

Walking the Colour Line:

A Comparative Analysis of Double Consciousness in African American Characters in
Movies Between the 1960s and the Present

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Abstract

W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of double consciousness is the phenomenon of a sense of two-ness, a double identity that exists in African Americans. This double consciousness arises from being black in a white dominated society. This research has looked at the historical context of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement and Black Power Movement, and the current-day Black Lives Matter Movement in order to analyse the concept of double consciousness in *A Raisin in the Sun* (1961) and *Black Panther* (2018). This research has found that the historical context influences the self-identity and double consciousness of African American characters in *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Black Panther*.

Keywords: Double consciousness, W.E.B. Du Bois, African American identity, Civil Rights Movement, Black Lives Matter Movement, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Black Panther*.

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INTRODUCTION

In an essay titled “The Conservation of Races”, published in 1897, W.E.B. Du Bois first asked himself the following set of questions “Am I American or am I a Negro? Can I be both? Or is it my duty to cease to be a Negro as soon as possible and be an American?”¹ In *The Souls of Black Folk*, published in 1903 DuBois continued to philosophise about these questions he asked himself. In his work, Du Bois argues that the black American individual has a double consciousness: that of a black person and that of an American person - a white person. “One ever feels his twoness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder”.² This sense of two-ness that constantly plays a role in the identity of the African American.

Many scholars have concerned themselves with the concept of double consciousness, both inside the United States as well as outside of it. The academic discussion on double consciousness is still ongoing. Frantz Fanon, like Du Bois, describes the experience of being black in a white-dominated society. In his *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon dives into the psychology of feeling this otherness - this two-ness. Fanon states that black people have a certain ‘third-person consciousness’, for the world of the white man they live in doesn’t include them.³ Du Bois and Fanon, have both described what it feels like to experience this sense of two-ness, but neither of them give an explanation or cause of this phenomena that reaches beyond simply existing within a white-dominated society. In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Paul Gilroy discusses the existence of one universal black culture which transcends both the structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity, in what he calls the Black Atlantic.⁴ Gilroy argues that this universal black culture exists because of the African diaspora – a common experience which links people of African descent all over the world.

Whereas Gilroy argues for a sense of universality, this research adds a time-bound and location-bound component. It looks specifically at the impact of the historical context of

¹ W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Conservation of Races,” in *The Negro Academy Occasional Papers* no. 2 (Washington, DC: The Academy, 1897): 5-15, 11.

² W.E.B Du Bois, “Of Our Spiritual Strivings,” in: W.E.B. Du Bois (ed.), *The Souls of Black Folk*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 9-24, 12.

³ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, (London, 1982 [1952]), 83.

⁴ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 19.

the United States on the self-image of African American characters in movies that deal with Du Bois' concept of double consciousness. It hopes to answer the following question: How does the historical context influence the self-identity of African American characters in movies from the 1960s compared to movies from the present?

This research will focus on African American characters in two movies on the black experience, one in the 1960s and one in the present. The decision to focus on these two periods was made because important developments occurred in American society that influence the black experience. African-American history is rich and complicated. Therefore, this research will focus solely on movies about the black experience in the United States. The selection of movies consists of *A Raisin in the Sun* (1961) for the 1960s and *Black Panther* (2018) for the present. These movies have been chosen on the criteria that a) they deal with double consciousness b) are located in the United States (for at least a part of the movie, or that the United States is a relevant place for the characters and c) take place in a time frame that is relevant to the selected time periods. The aim of this research is to see how one's surroundings can influence one's perception of self. Thus, this research aims to find out how the events of the 1960s and the present are reflected in the African American characters in the selected movies. It is important to note that this research does not claim universality and that the results are specific to the selected movies.

To answer the research question, a decision on how to analyse the characters and their identity in these movies had to be made. Certain cultural markers of black identity have been selected and will be used to analyse the black identity of the characters in the movies. This is because the characters are not verbally expressing their feelings of this double consciousness. Therefore, physical attributes and cultural exclamations that the audience can see will be used in order to draw conclusions. These markers entail a) physical appearance including hair, clothing and other possible physical aspects; b) expressions of traditional African culture like dance and music; c) the use of language: African American Vernacular English (AAVE); and d) the importance of heritage which entail links to a person's country of origin and their links to enslaved ancestors).⁵ The markers of black identity will be used to analyse *A Raisin in the Sun* (1961) and *Black Panther* (2018).

It is important to note that movies are not a reality. Although movies can be very accurate representations of reality, they are first and foremost an artistic expression of the vision that the film's director has. The directors, writers and actors all portray the issues at

hand in a way that they want the audience to see and experience them. Films are quite literally designed to create an experience for the viewer.⁶ However, this does not rule out the fact that movies often do represent a wider trend in society. The stories, themes, values or imagery of certain films and genres can very well harmonise with public attitudes.⁷ Films are often firmly tied to their context. This could be because movie makers are interested in specific issues that they concern themselves with and thus, choose to bring this issue to the audience's attention by showing it in their movies. It could also be that the movies' producers have an idea on what messages might be well-received by their audience, based on both instinct and seeing a general trend in important societal issues that their audiences concern themselves with. Perhaps, it could even be the case that the producers unknowingly add certain messages in their films, but that the audience relates these to contemporary issues, so that the success of a film's convention of popular issues is simply what the audience felt while watching the movie.⁸ Studying film in its social context is often called a 'reflectionist' approach, for the assumption is made that films reflect social attitudes.⁹ This research will thus be a reflectionist analysis of film, for it aims to look at how greater trends in society regarding black people are reflected in film. In this research, black markers of cultural identity that can be found in African American characters of these movies will be analysed in order to see if they reflect the historical context in which the movies have been created. For these black cultural markers, too, it is important to note that they are there because those involved in making the movie have planted these markers and have thus chosen for these markers to be seen by the audience.

The first chapter will focus on the period of the 1960s. It will discuss the most important moments for black people in the United States in the 1960s, such as the Civil Rights Movement, to give a historical background to the movies that will be analysed in this first chapter. Subsequently, the first chapter will look at *A Raisin in the Sun* (1961) and analyse how the historical context of the time in which this movie was created and released influences the presentation of black identity in the main characters. The second chapter will look at the Black Lives Matter Movement, which carries on the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement. The second chapter will then study *Black*

⁶ David Bordwell, Thompson, Kristin and Smith, Jeff, *Film Art: An Introduction*, (2020), 2.

⁷ Bordwell, Thomson and Smith, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 338.

⁸ Bordwell, Thompson and Smith, 338.

⁹ Bordwell, Thompson and Smith, 339.

Panther (2018) and analyse how the present influences the self-identity of African American characters in the film.

CHAPTER I: THE 1960S

This chapter focuses on the period of the 1960s and will briefly discuss the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement. Hereafter, this chapter will analyse the film *A Raisin in the Sun* (1961) which is directed by Daniel Petrie. This analysis will focus on the black cultural markers that can be seen in the film. Moreover, the analysis will examine how the historical context of the 1960s has influenced the sense of black identity and double consciousness in *A Raisin in the Sun*.

From Jim Crow to the Civil Rights Movement

The 13th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution which Congress passed on January 31, 1865 marks the official abolition of slavery in the United States at the end of the Civil War. The abolition of slavery did not mean the end of the oppression of black people in the United States. The white population of the former Confederate states in the south instated the Jim Crow laws to enforce racial segregation after the end of the Reconstruction era in 1877. Jim Crow legislation was enforced until 1965. The Jim Crow Laws ensured the separation between Caucasian people and black people in every public sphere in the United States. The constitutionality of these Jim Crow laws was upheld by the U.S Supreme Court decision in 1896. In 1892, Homer Plessy got on a “whites only” car on a train. He then refused to move towards a “coloured” car on the train and was arrested. In 1896 the case was taken before the U.S. Supreme Court. In the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* case, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled the “separate but equal” doctrine. This doctrine entailed that racially segregated facilities were constitutional on the condition that these facilities were equal to one another regardless of race.¹⁰ The separate but equal doctrine remained in place during the first half of the 20th century.

However, from the mid-1950s through the 1960s, black people started banding together to fight this racial segregation. This organisation of black people actively working towards change in the political and the social spheres of life was called the Civil Rights Movement. The 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown vs Board of Education*, ruled that segregation in public schools was unconstitutional, and dealt a lethal blow to the “separate

¹⁰ David W. Bishop, “Plessy vs. Ferguson: A Reinterpretation,” *The Journal of Negro History* 62, no. 2 (1977): 125-133, 126.

but equal” doctrine.¹¹ The Civil Rights Movement emphasised non-violent protest. Rosa Park’s refusal to give up her seat on the bus to a white person in 1955 caused black people in Montgomery, Alabama to boycott the busses for 381 days. One of the most defining moments of the movement was Martin Luther King Jr’s March on Washington on August 28, 1963, where he delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech near the Lincoln Memorial, in which King expressed his dreams of true equality for all people regardless of their skin colour. In 1964, the Civil Rights Act was passed, which prohibited discrimination in public accommodations and publicly owned or managed facilities, in programs receiving federal financial assistance and by employers and labour unions.¹² Furthermore, the Civil Rights Act also banned discrimination in voting.

From the Civil Rights Movement sprung another movement, namely the Black Power movement, which existed alongside the Civil Rights Movement. At the core of the Black Power Movement, as opposed to the struggle for equal rights in the Civil Rights Movement, lay the idea of black empowerment. This black empowerment, according to Peniel. E. Joseph, called for a “redefined black identity that connected black Americans to a national and global political project based on racial solidarity and a shared history of historical oppression.”¹³ At the founding rally of the Organisation of Afro-American Unity, one of the most prominent figures of the Black Power Movement, Malcolm X, said the following words: “We must recapture our heritage and our identity if we are ever to liberate ourselves from the bonds of white supremacy”.¹⁴ The Black Power Movement saw black identity as being vital to the liberation process of black people. In the same speech, Malcolm X declared that black people would reach their freedom, justice and equality “by any means necessary.”¹⁵ Thus, differentiating the Black Power Movement from the Civil Rights Movement, for “by any means necessary” does not align with the peaceful non-violence protest of the Civil Rights Movement.

¹¹ Gwen Bergner, “Black Children, White Preference: Brown v. Board of Education, the Doll Tests, and the Politics of Self-Esteem,” in *American Quarterly* 61 no, 2 (2009): 299-332, 299.

¹² “The Civil Rights Act of 1964.” *Harvard Law Review* 78, no. 3 (1965): 684-96, 684.

¹³ Peniel E. Joseph, “The Black Power Movement: A State of the Field,” in *The Journal of American History* 96, no. 3 (2009): 751-76, 753.

¹⁴ Malcolm X, “Speech at the Founding Rally of the Organisation of Afro-American Unity,” transcript of speech delivered at the Adoubon Ballroom, Manhattan, NYC, June 28, 1964, <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/speeches-african-american-history/1964-malcolm-x-s-speech-founding-rally-organization-afro-american-unity/>.

¹⁵ Malcolm X, “Speech at the Founding Rally of the Organisation of Afro-American Unity, June 28, 1964.

Black Panther Party, founded in 1966, embodied the spirit of the Black Power Movement. Amy Abugo Ongiri discusses how the Black Panthers used African American cultural identity as a tool in their fight for equality. She states that the classic Black Panther look with the leather jackets, black berets, black pants and guns created a visual statement that represented the ideologies of the Black Power Movement.¹⁶ Furthermore, she states how the Black Panthers portrayed African American culture as a powerful and beautiful object for identification.¹⁷ The 1960s saw the birth of the Black Arts Movement, which focused on authentic blackness and how this continues to be the “predominant mode for understanding African American identity and culture.”¹⁸ The Black Arts Movement saw the flourishing of the black arts.

The hypothesis for this first chapter is that the cultural markers of black identity that are shown in *A Raisin in the Sun* become more emphasised, and that, moreover, these markers of black cultural identity will be shown as positive features of the African American characters’ identities. The expectation is that softer aspects of African American cultural identity such as the use of AAVE and physical appearance will stand out the most. This aligns with the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement, as these movements promoted the importance of discovering one’s identity as African Americans.

A Raisin in the Sun (1961)

A Raisin in the Sun (1961) is the movie adaptation of a play of the same name which is written by Lorraine Hansberry. With *A Raisin in the Sun*, Lorraine Hansberry became the first black woman to write a play which opened on Broadway, on March 11, 1959. The movie adaptation, directed by Daniel Petrie, was first released in May of 1961. For the play to be turned into a movie the playwright insisted on writing the screenplay for the movie herself. Hansberry wrote *A Raisin in the Sun* based on personal experience from when her family moved into a white neighbourhood.

Lorraine Hansberry named her play after the Langston Hughes poem, “Harlem,” published in 1951, in which Hughes discusses the oppression of African-Americans and their seemingly unattainable dreams. The theme of the poem “Harlem” is reflected in *A Raisin in*

¹⁶ Amy Abugo Ongiri, *The Cultural Politics of the Black Power Movement and the Search for a Black Aesthetic*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009): 73.

¹⁷ Amy Abugo Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness*, 87.

¹⁸ Amy Abugo Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness*, 92.

the Sun. The movie discusses themes such as African-American identity, class and the values that lie at the heart of the black family. Set in Chicago of the 1950s, the movie follows the black, working-class Younger family as they receive 10.000 dollars from a life insurance policy after the family's paternal figure passes away. The family members all have their ideas regarding what they want to use this money for. Lena Younger, the family matriarch, wants to buy a house and finally move out of the one-bedroom apartment that the family shares. The house Lena eventually ends up buying with the money is located in a white neighbourhood, which causes some necessary tension among the family members about their future. One of these family members is Lena's daughter, Beneatha Younger who is an aspiring doctor.

Physical Appearance

The way one dresses and wears their hair is a means of expressing oneself. Moreover, the way people look and express themselves through hair and clothing can often be traced back to their culture. It can show whether one identifies with a specific cultural movement or ethnic group. The women in *A Raisin in the Sun* all have relaxed hair. This is a physical marker showing that they are assimilating to American culture. They wear their hair in the same fashion as the American, white women. Comedian Paul Mooney said the following: "If your hair is relaxed, they are relaxed. If your hair is nappy, they are not happy."¹⁹ Nappy hair is a signifier of otherness, and the dreaded constructs of colonialism that come with it, states Joi Carr.²⁰ When African American women wear their hair relaxed, they can blend in with more ease, for their hair no longer is another factor that sets them apart.

Not only do the female characters wear their hair like the white American women do, they also dress like them. None of the African American characters wear traditional African clothing in their day-to-day life. Only Beneatha plays around with traditional Nigerian robes in one scene. This, however, is but one moment in the movie, and Beneatha is never seen wearing the traditional clothing again after that short moment in which she plays dress-up.

The physical appearance of the characters in *A Raisin in the Sun*, thus signifies assimilation to the western American culture, instead of expressing their African American identity through their physical appearance.

¹⁹ Joi Carr, "The Paraphernalia of Suffering: Chris Rock's Good Hair, Still Playing in the Dark," in *Black Camera* 5 no. 1 (2013): 56-71, 63.

²⁰ Carr, "The Paraphernalia of Suffering," 63.

Expressions of Traditional African Culture

In the film, Beneatha Younger dates two men. One of them is George, an African American man who does not feel much for African culture. He is quite assimilated to American culture. He dresses wears suits and speaks in Standard American English. The other man Beneatha dates, Mr. Asagai, is of Nigerian descent and is very proud of his culture. Beneatha asks Asagai to teach her about Africa, because she is “looking for her identity.”²¹ Mr. Asagai gifts Beneatha traditional Nigerian robes, which he had his sister sent for. Beneatha is taken away by the beauty of the robes and happily wraps them around her body, which Asagai laughs at for she does not know how to do it properly. After being shown how to wear the robes properly, Beneatha prances around the room pretending she is the queen of the Nile.²² Asagai gives Beneatha records of Nigerian music as well. Beneatha dances to this by doing a traditional dance that the village’s women would do to welcome the men back from what is assumed to be the hunt. Beneatha unsure what the men are coming back from but she is more than happy to welcome them back with a traditional African dance. Walter Young, Beneatha’s older brother joins her in dancing to the traditional African music, whereas Ruth, Walter’s wife, and Lena think the two must have lost their minds.

Beneatha tries to express her African American side more by actively showing an interest in traditional expressions of African culture such as music and dance. She consciously tries to connect to this part of her identity in an attempt to merge both her African American identity and her American identity. Her brother Walter happily joins her in this expression of traditional African culture, however, both Lena and Ruth do not want to be associated with the scene and even show some kind of discomfort at the Beneatha and Walter’s enthusiasm. A general consensus among the Younger family does not exist when it comes to the expression of traditional African culture. Ruth and Lena seem to be much more assimilated to American culture relative to Beneatha and Walter are.

²¹ Daniel Petrie dir., *A Raisin in the Sun*, (Hollywood, CA: Columbia Pictures, 1961): 00: 37:30.

²² Petrie, *A Raisin in the Sun*, 01:52:53.

Use of language: African-American Vernacular English (AAVE)

African-American Vernacular English (AAVE), or Black English is a dialect with unique grammatical structure, pronunciation, and vocabulary.²³ AAVE is vastly different from Standard American English in its approach to grammar. For researchers of AAVE the central question about the origins of AAVE has been whether AAVE evolved from a prior creole language or whether its roots are solely to be found in English.²⁴ It must be stated that a general consensus has not been reached on the answer of this question. Regardless of this fact, the use of AAVE proves an interesting marker of black cultural identity in *A Raisin in the Sun*. Languages are essential important to one's cultural identity. Mary B. Ziegler states that "AAVE contains a rich depository of language factors" which are used by the African American community to express a "cultural self."²⁵

One of the most common, and instantly noticeable features of AAVE is the use of negative inversions. The characters in *A Raisin in the Sun* use AAVE. Examples of this are "I don't think I never seen me no African before."²⁶ and "Well, something always told me I wasn't no rich white woman."²⁷ These are but two examples of the many negative inversions, and signs of AAVE, used by the Younger family members. Throughout the movie, the continuous use of AAVE is an indicator of black culture which increasingly becomes very clear. As previously stated, Ziegler, mentions how AAVE is an important way for African American communities to express part of their culture.²⁸

The Younger family seems proud to be using AAVE, or at the very least, comfortable with their use of it. They use AAVE when speaking to one another, but also when they are speaking to other African American characters in the movie. This shows that there is a sense of general understanding and connection between the African American characters. This ties in with Gilroy's theory of the Black Atlantic, where the African diaspora created a similar

²³ Salikoko S. Mufwene and John R. Rickford, "Introduction," in *African-American English: Structure, History and Use*, eds. Salikoko Mufwene et al. (London: Routledge, 1998): 1-7, 2.

²⁴ Darin Howe, "Negation in African American Vernacular English," in *Aspects of English Negation*, ed. Yoko Iyeiri (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2005): 171-203, 172.

²⁵ Mary B. Ziegler, "Something to Shout About: AAVE as a Linguistic and Cultural Treasure" in *Sociological and Historical Contexts of African American Vernacular English*, (2001): 169-186, 169.

²⁶ Petrie, *A Raisin in the Sun*, 00:33:00.

²⁷ Petrie, *A Raisin in the Sun*, 00:20:34.

²⁸ Ziegler, "Something to Shout About," 169.

experience for black people and helped them create a transnational cultural identity.²⁹ Thus, the African American characters in the film create a sense of community with other black characters by using AAVE. Interestingly, the Youngers still use AAVE when speaking to the only white character that appears in the movie. None of the Younger family members adapt their speech to a whiter way of speaking when addressing this white character. The use of AAVE is a clear expression of the African American identity of the characters in *A Raisin in the Sun*.

The Importance of African Heritage

Although the audience can see Beneatha grow more and more interested in African culture and Africa itself throughout the movie, there is ultimately a limit to the extent of her own interest and determination in discovering the black side of her own identity. What is interesting about Beneatha's interest in Africa is that it is solely based on Mr. Asagai's personal experiences and what he tells her about Africa, or more specifically, his home country Nigeria. It is unknown to the audience in which African country the Younger family's ancestry lies, nor does the audience know whether the Youngers themselves have any clue as to where specifically their ancestors came from. Beneatha approaches Mr. Asagai herself to learn about Africa. She tells him: "I should very much like to talk with you about Africa. You see, Mr. Asagai, I am looking for my identity."³⁰ However, the viewer never sees Beneatha look for her personal link with Africa. She merely has a general interest in African culture, at least in what Mr. Asagai can tell her about Africa. Near the end of the movie, Asagai asks Beneatha to go back to Africa with him. Beneatha refuses because she does not want to conform to the idea Asagai has of a typical African wife. She wants to explore her African identity and learn about it, but she has the consciousness of an American woman nonetheless. The American woman in Beneatha does not want to give up her education and her dream of becoming a doctor to move to Africa and be expected to be subordinate to her husband.

This is where Beneatha's sense of double consciousness really comes to the fore. Du Bois points to a strife within the African American individual of "longing to merge his double self into a truer self".³¹ Beneatha tries to explore the African American side of her

²⁹ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 19.

³⁰ Petrie, *A Raisin in the Sun*, 37:30.

³¹ Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 13.

identity throughout the movie, but eventually find herself being torn and having to side with one identity more. She wants to learn about her African heritage, but she does not want this to interfere with her American dreams of going to school and making a career as a doctor. Beneatha is interested in what Africa has to offer as long as it is not at the expense of her American identity. Beneatha tries to merge both of her identities into one, just like Du Bois describes as a strife of African American individuals, but she eventually has to decide on which side of her identity she holds dearer.

Conclusion

The hypothesis for this first chapter was that the historical context of the 1960s would emphasise the markers of black identity shown in *A Raisin in the Sun*, and that these markers of black cultural identity would be shown as being positive features of the African American characters' identities. The expectation was that the softer cultural markers like the use of AAVE and physical appearance would be most prominently depicted in *A Raisin in the Sun*.

The analysis of *A Raisin in the Sun* has shown that the cultural markers of black identity in the African American characters are mostly similar for each character. They all have American hairstyles, wear American clothing and speak using AAVE. Unexpectedly, the physical appearance aligned more with the characters' American side of their identity, than their African American side. However, the prediction of the use AAVE coming forth most prominently was correct. When addressing both black and white people, the Youngers use AAVE, showing their comfort with expressing their African American identity. Their American appearance shows the American side of their double identity.

Remarkably, the characters in the film do not experience double consciousness to the same degree. Beneatha struggles with her double identity more than her family members. The markers of expressions of traditional African culture and the links to African heritage are shown almost exclusively in Beneatha, as she tries to discover her African American identity. She eventually decides not to fully explore this because she would have to give up her American identity. Beneatha answers Du Bois' question of whether it is possible to be both an African American and an American simultaneously with a no. She cannot find a balance for her double identity and decides to express one.

The findings from the analysis of *A Raisin in the Sun* are aligned with the historical context of the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement since they emphasised

the expression of black cultural identity. In the 1960s, African Americans were beginning to discover what it means to have a double identity. This is why the audience sees Beneatha Younger start flirting with the idea of Africa, but never fully pursuing her African American identity. She is just beginning to explore what it means to be African American, leading her to most prominently show softer aspects of black cultural identity.

CHAPTER II: THE PRESENT

This chapter focuses on contemporary issues regarding black people and the struggles they still face today in the United States. It will first discuss the modern-day Black Lives Matter Movement and its meaning for black people in the United States, in order to provide the reader with the necessary context needed to understand the film discussed in this chapter. Following this, this chapter will analyse *Black Panther* (2018) and analyse it by examining the markers of black cultural identity. The aim of this chapter is to examine the influence of the events of the era on the self-identity and the sense of double consciousness in the African American characters.

#BlackLivesMatter

The Black Lives Matter Movement, like the Civil Rights Movement, concerns itself with the dream of equal rights for black citizens in the United States. Despite the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and the election of Barack Obama, the first black president in the history of the United States in 2009, black people in the United States are still not considered equal. In almost every aspect of life, black people seem to have the shorter end of the stick. The Jim Crow era has officially ended, but residential segregation remains an important factor in the African American experience.³² Moreover, the percentage of a neighbourhood's black population is significantly associated with the perception of the crime problem in that neighbourhood, say Lincoln Quillian and Devah Pager.³³ Furthermore, African Americans have higher unemployment rates than other ethnic groups in the United States.³⁴ Academic outcomes for African American children are vastly different compared to their peers with different ethnic backgrounds. For example, African American children have less access to high quality, early childhood education opportunities, are more likely to be suspended or expelled than children for other ethnic groups and their graduation rates are among the lowest

³² Lincoln Quillian, and Devah Pager, "Black Neighbors, Higher Crime? The Role of Racial Stereotypes in Evaluations of Neighborhood Crime," in *American Journal of Sociology* 107, no. 3 (2001): 717-767, 717.

³³ Quillian and Pager, "Black Neighbors, Higher Crime?," 718.

³⁴ Thomas A. LaVeist, "Segregation, Poverty, and Empowerment: Health Consequences for African Americans," in *The Milbank Quarterly* 71, no. 1 (1993): 41-64, 41.

of any subgroup in the United States.³⁵ African Americans are incarcerated in state prisons at a rate that is 5.1 times the rate at which whites are imprisoned.³⁶ Moreover, in twelve states out of fifty-one states, more than half of the prison population was black in 2014.³⁷ The systemic inequality of African Americans causes high tensions between the black population in America and the authorities. One particular example of this is the use of excessive violence against black people by police officers.

On February 26, 2012, 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was walking through a Florida neighbourhood when he was shot and killed by 28-year old George Zimmerman. After hearing that Zimmerman, the murderer of a young innocent black boy, was acquitted, three black female organisers, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi invented the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag in 2013 to draw attention to the matter. Ever since, the Black Lives Matter Movement has fought against the disproportionate police violence against black people.

Eric K. Arnold states that the Black Lives Matter Movement has been at the forefront of what has frequently been called a new Civil Rights Movement.³⁸ The Black Lives Matter Movement has similar goals to the Civil Rights Movement, but it infuses fresh urgency into discussions around race in America.³⁹ The Civil Rights Movement and the Black Lives Matter Movement both stem from different, systemic issues that are at hand in the United States. The Civil Rights Movement emerged from the systemic oppression of black people in America through the Jim Crow legislation, whereas the Black Lives Matter Movement stems from the systemic devaluation of black lives in America in all domains of life.⁴⁰ They started from different needs, but they share the same ultimate goal: equality for black people. The Black Lives Matter Movement is a militant approach. The movement does not want to waste any more time, it demands equality.

³⁵ Tyrone C. Howard, "Why Black Lives (and Minds) Matter: Race, Freedom Schools & the Quest for Educational Equity," *The Journal of Negro Education* 85, no.2 (2016):101-113, 102.

³⁶ Ashley Nellis, "*The Color of Justice: Racial and Ethnic Disparity in State Prisons*," (Washington, DC: The Sentencing Project, 2016): 1-25, 4.

³⁷ Nellis, "The Color of Justice," 3.

³⁸ Eric K. Arnold, "The BLM Effect: Hashtags, History and Race," *Race, Poverty & the Environment* 21, no. 2 (2017): 8-15, 10.

³⁹ Arnold, "The BLM Effect," 10.

⁴⁰ Aldon Morris, "From Civil Rights to Black Lives Matter," in *Scientific American*, February 3, 2021. Accessed June 11, 2021 from <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/from-civil-rights-to-black-lives-matter1/>.

The hypothesis for this chapter is that, because the Black Lives Matter Movement is more militant and more forceful in demanding equal rights for black people in the United States, the expected outcome of the *Black Panther* analysis will be that the softer aspects of cultural identity, such as the use of language and physical appearance will still be shown, but they will not be emphasised in the way that the marker of the importance of African heritage is. This is because the Black Lives Matter Movement focuses on the systemic oppression and devaluation of black people which can be traced back to the moment Africans were from of Africa.

Black Panther (2018)

Black Panther (2018) is directed by Ryan Coogler. It is the first movie in the Marvel Cinematic Universe to have a black superhero as the main character. Moreover, the movie has a predominantly black cast and is directed by an African American director. *Black Panther* protagonist, T'Challa, returns to the isolated nation of Wakanda to succeed his recently deceased father as king of Wakanda. To the outside world Wakanda looks like an underdeveloped African nation, but since Wakanda was never colonised it still has its natural resource, vibranium, which they keep hidden. The Wakandans want to protect their natural resources. T'Challa is tested as the new king when his cousin, Erik Stevens, tries to steal the vibranium and reveal Wakanda's secret to the world. Erik grew up in the slums of Oakland, California and his experience in life is entirely different luxury lifestyle T'Challa has. Erik lost his father at a young age because of a personal conflict between his father and T'Challa's father. Erik discovers the real reason behind his father's death and chooses to avenge him. The analysis of *Black Panther* will focus on Erik's character.

Physical Appearance

When Erik finds out the real reason why T'Challa's father killed his father he becomes a mercenary operative. In *Black Panther*, he wants to avenge his father's death and use Wakanda's wealth and resources to help black people worldwide liberate themselves from the bonds of white supremacy. Erik's feelings of connectedness with black people worldwide can be tied in with Gilroy's theory. Gilroy argues that the "colonial experience", which includes slavery, colonialism, racial discrimination, can be identified as one of the reasons for

synthesis in black cultures.⁴¹ In *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy argues how the African diaspora is essential in creating a black culture and a black identity, for this is a common denominator that connects black people all over the world.

Erik has lived his life in preparation for the ritual combat he needs to win become king of Wakanda and gain the powers of the Black Panther. Klaue, Erik's accomplice tells him that he can scar himself as much as he would like, but that he will just be an outsider to the Wakandans.⁴² Klaue refers to the scarification on Erik's body, where each scar represents a kill he has made as a mercenary operative. Scarification is similar to tattooing, as it marks something on the body. It involves cutting or making an incision into the skin, and then allowing the wound to heal, which leaves a permanent scar.⁴³ Scarification can show a relation to ethnicity, age and gender in African tribes.⁴⁴

Erik has more than one physical marker that is a tribute to his African American identity. Another one is the fact that Erik wears his hair in a traditional African protective hairstyle called twists.⁴⁵ Erik deliberately chooses not to make his hair look like that of white American men. His decision to wear a traditional African hairstyle is a conscious decision shows that he is comfortable expressing the African American side of his identity in his physical appearance.

Erik's style of clothing, on the other hand, is very American. His American way of dressing forms a stark contrast with the Wakandans and their traditional tribal African clothing. After winning the ritual combat against T'Challa and being crowned king of Wakanda, Erik stops wearing American clothing. Erik's determination to become king of Wakanda influenced his decision to lose his American way of dressing and instead dress like the Wakandans. One could then assume that Erik does not feel upset about letting go of that particular part of his American identity, if it means he can finally rule over Wakanda. This thus suggests that retaining this American part of his identity is not more important to him than ruling over Wakanda. When relating this back to Du Bois' concept of double consciousness, one could conclude that Erik's African American identity is not fixed.

⁴¹ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 195.

⁴² Ryan Coogler dir., *Black Panther* (Hollywood: Marvel Studios: 2018), 01:03:29.

⁴³ Olatunji Ojo, "Beyond Diversity: Women, Scarification and Yoruba Identity," in *History in Africa* 35 (2008): 347-374, 368.

⁴⁴ Ojo, "Beyond Diversity," 368.

⁴⁵ Tiffany Nicole Peacock, "African American Hair and Beauty: Examining Afrocentricity and Identity Through the Reemergence and Expression of Natural Hair in the 21st Century," (2019): 1-148, 1.

Whether Erik feels more like an African American or an American can change depending on the context and the situation he might find himself in.

Erik's physical appearance shows the two sides that make up Du Bois' concept of double consciousness. From this, one could not conclude whether he sides more with his African American or his American side. But it does clearly show the two-ness that exists within Erik's identity. The only physical aspect that shows the American side of Erik's identity, namely his clothing style, is quickly traded in for traditional African wear when he finds himself in a position where dressing like the Wakandans is beneficial to him. Erik's physical appearance is mostly an expression of his African American side, but the fact that the Wakandans see him as an American signifies his two-ness, for they do not see him as one of their own. Erik is an African American and American and he expresses both identities in his physical appearance.

This contrasts with the physical appearance of the African American characters in *A Raisin in the Sun*. Each member of the Younger family has fully assimilated their appearance towards American culture. They have "white hair" and wear American clothing. Erik, however, shows clear signs of African American identity in his physical appearance. This aligns more with the context in which *Black Panther* was created, as the Black Lives Matter Movement does not focus on establishing African American identity.

Expressions of Traditional African Culture

The previous section already discussed the scarification on Erik's body, which is a physical expression of traditional African culture. This physical expression of traditional African culture is not the only one that can be found in Erik's character. Although there are no expressions of traditional African culture in the form of dance or music, Erik does show expressions of traditional African culture by performing traditional African rituals. The Wakandans have multiple rituals that encompass the becoming of the Black Panther such as the ritual fight and the drinking of the heart shaped herb to gain the powers of the Black Panther. The ritual fight, called a Donga, is performed by the Ethiopian Mursi tribe.⁴⁶Erik participation in these rituals thus show expressions of traditional African culture in his character.

⁴⁶ Shinta Andriani Sere, Muarifuddin and Fina Amalia, "The Representstion of African Cultural Identity in *Black Panther* Film by Ryan Coogler (The Application of Stuart Hall's Theory)," (Kendari: Halu Oleo University, 2019): 1-10, 5

Beneatha's character in *A Raisin in the Sun*, shows a playful curiosity for traditional African dance and music and flirts with the idea of Africa by learning how to dance to the rhythmic African music. Erik expresses traditional African culture by performing in rituals but he takes this much more seriously than Beneatha does. This shows that Erik's African American identity is more established, and holds a more significant place in Erik's character than it does in Beneatha's character.

African American Vernacular English (AAVE)

Many non-standard varieties of English, like AAVE, use *ain't* to negate a sentence.⁴⁷ The use of *ain't* in African American Vernacular English can occur in the negative form of *have + not*, *be + not*, and *do + not*, both in the present and past tense.⁴⁸ The use of *ain't* is the preferred use of negation over the use of a negative form of *be* in African American Vernacular English.⁴⁹ Examples of Erik's use of AAVE are "*I ain't worried 'bout the money bro.*"⁵⁰ or "*You ain't the son of a king. You the son of a murderer.*"⁵¹

For Erik, AAVE is his native tongue, because he grew up in Oakland. Nonetheless, Erik does know and speak the language the Wakandans speak. The people of Wakanda communicate using Xhosa. Erik can understand the Wakandans perfectly fine in their native tongue, but he continues to speak in his AAVE dialect nonetheless.

Erik does not seem to compromise the integrity of his African American identity when speaking to the Wakandan tribe elders. He could address the Wakandan tribe elders in their own tongue, but makes the decision not to do so. Erik's refusal to speak in Xhosa even though he masters it adds comedic value to the scene, which is done in true Marvel fashion, and be seen as a conscious decision made by the director. Nonetheless, Erik's determination to continue speaking in AAVE tells the audience that Erik is comfortable with expressing his African American identity in front of the Wakandans. Although Erik is of Wakandan descent and wants the Wakandans to acknowledge him as such, he does not give up part of his

⁴⁷ Jack Sidnell, "Outline of AAVE Grammar," (2002), 19. Accessed June 11, 2021 from https://cdt.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Outline_of_AAVE_grammar_Jack_Sidnell_2002_1_Afr.pdf.

⁴⁸ Darin Howe, "Negation in African American Vernacular English," 174.

⁴⁹ Howe, "Negation in African American Vernacular English," 176.

⁵⁰ Coogler, *Black Panther*, 01:02:10.

⁵¹ Coogler, *Black Panther*, 01:15:49.

African American identity in order to achieve this. Retaining his African American identity is just as important to him as partaking in the Wakandan tradition.

Erik's persistence in using AAVE aligns with the findings on the use of AAVE in *A Raisin in the Sun*. The Younger family members continue speaking in their AAVE dialect when speaking to white people, just like Erik continues to speak in AAVE when addressing the Wakandans. In both movies, the use of AAVE is an essential part of the characters' identity as African Americans, and the characters choose to retain this part of their identity regardless of what situation they find themselves in. Thus, from the 1960s to the present, the use of AAVE is still a marker of black identity that is shown in movies.

The Importance of African Heritage

Erik has a good knowledge of African culture, and Wakandan culture in particular. In the beginning of the movie we first meet him in the British Museum. One of the employees at the museum tries to tell him about the traditional African masks and weapons displayed at the museum. As Erik corrects her about the origins of the weapon, saying it is Wakandan because it is made of vibranium. Erik steals the vibranium weapon. This scene shows the audience that Erik is in touch with his own African heritage. He knows his home country's cultural objects to such an extent that he can denote which objects are Wakandan and which objects are not.

Erik moreover shows the audience the importance of his African heritage by saying the following words right before his death.: "Bury me in the ocean with my ancestors that jumped from the ships. Because they knew death was better than bondage."⁵² These eerie and sad words are actually a reference towards the few captured Africans who managed to break free from their bonds on the slave ships as they were journeying across the Atlantic. These captured Africans who managed to escape jumped into the ocean as a suicide act, for they could not bear to deal with the future that lay ahead of them when the slave ship would dock in the United States.

Erik's knowledge of his personal heritage and the Wakandan culture shows a stark contrast with Beneatha Younger in *A Raisin in the Sun*, who has no knowledge of her personal lineage to Africa. Rather, she merely flirts with the idea of Africa as a whole through what Asagai shows her. Erik is thus much more aware of what it means to be both

⁵² Coogler, *Black Panther*, 01:57:57.

African and American, and as a result expresses this two-ness more than Beneatha does, considering that she finds herself in the beginning stages of exploring her double identity. Moreover, *Black Panther* directly refers to slavery, whereas there was no such reference in *A Raisin in the Sun*. African American identity is far more established in the present than in the 1960s. The Black Lives Matter Movement is thus able to shift the focus away from establishing an African American identity and towards destroying the systems that keep inequality for black people in the United States intact. The Black Lives Matter Movement acknowledges that the current systems of oppression and inequality for black people finds its roots slavery, hence direct reference to slavery in *Black Panther*.

Conclusion

The hypothesis for this chapter was that, because the Black Lives Matter Movement is more militant and more forceful in demanding equal rights for African Americans, the expected outcome of the *Black Panther* analysis would be that the softer aspects of black identity, such as the use of AAVE and physical appearance, would still be shown, but they would not be emphasised in the way that the marker of the importance of African heritage would be.

As expected in the hypothesis, the cultural marker of African heritage comes to the fore the strongest in Erik's character. He is knowledgeable in his African heritage, and expresses that the history of his enslaved ancestors is vital to his African American identity. Erik's physical appearance is both African American and American. He dresses American, but his body's scarification and his black hairstyle signify his African American identity. Expressions of traditional African culture seen when Erik partakes in the necessary rituals to become king of Wakanda.

This analysis has shown that Erik's identity and thus his double consciousness is not fixed. Whether Erik feels more like an African American or an American is subject to change based on the context and situation he finds himself in. He is willing to give up some parts of his American identity when it is beneficial to him. His physical appearance combines his African American and American identity. The scarification on Erik's body and his black hairstyle signify his African American identity. Erik dresses like an American but gives this up from the moment he becomes king of Wakanda. Contrastingly, the use of AAVE is not something Erik is willing to give up. Certain elements of his double identity are retained throughout the movie, whereas others are dropped. Erik seems comfortable with having a

double identity for he worries not about expressing both of his identities to the same degree at all times. Du Bois described the wish of the African American to merge their double identity into a single, truer self.⁵³ Erik still has a double consciousness, but he has found a balance within this double consciousness that works for him. This is something Beneatha Younger was unable to accomplish in *A Raisin in the Sun*.

The impact of the historical context of the present shines through in *Black Panther's* direct approach to depicting African American identity by emphasising the marker of African heritage and slavery. This emphasis on African heritage matches the militancy and the urgency which can be felt in the Black Lives Matter Movement. The present shows the progress that has been made in the process of self-identification, compared to the 1960s. The present shows that an established African American identity, compared the discovery of African American identity in the 1960s. Erik shows that his African American identity is established and that he has found a working balance between both of his identities.

⁵³ Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 13.

CONCLUSION

This research has analysed how the historical context influences the self-identity and double consciousness of African American characters in movies from the 1960s compared to the present. The analysis of *A Raisin in the Sun* found similarities in the Younger family in the use of AAVE and physical appearance. Nonetheless, differences occur when Beneatha explores African culture. Beneatha flirts with Africa but proves unsuccessful in merging her double identity into one. Her struggle with her double consciousness aligns with the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement, for these highlighted the importance of discovering African American identity.

The analysis of *Black Panther* most prominently showed the importance of African heritage for Erik's identity. He expresses his African American identity with his black hairstyle and the use of AAVE. But, Erik dresses American. Erik balances both identities, but merging them into one truer self, like Du Bois discussed is something he has not fully achieved. Erik's African lineage being vital to his self-identification aligns with the historical context of the present. The discovery phase of self-identity has largely passed and the focus of the Black Lives Matter Movement has shifted towards demanding equality for black people. Both the analysis of *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Black Panther* have shown that the historical context of the period influences the self-identification and double consciousness of African American characters.

An unexpected result is that the experience of double consciousness is highly individual. Gilroy argues the existence of a unified black culture between all people of African descent despite the African diaspora. Within this Black Atlantic culture individual expressions of this black culture are influenced by time and place. *A Raisin in the Sun's* Beneatha Younger struggles with her double consciousness, but her family does not. Moreover, *Black Panther's* Erik Stevens seems comfortable with having two identities within his body.

A critical look at the methodology shows room for improvement. Choosing the markers of cultural black identity based on what was found in the movies may have caused biased results. The results may have differed if the markers were chosen separately from the movies. Furthermore, the results are derived from only one movie for both periods, and there is no movie that falls in between the two periods. For future research, it is advised to analyse multiple movies for each time period. Moreover, selecting a period between the 1960 and the present could better depict the progress of the self-identification of African American

characters in movies. Further research should analyse double consciousness outside of the United States, to gain a better understanding of how time and place influence one's self-identity and to see how this ties in with the Black Atlantic and how the African diaspora influences black cultural identity.

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