

The Perception of Africa as a Monolith in Western Film

Reflections on the African-American Psyche

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Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie describes the danger of a single story in her TED Talk, and expresses that if all she knew about Africa were from popular images, she, too, would think Africa was a place of scenic beauty filled with inarticulate people in need of saving from infectious disease and senseless wars. For decades, we have seen images of Africa that depict a swarm of primitive people living like animals on a perpetual safari. Compared to the initial portrayal of Africa as the dark continent, there has been a more progressive representation of the continent in Western media, specifically in film. However, there is still a retrograde attitude toward Africa in its portrayal as a monolith in films. African American filmmakers often create films that derive their physical setting from Africa, indicating how this retrograde attitude consumes them and influences the narratives they project in these films and hence, the knowledge they disseminate through them. While narratives have evolved from using the continent as a monolithic landscape for white savior stories or scenes of turmoil, I argue that even the progressive depiction of Africa in Western film is still a monolith and that this reflects the African-American psyche regarding the continent. In this essay, I will discuss how the representation of Africa as a monolith in film and the broader African American community's affinity with that imagery reflects their presumptive familiarity with the continent. I will expand on African Americans' view of the continent as an antithesis to the oppressive society in America and will discuss their belief in blackness as an overarching identity. I will discuss how this is because of their need for a black people paradigm, manifested in Blacktopias or allegorical fantasies such as Zamunda and Wakanda.

Firstly, to briefly define key terms employed in the main arguments, a monolith is a group of people who are all the same. For example, Africans are often thought of as being the same, and the continent as a whole is perceived to be one single

entity. Presumptive familiarity is the affinity with an idea based on one's limited engagement. For instance, African Americans are likely to have their own, more complex set of preconceptions about Africa, inferred more from Hollywood films than personal experience.¹ An antithesis is a contrasting or opposing idea. A "black people paradigm" is an archetype or ideal society presented in the concept of a Blacktopia. Subsequently, a Blacktopia is defined as a society outside of the terror of racial oppression where the African identity is welcomed and celebrated. Finally, the African American psyche refers to the beliefs or perceptions upheld by the African American community and signifies how large the gap between "African" and "American" is.²

Next, to fully conceptualize how the depiction of Africa as a monolith reflects the African American psyche, one must examine the site of these productions from which the main arguments will be based. *Coming to America* is a 1988 American romantic comedy film written by African American actor and producer Eddie Murphy, who also plays the lead character. In the movie, Akeem Joffer, the prince and heir to the throne of the fictitious African country Zamunda, is discontented with being pampered all his life. The final straw comes when his parents present him with a bride-to-be he has never met before, trained to obey his every command mindlessly. Akeem concocts a plan to travel to America to find a wife he can both love and respect and who accepts him for his personality, not his status. The second film explored in this paper is *Black Panther* which tells the story of T'Challa, the heir to the throne of Wakanda, a fictional African kingdom³. T'Challa returns to Wakanda after the passing of his father to assume the throne in his due place. T'Challa's resolve as king and as Black Panther is put to the test when he is lured into a struggle that threatens the future of Wakanda. The young king must gather his supporters and unleash Black Panther's full strength to fight his enemies and ensure the safety of his people when faced with deceit and peril. Together, these two artifacts will be the narratives used to provide evidence of the main contentions in this paper.

To move on to the first argument, Western film's presentation of Africa as a monolith demonstrates how Western stereotypes have influenced African Americans' presumptive familiarity with Africa. To relate this claim to a narrative, along with telling a comedic love story, the film *Coming to America* aimed to dispel preconceived notions about Africans by glamorizing Africa. However, it capitalized on stereotypes of the African continent. The film employed Westernized narratives to create the fictional African Kingdom, Zamunda, that Africans in the diaspora can identify. However, this was achieved through presenting imagery that would gain

1 Steve Rose, "Black Panther: Does the Marvel Epic Solve Hollywood's Africa Problem?," *The Guardian*, February 3, 2018.

2 Rose, "Black Panther".

3 Rose, "Black Panther".

the representational legitimacy of Western audiences.⁴ The primitiveness depicted in *Coming to America* is far removed from the reality of modern-day Africa, but is similar to the Western perception of Africa as a wild and exotic wonderland.⁵ This demonstrates the duality seen in the imagery as it aims to appeal to the African American community while appeasing Western audiences. African Americans reinforcing the concept of a unitary Africa reflects their Westernized conception of the continent. It has resulted in their presumptive familiarity with Africa and their affinity with the monolithic idea of Africa. However, this is not the true reflection of the continent and its nuances.

To further this discussion, African Americans' presumptive familiarity with the monolithic image of Africa in films reflects the part of their psyche that sees Africa as an antithesis of America. African Americans live in a society where they must conform and emphasize the degradation of the African identity.⁶ Hence, Africans have believed that assimilating into American culture entails erasing all traces of Africa and that doing so necessitates accepting discriminatory principles.⁷ Still, in their efforts to assimilate and conform, they continue to have a dual experience of being American but have a void of not feeling entirely accepted by American society because of their African identity.⁸ Thus, Africa offers a place where African Americans can freely fill that void. This Afro-futuristic Africa was seen in the film *Black Panther*, which depicted an empowered African society as a cultural oasis. Wakanda was construed to stand in for the whole of Africa, as seen in the representation of various cultures, languages, and tribes from different regions of the continent, reinforcing the idea of Africa as a monolith. While this gave Black people the representation they needed and have not found in America, the issue lies in the fact that contrasting the US and Africa means placing them side by side as opposing but equal entities. This is problematic because America is a country, while Africa is a whole continent of 54 countries, each with its own cultural diversity and nuances.

In the same line, films set in Africa rarely portray authentic settings as the narratives are often based on allegorical fantasies such as Wakanda in *Black Panther* or the fictional kingdom of Zamunda in *Coming to America*. An allegory is a narrative that can be interpreted to represent meaning with moral significance. In the case of Zamunda, the glamour of the cultures in the kingdom represent the fascinating culture of the whole continent, lacking discrepancy between different cultural groups. Therefore, generalizing Zamunda's culture and riches to reflect the affluence and heritage of the entire continent perpetuates this monolithic image

4 Samuel K. Bonsu and Delphine Godefroit-Winkel, "Representing Africa in the 'Coming to America' Films," *Markets, Globalization & Development Review* 6, no. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.23860/mgdr-2021-06-01-04>, 7.

5 Bonsu and Godefroit-Winkel, "Representing Africa," 3.

6 Adaobi C Iheduru, "Examining the Social Distance Between Africans and African Americans: The Role of Internalized Racism," *Theses and Dissertations*, 2012, 10.

7 Iheduru, "Internalized Racism," 10.

8 Iheduru, "Internalized Racism," 11.

of Africa. In the case of Wakanda, the technological advancements in the kingdom represent the success of African resource utilization and innovation independent of Western exploitation. Although this is a progressive portrayal, its depiction is still unitary, which is not reflective of the reality of the many impoverished African countries that experience neo-colonialism and hence do not have access to the imagery portrayed in the film. African American filmmakers make this depiction hoping to shift the narrative of a destitute Africa. However, it is still reflective of their monolithic perception of Africa.

To develop the aforementioned argument, the antithesis of Africa imagined by African Americans reflects their need for a black people paradigm in the form of a blacktopia. *Black Panther* continues a tradition of constructing blacktopias, societies that thrive beyond the reach of white supremacy.⁹ One of the many effects of slavery on the African American people is that it destroyed a substantial part of their African culture.¹⁰ Hence, the aspiration for home or freedom was central to their folksongs, and Africa symbolized liberation from captivity and slavery.¹¹ Africa became a place where one could be black and proud and was perceived to be the land of the free.¹² The constructed narrative of an African country consisting of various cultures derived from different African regions (Xhosa language, Sotho Attire, Ugandan architecture, etc.) into a single blacktopia reflects a part of the African American psyche that views Africa as a homogeneous entity of vast culture, and harmony. This is not a negative perception of Africa, as the imagery reflects a developed Africa that represents collective ingenuity and beauty. However, it is still a monolithic representation that negatively influences the presentation of an authentic African to the world, as it has its distinctions.

Lastly, the representation of Africa as a monolith in the Western film reflects the part of the African American psyche that sees Blackness as an overarching identity. Beyonce's *Black Is King* is a film that aims to inspire pride in Blackness and among Black people worldwide. However, it is replete with stereotypes about the African monolith that persists in causing harm to the audience it is intended to inspire.¹³ Keita Kadiatou argues that Beyonce's *Black Is King* film correlates Blackness to a Pan-African concept that lacks nuance in its portrayal. African Americans minimize the diverse African cultures to an aesthetic they can employ for rapport within the African American community, reinforcing the idea of Blackness as an all-encompassing culture.¹⁴ The distinctions of the elements such as countries,

9 Gina M. Eckhardt, "Black Panther: Thrills, Postcolonial Discourse, and Blacktopia," *Markets, Globalization & Development Review* 03, no. 02 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.23860/mgdr-2018-03-02-06>, 6.

10 Imoh Abang Emenyi and Imo Okon, *African in African American Psyche - A Movement from Reality to Text*, Harvests From The Gown, vol. 2 (Lagos: FlyPapers Printing House, 2014), 416.

11 Emenyi and Okon, "African in African American Physique," 417.

12 Emenyi and Okon, "African in African American Physique," 416.

13 Kadiatou Keita, "The Black Monolith: A Critique of Beyonce's Black Is King," *DOWN MAGAZINE*, October 7, 2022, <https://downatnyale.com/the-black-monolith-a-critique-of-beyonces-black-is-king/>.

14 Keita, "The Black Monolith."

cultures, and traditions that make up the African continent are minimized to aesthetic representations that merge and exploit African cultures. However positive the image of regal African culture shown in the film *Black Is King* is, it is still a monolith of stereotypes such as animal prints perpetuating a primal image and random face or body paint. These images have no cultural meaning other than an aesthetic that African American audiences can appeal to and from which White audiences can be appeased.

In closing, the progressive representation of Africa in Western film is still a monolith, reflective of the African-American psyche regarding the continent. Films in Africa are often set in blacktopias or allegorical fantasies that intend to represent the whole continent, such as those depicted in *Black Panther* and *Coming to America*, reinforcing the unitary perception. While African Americans have aimed to overturn narratives of the continent as a monolithic landscape of discovery or suffering, they have formed a superficial representation of African culture through these Blacktopias. This superficiality reflects African Americans' presumptive familiarity with Africa, their view of the continent as an antithesis to the conformist and oppressive society in America, and their belief in blackness as an overarching identity. Western films have made strides in their narratives based in an African setting. Now the issue here is nuance, as tying Blackness to a Pan-African idea by depicting Africa as a monolith is harmful to the very people it aims to uplift. Some of the implications of my argument is that the monolithic representation of Africa is reflective of the audience that filmmakers actually intend to inspire. The imagery depicted in films such as *Coming to America*, *Black Panther*, and *Black Is King* is made for entertaining the African American community to embrace elements of their African identity more than it is made to represent, let alone empower African audiences. African Americans seem to only engage with the affluent, regal elements of their African identity but not the mundane actuality of everyday life because it is not as entertaining to them. Hence, the African identity has to be constructed to depict prestige or regality to be celebrated and can not be accepted as just another facet of identity. The perceived issue is that this imagery serves an epistemic function in that it forms the basis for which audiences gain knowledge. Western audiences still suffer from ignorance regarding the continent and all too readily assume that fiction and fact coincide. Therefore, it is imperative that narratives based in an African setting fully encompass the distinctive and diverse nature of the continent but also illustrate the normality of the continent and its experiences.