

Can the Migrant Speak? Ethnic Accents in *Black Panther* and the Quadruple Consciousness of African Immigrants in the United States

by

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African immigrants in the United States have to continue counting the lenses through which they view themselves in their adopted home, drawing from and expanding on W. E. Du Bois's idea of double consciousness. For those coming from predominantly black or brown cultures and populations, most immigrants of African descent realize that their skin color becomes a point of contact in how they are viewed and judged. Their former lives were shaped largely by tribalism and nationalism but now they have to factor in their skin color as an everyday determinant of how they act and live.

The impact of myth in society can never be overrated.¹ Unfortunately, the twentieth century saw a global availability of Western myth aided by the invention of television, film and internet. This proliferation led to the wrongly propagated stereotype of “the West saves the rest.” For many years, children growing up in Africa envisioned heroes as mostly costumed white men. This being the case, the recent box office success of *Black Panther* has been a welcome reprieve. The film not only allows black viewers to see themselves in the protagonist on screen, it generates various social and political issues worthy of our attention. Key among them is the interaction of African Americans and Africans and, in light of *Black Panther*, the quadruple consciousness of black African immigrants in the US.

Prior to recently migrating from Africa, many view the United States as an opportunity to fulfill their aspirations for financial prosperity and self-actualization thanks to the United States' genius in advertisement.² However, upon arrival they realize that yes, you can scrap a living in the country, but it has a complex relationship with dark-skinned people. Soon, it dawns upon them that the words of William Edward Burghardt Du Bois still ring true. Analyzing the predicament of being black in America, Du Bois observed that one exists in “a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others.”³ This measuring of oneself through the lens of whiteness and blackness became popularly known in the early twentieth century as double consciousness. However, in the twenty-first century, Brent Edwards examined this idea and interjected, “Just two [lenses], Dr. Du Bois, we are forced to ask today? Keep counting.”⁴

The Africans in the diaspora have to keep counting. They view themselves not only through the lens of blackness and whiteness but also through the lens of nationalism and ethnicity. They have a quadruple consciousness. As one friend recently mentioned, “I never knew I was black until I came to America.” Such a statement captures the reality of many African immigrants. For these, who formerly lived in a predominately black society, race consciousness and unwelcoming spaces were not an everyday reality.

Living away from their countries of birth, Africans in the diaspora are both T’Challa and Erik “Killmonger.” T’Challa and Erik are first cousins who grew up in vastly different circumstances: T’Challa in the prosperous country of Wakanda and Erik in the slums of Oakland, California. Although their life experiences are vastly different, both are leaders in their own capacity who seek human flourishing. Erik seeks to correct historical wrongs through brutal force. He wants to use the power and resources of Wakanda to ‘liberate’ blacks throughout the world. Like Erik, African immigrants experience a society that seeks to alienate them because of their skin color. They have to learn to live with a new consciousness specifically tied to their blackness. For instance, owning a car is a form of prestige in Kenya. When one drives it, especially in the village, one is met by adulations for such an accomplishment. Not so in the US anymore where one learns to drive with a sense of despair in the case they are stopped by the police. Such immigrants, although relating internally to T’challa’s outlook toward the US, are to a certain degree experiencing life like Erik did. However, they are not fully “Killmonger.”

For most, America is a means to an end, namely to bring about economic flourishing. This explains why many immigrants remit finances back home to help their families and extended communities. For instance, the Kenyan community in America sends back home approximately two billion dollars annually.⁵ This money is a vital aspect of the country’s economy. Most Kenyans invest in their country of birth and some move back upon retirement. The Africans in the diaspora continue to retain a nationalistic identity tied to their nations of birth. This explains why a movement such as “#Blacklivesmatter” did not receive much traction from first generation Africans. To them, America is not “truly home.”

This way of thinking has continued to be a point of tension between African-Americans and recent immigrants from Africa. The latter, having no prior prolonged prejudice directed to them, think of themselves as the “exceptional blacks.” This thinking is passed on to second-generation Africans. Contrary to their parents, they are a step further from fully identifying with Africa yet they still embrace their parents’ nationalistic pride that seeks to shield them from the negative realities of a system that does not fully embrace blackness.

This thinking has been clearly captured by Onoso Imoagene in her recent book *Beyond Expectations*. However, all blacks in the country need to forge a better symbiotic camaraderie that promotes human flourishing. The rivalry of T'Challa and Killmonger ought not to characterize African and African Americans in the country.

In a stroke of brilliance, *Black Panther* made African accents an acceptable means of communicating in Hollywood. T'Challa, speaking in a quasi-Zulu accent, reigned on the box office for more than five weeks. Although Chadwick Boseman is not the first African American to speak with an African accent on film, he did it with a rare mastery and was supported by a cast of many African actors. This was a departure from the past where it has been painful to watch and hear most African accents on film. They are usually employed as a comic relief, unwittingly implying that anyone who speaks with such an accent is not to be taken seriously. Not so with *Black Panther*. The film gives hope to African immigrants that they too can speak intelligibly without having to mask their accents as an unfortunate disability.⁶ *Black Panther* has shown us that the migrant can indeed speak!

Furthermore, the film celebrates the existence of robust relationships amongst blacks. This has not always been the case in Hollywood. Although many observers of the movie have hailed the physical and technological advancements in Wakanda as the epitome of the script, relationships in the city are incredible as is evidenced by T'Challa and his sister Shuri. They both exhibit beautiful affection and loyalty. The necessity of community for flourishing is essential. Immigration uproots Africans from their immediate society and usual rhythm of life, bringing them to a country where they have to work unusually long hours to make a living and navigate individualism. This had led to despair amongst some people. They move from an enchanted world to a disenchanting one. The film's celebration of relationships amid economic and technological advancement is an encouragement to African immigrants that they don't have to abandon *Ubuntu*.

Black Panther performs a powerful myth that is key for the flourishing of Africans in the diaspora. Uprooted from their countries of birth, African immigrants have to navigate a country that does not always treat them kindly. They have to navigate a quadruple consciousness as they seek to establish themselves as fruitful citizens. *Black Panther's* celebration of African values and way of speaking goes a long way to encourage Africans in the diaspora. The migrant can speak and this is the personal key to flourishing!

Endnotes

¹Richard Purtill, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Myth, Morality, and Religion* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984).

²Bitange Ndemo, a social critic in Kenya and former minister for communication, captures this optimism in a newspaper column. Bitange Ndemo, “In the Land of Opportunity, African Immigrants Veer Closer to the Poverty Trap.” *Nation*, November 2, 2015. <https://www.nation.co.ke/oped/blogs/dot9/ndemo/2274486-2939340-124go0gz/index.html>

³W.E.B Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: New American Library, 1969), 45.

⁴Brent Edwards, *W.E.B Du Bois: The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), xv.

⁵Central Bank of Kenya, “Diaspora Remittances,” <https://www.centralbank.go.ke/diaspora-remittances/>.

⁶Larry Madowo, a leading Kenyan journalist is of the opinion that he cannot identify with *Black Panther* because of the prevalence of generic African accents. Madowo’s view captures the reality in Kenya where ethnic accents are often used to taunt various tribe. This shames those who speak in such a way. Larry Madowo, “‘Black Panther’: Why the Relationship between Africans and Black Americans Is So Messed Up.” *Washington Post*, February 16, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2018/02/16/black-panther-why-the-relationship-between-africans-and-african-americans-is-so-messed-up/?utm_term=.b6c1751b6d43.

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