my whole day was gone. But this was so, so powerful, right, because it was the inmates themselves that was using this process of trying to address restorative justice along with the survivors-- women whose children, whose families were murdered by the same people.

AUDIENCE: Wow.

TONY VAN DER MEER: And I'm telling you, I was in tears. I was in tears that whole day, because I sat next to those women. And I sat next to the men who were talking about the murders that they committed. But it was-- you know why it was powerful, because they was trying to deal with the question of being remorseful and forgiving, but also recognizing that because you want to be-- you're looking for forgiveness, you want to grow out of what you've been through don't mean that someone's going to say, yeah, yeah, we forgive. That's a very difficult position. But the idea that they were dealing with an idea that the victims-- the survivors, excuse me, was going there and was being forgiving was very, very powerful.

That is the work that has to happen in terms of-- if we're going to change anything, we're going to have a imagination as to how we move forward. We have to deal with those who are the most vulnerable. And that is the victims, and that are those who have committed crimes. When we can transform that, then we can talk about having a different imagination about how we see society, because, you know, one of the interesting things about the hearing around Michael Cohen was that in terms of him admitting what he's done-- and you can see these other folks was they wanted to blame him but not blame the institutions, not blame the structure that allow him to do what he did, not even looking at-- so it was horrible.

So you can see that nothing was going to change based on what they're talking about, but until we begin to look at our own weaknesses and our own contradictions, right, and begin to work with people with a sense of values and ethics and our humanity, then we can move forward. Right? And so what's been even more disturbing that I can see my community in pain today because of this young woman, Jassy Correia, who was murdered this week in Boston. They found her in the back of a car. And then I hear this debate of so-and-so is to blame and this and this and that.

And the first thing I did this morning was call some people and say, we need a healing circle. Right? Because then we are going back to imagine like how do we deal with-- we need to punish so-and-so. We need to do this. That is not going to bring that young lady back. It's not going to bring her back. Right? And so you could hang him. You can cut his head off, whoever they got. And you can watch it. But you still can hurt.

And I'll end with this. One of the things I learned from these women survivors was that-- they say it over and over. They said hurt people hurt people. Healed people heal people. Right? So the question is how do we heal hurt people? And so for me and being in there and what really triggered things for me is that as a young man who witnessed the loss of my 12-year-old brother is that it's been 50 years, and that pain is still-- it lingers. It never goes away. But it's a question of what tools do you

use so that you don't get caught up in the system that is looking at a corrupt way of what justice is versus looking at a way of how do we begin to create justice and restorative justice in our society. That should be part of our imagination. Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

KYRAH MALIKA DANIELS: Good afternoon, everyone. How are you all doing?

AUDIENCE: Good afternoon.

KYRAH MALIKA DANIELS: It's wonderful to be here. And I just have to say, I am so honored to be joining this panel. Thank you so much to the organizers, Fatima, Jared. And special thanks to Christina for the warm invitation to be a part of this conversation. I feel like the work that we're doing really feels quite aligned on this panel. And I'm really grateful for my predecessors, if you will.

Today I am presenting on portraits of the divine Black feminine and Haitian Vodou in Black Panther. I'm going to be in a more conversational mode to dialogue with you a little bit about how I have incorporated some elements of teaching about divine Black feminine and Black Panther in my classes on Introduction to African and African Diaspora Studies. I'm going to speak about-- I'm going to introduce you all to four different spirits known as Haitian lwa, Haitian spirits.

From left to right, you have Lasirenn, the mermaid queen, Ezili Danto, the warrior mother, Ezili Freda, the lover and businesswoman, and Grann Brijit, queen of the dead. And these have corollary spirits in other African and African diaspora traditions, certainly the Yoruba-derived traditions. I'll be speaking very briefly about sort of the divine feminine as I call them from Black Panther. From left to right, we have Princess Shuri, Nakia, Okoye, and Queen Ramonda.

And I think it's really important to dialogue about these two sets of portraits of Black femininity and Black womanhood, because it allows us to sort of explode our understandings of what Black women look like and what our limitations are, to think more expansively about what does our imaginary of Black womanhood look like if we begin to conceive of what a Black divine feminine can be. What are the possibilities that that raises for us as people?

So I want to begin by introducing you a little bit to Haitian Vodou. It's a tradition based on healing, based on ancestral reverence, appreciation of a highest god, and many intermediary spirits. And I think one of the things that's important to note is that Haiti, like many other countries, probably arguably all countries exists in a patriarchal society. It is still very much a misogynist nation.

But within that nation, I think Haitian Vodou really offers women a great deal of opportunity for leadership. There's a great deal of empowerment that women feel when they are part of these religious communities. And there's also a certain understanding about a balance of power shared between men and women in Haitian Vodou communities. I argue that Haitian

spirits who are goddesses really allow us to expand beyond the understandings of Mary as just a virginal mother who is representative of matronly love, fidelity, and submission, but rather these spirits embody notions of love, work, anger, power, sensuality, sexuality, frustration, and need, right? I think this is something that's really interesting for us to think about is, what does it look like when spirits need us as humans to call their name, to invoke them, to remember their legacy so that they too can help us with our paths forward?

Karen McCarthy Brown, who's written a seminal text on Haitian Vodou states that the female lwa, especially the Ezili spirits-- and these are two of them here, Ezili Freda and Ezili Danto, serve as, quote, "mirrors and maps to understand Haitian women's social, cultural, and religious realities in Haiti and the diaspora." And I really love this term mirrors and maps, because it encourages us to think about these spirits as reflections of women in Haitian society as well as routes for women in society. They are known and understood to have fraught tension between the two of them. And I'll get into that in a minute.

But in essence, there is the sense that there is an ongoing rivalry that can never be resolved. And part of the reason that it can never be resolved is because each one needs the other. They cannot exist, in fact, without the other. And in many ways, this reveals some of the tensions that Black women, Haitian women experience within themselves. And in a lot of ways, the Ezili spirits along with other divine feminine spirits of Haitian Vodou remind us of the diversity of these divine female energies that live within all of us, so reminding us that, in fact, you may be made to a particular spirit. You may be chosen by a particular spirit. You may walk with a particular spirit, but, in fact, you carry all of the divine within you. And it's that plurality, it's that diversity that's important to recall.

So I'm going to introduce you first to Lasirenn, the mermaid queen. She's associated with La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre. She's considered to have a sister. Some people say a lover known as La Baleine, who is a figure also associated with the sea. And she is also known to be able to take people underwater to initiate them. So at times, people will come forward and say, I was initiated, but [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH] underneath the water.

And this would be a reference often to spirits such as Lasirenn, who have imparted mystic wisdom. All of a sudden, they know all of the salutations. They know all the songs. They know things that have been really guarded, protected knowledge that you would only learn in initiatory rites with a temple. And they present themselves. So she's someone associated with the mystic knowledge in the depths of the sea. She is married to Agwe, because Black women can have love too, even in the spirit world.

So I've created very short reflections based on my research with devotees in the community. I myself am also closely and intimately tied to the Haitian Vodou tradition. But also as creative interpretation. So queen of the seas, Lasirenn inhabits saltwater and fresh waters alike, and her husband is Agwe, the royal ship captain and protector of underwater treasures. Lasirenn comes blissfully, her face glowing with a shine from

the sea and the sun. And when asked, she performs divination with deserted shells at the bottom of the sea.

She dances as she embraces her children who live above water, folding them into her human arms as she swishes her tail gracefully, longingly. Lasirenn uses coral to comb her hair and fashions bits of tortoise shell as her pocket mirrors. She speaks in echolocation to send messages to her sister, lover La Baleine. Never seen without her prophetic mirror, she reveals how acts of reflection and recollection allow us to make ourselves anew.

Next is Ezili Freda. She is associated with Our Lady of Sorrows, Mater Dolorosa. She is considered to be a spirit of love, also of jealousy, of fortune, of wealth, and abundance. She is considered also to be a bit of a tragic figure. When often she comes in ceremony, she may weep. And it's understood that her imaginary of the world of being perfect and her expectations of humans is so great that inevitably she will be disappointed by humans' foils. And so often, she comes in ceremony and weeps.

Ezili Freda, lwa of loving affection and jealousy, spirit of fortune and chance, is a woman with many lovers but no master besides herself. A renaissance woman, she travels widely and speaks more than one language of love. She appreciates the finer things in life, including opera, aged wine, luxurious perfumes, and coral colored lipstick. Few people know that Freda trained as a professional dancer, and while she can tango, waltz, and Kizomba better than most, no one but her lovers know how much she enjoys a good [INAUDIBLE], pressed tightly against a new partner or a familiar love as they whisper dreams of fame and fortune in her ear.

A shrewd businesswoman, Freda doesn't trust men with her money, but rather has started her own me, the goddesses' informal loan club that rotates recipients for savings. From time to time, she secretly steals away to her grandmother in the countryside to seek advice for her next ventures. She is known to persuade lovers and business partners alike with a golden tongue and laughter that rings like bells, ever ready for champagne toasts in honor of her successes and those of devotees.

Next, we have Ezili Danto, a warrior mother considered to be the patroness of lesbians and also of queer men, considered to be somebody who takes care not only of her child and those of her sister, but also of all the children of the world. Ezili Danto brews strong herbal tea and takes her coffee black. Her house is deep in the woods, and it is here amidst the roots and the leaves that she performs ritual work.

In the evenings, you may find her seated in a rocking chair on the porch, a headscarf crowning her head, a pipe in one hand, and a story emerging like wisps of smoke from between her lips. It is said that Danto disguised herself as a man to enter battle during the Haitian Revolutionary War. And when her identity was discovered, the outraged soldiers sliced out her tongue for fear that she would betray them to the other side.

Ezili Danto bears these marks as two scars on her cheeks, and when she comes in ceremony, she does not speak, but rather clicks a silenced

phantom tongue. Ki-ki-ki-ki-ki-ki, ki-ki-ki-ki-ki-ki, ki-ki-ki-ki. Danto is Freda's dark-skinned sister who cares for her own children, as well as the children of her light-skinned sister. She engages in intimate relationships with men and women alike as patroness of women loving women. A fearless warrior and fiercely protective mother, a lover and justice seeker, Danto's love knows no bounds. And she embodies multifaceted aspects of Haitian womanhood, weaving together experiences of sexuality and motherhood.

And the last spirit I'm going to introduce you to is Grann Brijit, queen of the dead associated with the Irish Catholic saint, Saint Brigid. She's considered to be a prophetess, somebody who works closely with the dead as the guardian of them and who has a family of very rambunctious other spirits. Grann Brijit, queen of the Ghede Nation, sleeps with the Book of the Dead under her pillow and the Book of Life as the journal on her nightstand. Married to the boisterous spirit Baron Samedi, she is reserved but equally witty. She is known as a gifted clairvoyant with a mischievous sense of humor, as Ghede's children are always playing pranks. She weaves baskets for offerings to the dead and dresses royally in hues of purple, mauve, and maroon with flowing robes kissing her bejeweled feet and textured fabrics crowning her head.

The reason that I introduce my students to these particular divine spirits in a conversation about the harmful representations of Black women's stereotypes in the United States is because I think it provides a really helpful and stark contrast. So I will note that some of the images that come about are quite controversial. We're more familiar with these types of representations of Black womanhood in the media and in our everyday lives, the mammy, associated with the woman who was brought from the fields to feed not only her own children but the children of the master, who would not be suckled by the mother. Unfortunately this carries on in Aunt Jemima. Do not buy Aunt Jemima. Because she began as this mammy figure and has been dolled up in a sort of cute do. But this is her origin. Right? Her origin is as the mammy.

We're also perhaps familiar with the notion of the Jezebel, the sexually lascivious woman who is always tempting men and bringing them to their downfall, especially the case with Black men who are trying to stay a straight road and white men who might be really able to achieve power if they were not caught up with these lascivious women.

We're familiar, of course, with the angry Black woman sapphire as a figure who is a threat to men again trying to climb in the hierarchy, but also just a sort of disturbance and a nuisance in the community and society, one who causes trouble, who sounds the alarm at times and creates conflict wherever she passes. And finally the welfare queen, a figure whom we're very familiar with in this day and age in our political specter, the one who is always trying to extort from the state, take advantage of a system of beneficiary goods always at the expense of others.

And so I like to place these four really horrific stereotypes in conversation with Haitian lwa and whom we might identify as the sort of divine feminine Africana cast, because I think it provides us really helpful and fruitful discussions of what the experiences and what the

variety and diversity of Black womanhood could look like. So I'm going to show you a very short clip-- it's just one minute long-- of some of these figures from Black Panther. Oh. With the sound on. I do that.

[VIDEO PLAYBACK]

- --activated.

- Wait. Which side of the road is it?

- For Bast's sake, just drive.

- She embodies what the little sister should be in a movie like this. And she brings an aspect of T'Challa out that I love being able to show. You have the wisdom of the queen mother and the fact that she's on the council. There's a feeling that she doesn't necessarily agree with my decision to go get Klaw at this particular time. So there's a respect factor there. But then, you know, I'm my own man.

With Nakia, I love the fact that she has her own mind. And I have to deal with that as a man. Okoye allows you to have another dimension of how you operate, because she's so good at what she does that she's protecting me on another level. She's like another suit. This is a very rich experience in terms of the characters when you think about who's playing those roles. And being beside them every day, it's just-- it's fulfilling.

- To have these characters that reflect that-- you have Shuri, this young, spunky, tech-savvy woman leading Wakanda's technological charge, that's powerful. And it's a really important image for young girls to get.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

[END PLAYBACK]

KYRAH MALIKA DANIELS: It's gonna stop there. Subscribe, right? Capitalism.

[LAUGHTER]

At it's best. So as I'm winding down, I hope that it's helpful to think about the different ways that we can use some of these teaching tools in the classroom. Like my fellow panelists, I also have quite a lot of problems with Black Panther. Neck rings and lip plates, I think sometimes African-Americans, we have to be held accountable for our own imaginaries of what African civilization looks like. But I think in the example provided by Dr. Van Der Meer as well and thinking about the ancestral plane, this is a really wonderful way to introduce students to the importance of ancestral reverence, right? Ancestors are not gods, right? They did not create the universe. But how can you not honor those who came before you?

And to quote my fellow panelist Dr. Young in mentioning this notion of liberatory framework in this-- I think you called it the redemptive countermythology. I think what's really profound about these African indigenous traditions is that you are encountering a religious tradition



that existed before colonialism, right? And so what does it mean to encounter a set of diverse female spirits who embody these powerful notions of warriors as the Dora Milaje perform acts of service for the country, for the nation of Wakanda as Amazonian warriors?

This is a text that's created by filmmakers of a film called Ancestral Voices, Dalian Adofo and Verona Spence. They've created a film-- two films actually on African and African diaspora religions, which are really great teaching tools. And they've created some text to guide conversations through a discussion of the female presence particularly as a divine feminine presence in the film.

We can even think about the Oscars sweep as the divine feminine, right? So have Hannah Beachler awarded for production design and Ruth E. Carter awarded for costume design. These are really important conversations to have with students. I'll note that Ogunnaike actually has written-- Ayodeji Ogunnaike, who joined me today this morning in the earlier speech-- has written a fantastic article called "Managing Multiple Masculinities." I think that in the same way we're thinking about the complexities of what Black womanhood looks like to complicate our understandings of these horrible stereotypes, we ought to do the same thing for understanding the nuances of Black manhood.

And I'll end by noting that one of the things that's most integral to understanding the importance of all of these spirits is the notion of balance. This is a veve, a sacred symbol that's drawn on the earth to invoke spirits in ceremony. This is called Milokan. It is the integration of spirits. So you have Ogun, the warrior alongside Azaka, the farmer, alongside Ezili Freda, whom we were introduced to earlier, right? And so the understanding is that it is only by bringing the universe into harmony with the balance of these divine feminine and divine masculine energies that we will truly be able to call ourselves empowered and liberated. So thank you so much.

[APPLAUSE]

SPEAKER 1: Thank you so much, everyone. And we now have-- let's see-- just about 20 minutes for questions.

AUDIENCE: Thank you so much for the wonderful talk. Actually, if you don't mind, I'd love to hear a few of your criticisms of Black Panther if you got a minute, especially as it pertains to the portrayal of specifically Black Americans in the movie and how we think about the Black imaginary that might not include-- thinking about differences like you were saying between African and African-American and the difference between being, I don't know, maybe having a royal lineage versus being slave-descendant in the states and how maybe the movie might have troubled that, if that makes any sense. Thank you.

NIKKI YOUNG: Please.

TONY VAN DER MEER: Well--

AUDIENCE: Sorry.

KYRAH MALIKA DANIELS: We all have so much to say.

[LAUGHTER]

TONY VAN DER MEER: Yeah. So I think that-- I think that the main thing is, how do we look at-- you raised it, how we look at freedom and where does that leadership come from. And part of-- I mean, like, when you look at-- the question was is that, how did we get here? Right? How did Black people get to America to diasporas? And apparently there's been some contradictions in African society, right, for that to happen. And so what is it that we need to change? And how do we look at changing it from those who are at the bottom of that level of oppression?

And so if you deal with this more hierarchical understanding of how you want to get your freedom, then we're going to be waiting for people to come and free us as opposed to us all having agency to free ourselves around there. So Hollywood is not going to do that. I mean, I thought the Black Panther film was wonderful in many ways, but it's still another imperialist product. You understand? You know?

And so you are mixing these symbols. And it's also about co-optation right? So the whole idea of even Afrofuturism is good on one hand, but it's also a way of escaping, because, see, we got to fight. We got to struggle. And I don't care if you're the provost at Harvard University. I don't care if you're the President of the United States. It's that Black people have to struggle in order to be free, right? Otherwise you fall into a different mindset, a different model.

So, you know, Wakanda, beautiful, right? I got it. Right? But-- but, you know, we got to understand, right, is that our freedom is just not based on our freedom. Our freedom is based on everybody else's freedom. Right? So our freedom is based on the Afro-Venezuelans, the Afro-Cubans, and all Venezuelans, all Cubans, and the Afro-Colombians. You know? And all those folks who've been part of the diaspora, right?

And so we have to understand that, yes, I'm fighting for my freedom, but as long as somebody else is not free, I am not free. As long as there's a hierarchy, you know, I'm still not free. You know, we could do all the tokenism, all the symbols, and have all the Black Congresspeople, Black ba-ba-ba-ba ba-ba-ba-ba ba-ba-bup-bup. It don't mean anything if we still have the level of poverty, you know, the disaster that happens in these urban cities. We are not free. And so Hollywood is not going to show that. That's something that we have to do. And that's something you're not going to make a lot of money in doing.

NIKKI YOUNG: Well, I feel like now that Dr. Van Der Meer has invoked Audre Lorde, we can leave.

[LAUGHTER]

So I don't know what else there is to say, but I'm going to say something anyway. I really am glad that you introduced this critique question, because as an ethicist, there are two big things. Now, there are lots of

things, but there are two big things. The first thing is absolutely our treatment of Killmonger, right? So-- does he have another name?

KYRAH MALIKA DANIELS: I think that's kind of it.

NIKKI YOUNG: That's what the name is? OK. Because I didn't read the comic book. Don't tell anybody. But-- So you all talked about this a little bit this morning. But basically, sort of what the isolationism creates is a notion of re-marginalization. So what he experiences is a kind of othering that allows a first set of being a family to remain intact. So as a person who talks about family, I am first of all frustrated with the idea of the royal family being able to remain intact by eviscerating one element of itself, right? And then wondering why that self isn't upset. So instead of saying, you know what, let's wrap our arms around, let's have a healing circle, let's do something like that, what they say is, oh my gosh, we've got to destroy.

Now, it's not like Killmonger didn't come in there talking about hey, auntie, and let me take over your land, right? I'm not saying that he did the right thing. But I am saying that the response to what is obviously a significant family trauma is more sort of war-like like approaches.

KYRAH MALIKA DANIELS: Hurt people hurt, right?

NIKKI YOUNG: Absolutely. And that approach could have been totally different in a Black imaginary-- in a queer Black imaginary that sort of tries to repair the strictures of family. The other significant thing-- and I was really surprised at this at the end-- that if Wakanda as a context projects simultaneously a past and the possibility for a future that the only future that we could imagine was a capitalist future was like, wait, what? So the thing that would bring Wakanda into the world was its collusion with an imperial project? I was like, ooh. It was like eating a mango and it being rotten in the middle. Like--

[LAUGHTER]

I don't know. I heard we're having Jamaican food, so I'm just like-- but that idea was so disappointing as an imaginary and as a visual. I mean, because the big thing at the end, what is it, like a plane or a spaceship or something that's in the middle of Oakland? So the image that we see is also disappointing given the beautiful images of tradition and culture and innovation that we see in Wakanda.

Also I wish they wouldn't have gone back to Oakland. So it cannot be-- I don't know why this is about to make me cry. But it cannot be that the future is to redo the transatlantic move. It cannot be that we return to one of the spots, that we literally trace the same steps to go back to new places as sites of colonization to bring back money. Like, it seems like the cruelest form of retelling a story that we can imagine.

So those are some big things. Now, there's also some other stuff around, like, the very flatly imagined concept of gender. So I love that the-- what's the warrior--

KYRAH MALIKA DANIELS: Dora Milaje.

NIKKI YOUNG: The Dora Milaje. I love how powerful and physical and whatever. But that we only talk about that as an expression of a sort of masculinity that's adapted into femininity seems just like a really sort of flat and simple way of treating, like, Black womanhood in the film. Yeah. So I was disappointed in that. And there's more, but I want to hear what you have to say. So I'm going to stop talking.

KYRAH MALIKA DANIELS: I'll be brief. I feel like you all have highlighted such important components structurally. I think that my more major concerns were really just with the representation of Africa. I certainly understand the concerns about representations of African-Americans. In fact, it's very interesting. I recently facilitated a conversation between Black students at Boston College. And apparently they have this-- 21st century millennials. I'm like a different millennial generation. They have this enormous group chat of all the Black students on campus. It's only 200 of them, so it's not that large.

[LAUGHTER]

And they apparently had an explosion on the group chat when they started talking about Black Panther. And it was well, you all, meaning African-Americans, shouldn't be able to wear dashikis, because that's appropriating our culture. And the response was, well, you all-- African-Americans to African-descended peoples from the continent-- shouldn't even say the n-word because you weren't enslaved. And I thought, ooh. This is a lot to work with.

I actually find-- setting that aside for a moment, I think that there is unfortunately-- I think there remains a lot of distrust of the memory of what our African brothers and sisters did to us. Unfortunately, I know a lot of African-Americans were like, why would I go to Africa? They sold me into slavery, not understanding how much more complex that was. Yes, slavery existed in Africa. It was not racialized. It was not hereditary. And it was not chattel slavery. This is not to pretend that it did not have damaging effects, but nobody I think could have imagined the type of enslavement that was going to take place by the hands of Europeans when slavery looked so fundamentally different on the African continent.

And so I actually had more problems with the representation of Africa, the sort of amalgamation of, like, old Africans from just [INAUDIBLE] nations and from, again, the lip plates and the neck rings. Like, why is this our representation of Africans when this is like less than 1% of Africans who look like this? Why aren't they wearing more Nikes? Why aren't they wearing more-- OK, maybe not Nikes. Maybe the equivalent of Wakanda equivalent of Nikes, whatever it is, right?

I think that there are some ways in which I felt like African-American conceptions of what Africa looks like was really quite limited and very concerning to me. And I actually didn't think that Killmonger represented, like, all that is wrong with African-Americans. Ryan Coogler is African-American. I don't think he's going to be doing that to himself. I actually thought that Killmonger was so tragic as a hero because-- or, like,

antihero because of the trauma that he experienced as a child. And so those were some of my concerns.

TONY VAN DER MEER: And just real quickly, I mean, I think that what I would be interested in is, you know, in terms of the script itself and how to execute it and who has the authority to say this is-- let's do this, you know. And so it's the same thing when Manning Marable wrote the piece with Malcolm. It's like, well, who's publishing it? So we have to deal with who has the power to say let's go and who says, no, it's not going to go.

KYRAH MALIKA DANIELS: And I'll say just very quickly, I mean, it's also important to remember, Black Panther was not a Black story. Right? It was written by two Jewish white dudes in the 1950s, right? So even the sort of realization of this film exactly as you two have said exists within this capitalist framework of, like, the industry and the empire that is Hollywood. I think this is why it's so important not to sort of band Wakanda, you know, though we got our issues, but rather to think about how can we ensure that more Black writers, more Black playwrights, more Black directors, producers, more costume designers are at the forefront so that various narratives can be told, so that more future imaginaries can be actualized and realized.

TONY VAN DER MEER: And I wanted to say this, but it just went somewhere. The idea that the way that we are looking at the film the Black Panther when we have Black Panthers and their families who have been devastated by the US government and even Black Panthers who are still incarcerated and that people don't even know about them.

NIKKI YOUNG: True.

TONY VAN DER MEER: Right. And then how do we begin to link that, because the whole idea of the Black Panthers was a co-optation of what was going-- you create another imaginary of what's going on versus the fact that people, young people, were saying, we gonna throw down to get our freedom by any means necessary. But if that is wiped out, then the young people that you're talking about and the young people that we all deal with, they have no notion of that.

KYRAH MALIKA DANIELS: Yeah. And they're fighting over who gets to wear a dashiki.

TONY VAN DER MEER: That's right.

KYRAH MALIKA DANIELS: Right.

NIKKI YOUNG: That's right. Yeah.

AUDIENCE: Check.

[LAUGHTER]

So we've been talking about issues of negative imagination, positive imagination, critiquing those, representation. I'm curious if you have any

thoughts on identity politics in the current political time in the presidential election and this issue between who's being-- the representation versus real platforms and policies. I don't know if you could put these two together, sort of like realpolitik imagination with this, like, Black Panther critical analysis.

TONY VAN DER MEER: So I think that-- well, I don't want to speak too fast, but that a teachable moment was missed around the Michael Cohen hearing. And I think-- some people brought some issues out, but I think Congressman Meadows really put his foot in his mouth. But I think the real issue is there'll be some changes in terms of what the policies are, but is that the change that we really need or the change that we really want?

And so we keep looking for the next charismatic person to be president or the next-- and we're not looking internally in terms of the local communities. Tip O'Neill said that all politics is local. So where are the local people's assemblies developing platforms based on what it is they want and what they need? And so we'll go into 2020 with the same thing. And it's like, well, will it be a Black woman this time, right? Or will there be a Black gay male person this time? Will it be a White woman?

Versus what is the platform? How is that going to deal with the structural changes that need to happen? How is it going to adjust the inequalities and the gaps in our society, right?

So I've been working the past 10 years with people, real radical people, who wasn't trying to get paid to get honorariums and meeting in different places and spending their time trying to put together a freedom manifesto to look at the question of Black liberation and Black freedom and how we need to build assemblies. But what happens is that you've got to go through all the different problems that we have to sort of get there.

There are some examples, particularly maybe in Mississippi, Alabama, particularly after the election of Chokwe Lumumba of people trying to develop a new-- having assemblies, trying to build a new economy and new-- trying to decolonize thinking and so forth. Those are things that we have to look at, but we get caught up with all this other minutia, you know, versus what is it that we have to do, because they are not the answer. They're not the answer. We need a new society. We need a new world.

Whenever Elizabeth Warren assembles other Democrats to talk about let's go after Venezuela, you know, uh-uh. Right? And who has the courage to speak on that? You understand? So I think that we have to begin to look at how we go after defining what freedom means for us, and how do we organize for it? And how is it going to be democratic, you know, and inclusive and not just male-oriented? You know, we have to look at the total perspective on how we go forward. And that's a difficult struggle that we have to undertake.

NIKKI YOUNG: I think the Freedom Project is a-- so not this Freedom Project. I believe in that Freedom Project. I think that, like, the liberation project is sort of always facing failure, because-- so not that we can't be free, not that liberation is impossible. But it's always facing failure because we somehow think that our individual and communal

experiences of freedom are going to happen through the liberation project, that, like, political liberation project.

KYRAH MALIKA DANIELS: Yes.

NIKKI YOUNG: And it's not.

KYRAH MALIKA DANIELS: Yes.

NIKKI YOUNG: Right? It's not going to work like that. Now, our individual and collective-- like, our community, us getting free and all the ways that that sort of speaks to our subjectivity, et cetera, et cetera, can contribute to the liberation project and vice versa. But one doesn't-- it's not going to create the other.

So I was thinking about Kamala Harris, and-- so I was reading about, like, [INAUDIBLE]. He's like, all right, what's she talking about for real? And I was-- so there's this section, I was like, all right, what's she saying for the queers, right? What's the LGBT folks got?

And she argued several years ago against these trans folks being able to have what they need, right? And her response, as I'm sure you all know, was I had to argue against it because of my job. And I was like, oh, you don't need to run for president, because your job is going to be to maintain American liberal democracy. And what American liberal democracy is going to do for sure is devastate us all. So, you know, like, those two things can't go together.

And I think the question of identity politics wrapped up in there is, but I do want Blackness. I do want womanhood. I do-- but not at the cost of--

KYRAH MALIKA DANIELS: Right.

NIKKI YOUNG: Not at the cost of our freedom, right? And not certainly for somebody's job. And I know what the job is, you know, which also means that I'm not depending on the presidency to liberate us.

TONY VAN DER MEER: We have a question right here.

AUDIENCE: I just wondered if you all could comment about the young lady-- I think she was the apparent heir's sister-- and her technology. You know, I can't remember exactly-- I didn't really understand. There was some machine she kept going to.

KYRAH MALIKA DANIELS: You're talking about in Black Panther?

AUDIENCE: Right.

KYRAH MALIKA DANIELS: Oh, Princess Shuri, The little tech sister?

AUDIENCE: Right. I'm wondering if you see some symbolism in that being with, you know-- since we have some [INAUDIBLE].

NIKKI YOUNG: Your conversation earlier was good on that.

KYRAH MALIKA DANIELS: Oh, yeah. Yes?

AUDIENCE: Sorry, this is going to have to be our last question, because our next panel [INAUDIBLE].

KYRAH MALIKA DANIELS: Yeah, I mean, I think I agree with Lupita Nyong'o-- Lupita, if I may be on a first name basis with her-- when she states that it's a really important visual for young Black girls to see other Black women as bosses, quite honestly in, yes, a world that is increasingly becoming sort of technocratic. I personally feel like we need to be very cautious about the ways that we can get sucked into the sort of digital vortex of isolationism. There are all these studies right now indicating that while people are more digitally connected than ever, many people, particularly in the West, are feeling more isolated than ever, are feeling less heard because they've become obsessed with more likes and more tweets and more retweets and da-da-da-da-da, right? And basing our sense of value and worth in how many likes you get is, I think, quite dangerous. And this sort of endless scrolling I think is equally concerning in terms of being unable to be present, to be still, to be quiet, to be uncomfortable in an awkward moment and to own that and to sort of work with that as opposed to constantly moving to our phones.

But that said, I think that that's what religion can offer us. And I think that honestly that's what these African and African diasporic religions can offer us-- comfort with discomfort, the ability to take a moment and be still and be quiet. And even recognizing that, I still think that it's really important to see these types of representations of Black womanhood, because it's one of many, right? If that were the only Black woman in the movie, I'd be very upset, right? But because there's also a love interest who is not primarily a love interest, who also has her own sort of agenda and objectives, though it could be more full-- because there is a mother figure, because there's also a warrior, I'm feeling more pleased. It's one of the first films that we've seen that has at least four archetypes that aren't Jezebel, mammy, sapphire, and welfare queen, right? And so I think expanding our representations of Black womanhood can only help to serve us even if we remain critical of the ways that technology can kind of envelop us and silence us.

TONY VAN DER MEER: And I think the question is also not getting caught up on what they're showing as technology, but also begin to deal with spiritual technology and women representation and their process. You know, for example, in Yoruba tradition, when you go to Cuba, it's that it's usually very male-oriented in terms of when you look at those who become-- you know, who can deal with Ifa, for example. You know, whereas in Nigeria, you have Iyanifas, which is also a new phenomena. It does exist, but it's becoming more prolific, right?

But the real shift is right in the diaspora where you're getting more women who are becoming Iyanifas, who can do the very same thing that men can do, right? And so that is a very important piece, because there is a spiritual technologies involved that could help people deal with the kind of transformation they need to deal with. And so it's how we begin to look at what technology actually is. So--



SPEAKER 1: Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

[MUSIC PLAYING]