The peering into that deep void never quite stops. I’m talking about that troublesome, discomforting place that separates the global black family, the rift between Continental Africans and Blacks who are descended from slaves. It’s a rift created by forces and events too painful and shameful for many to want to talk about, yet one that often feels over-hyped, a conversation that stays at the tip of the tongue and never concludes. Is there anything more to explore beyond what you will find in abundance on YouTube and the blogosphere?

There is no shortage of sensational clatter that plugs a hunger for instant gratification when it comes to discussing that eternal antagonism between Africans and Blacks. It is the proverbial tale of sibling rivalry – Essau and Jacob, Sendeyo and Lenana, Thor and Loki, Wuriri and Mabemba... I lost you on the last one. There’s an arresting tale from the Taita people about a rivalry between two sisters that takes one of them through death and mystical destruction, and the redemptive remembering of body and bond until their relationship is newly restored.

It often seems pointless to rehash an emotive break-up for the sake of resolving it, especially one that has grown larger than life and seems to demand the very institutionalisation of the rivalry that defines it. After all, such a rivalry gave birth to the story that recently took the world by storm – the Black Panther movie – and got people talking all over again about this very rift between the global Black family.

However, beyond the trivial endless beefing – the derogatory name-calling and the beliefs and stereotypes we hold against each other, there is still a sincere hunger for peeling off layers of masks
from each other’s faces in the hope that we shall find the long-lost sibling and reach full acceptance at the final unmasking.

There is no urgency on the personal level for a momentous kumbaya between Blacks and Africans; otherwise we would be seeing a lot more inter-marriages between the two by now. The urgency is at the global level. Yet the dissection of this rift towards a global unity of the Black family cannot be done without exploring the trivial nuances that contribute the most to the daily rancor. This also comes with the danger of generalisations, a process that takes one right back to the place of rancor when an argument does not apply to the singular. Having lived, schooled and worked in the United States as an African, now married to an African-American, I will claim the privilege of making informed generalisations on this issue. A reminder that I will use “Blacks” to refer to African-Americans and “Africans” to refer to Continental Africans.

**Generalization 1:**

Blacks and Africans do not like revisiting the past. This is a trait that has kept both groups numb to their own pain. They fail to appreciate each other’s past from the point of separation. Blacks have not had a powerful movement dedicated to the demand for reparations, neither have Africans dedicated any significant effort towards reparations for colonisation.

In Kenya, a lawsuit against the British was a low-key process spearheaded by human rights lawyers without the forceful wind of national activism. Reparation is an integral part of healing the past, in this case, repaying a people who went through Maafa – the entire gamut of the African Holocaust. Black people are still going through this targeted catastrophe, only now redesigned as mass incarceration, violent racism and economic subjugation.

Other people have received reparations – the Japanese for the suffering that America put them through when they corralled them into concentration camps; the Jewish people for the Holocaust; groups of Native Americans for massacres that occured across the Americas; Aboriginal people for the great suffering as a Stolen Generation.

For the descendants of slaves, no amount of literature, song or grioting can ever truly capture the impact of their holocaust. It is tragic that a history of two-and-a-half centuries of official slavery has not pricked the conscience of any American administration enough to legislate reparations. It is a necessary step towards removing the poison of racism that still courses through America’s veins and reconciling historical injustices. Equally tragic is the fact that there has not been a collective effort by African nations to confront their colonial masters. This neglect of the past has exacerbated the rift between Blacks and Africans whose knowledge of each other is generally superficial and lacks comradeship.

**Generalization 2:**

The post-Civil Rights generation of Black people do not want anything to do with Africa, and Africans remind them of an identity they are embarrassed about. This statement is bound to raise consternation among Blacks who have taken pilgrimages to the Door of No Return, those who have actually settled in Africa, and those who have married Africans.

But I’d argue that the Blacks who have embraced the African identity have little to no clout to shift
the whole Black awareness centre towards a Pan-African awakening. They are too few. Many young Black people will say Africa is as strange to them as Mongolia, their African ancestry notwithstanding. Very few who take holidays ever consider Africa as a destination. Why should they, when all they see through American mainstream media’s keyhole is a continent in continuous throes of devastation? Oprah Winfrey said it, as did Dr Henry Loui Gates, that growing up, to be called “African” was an insult deeper than the N-word.

Africans who come to the United States soon learn that they are a notch below the African-American on the social strata. Naturally, it is the person right above your head that gets to step on you the most. The rift between Blacks and Africans is widened by the fact that a lot of the put-downs Africans suffer while abroad come directly from Black people.

It is easy to forget that the weight of oppression that comes from the top is suffered by both Blacks and Africans. By no means does this excuse Black people who find Africans easy targets to deposit long-seated anger and frustration. Indeed, one of the most emotional debates following the debut of Black Panther was on a thread where Africans confronted Blacks for suddenly feeling proud of African costumes and accents. Black Panther made it cool to have an African accent, yet many times Blacks have told Africans to stop speaking “African” when they speak English with heavy African accents. All the direct racist taunts I’ve received in America have come from Black people, mainly for my accent and my style of dressing. Black people’s fear and shame of their African identity is not difficult to understand, and not at all difficult to forgive.

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Sadly, the same fear and shame is being reciprocated by Africans against Blacks. This wasn’t the case with Africans who came into the US before the turn of the century, I being one of them. At least in Kenya we were never exposed to derogatory media about Black people in America. This was a new phenomenon, one that followed the rise of hip-hop in African countries. Older generation Africans who now have kids born in the US do not want anything to do with African-Americans. They have also been poisoned by negative keyhole perspectives of Black people.

While finding their place in America, Africans are unwilling to understand the struggles of Black people and choose to either keep to themselves or marry white. A Kenyan-American teenager said to me that he dislikes it when his parents tell him that if he wants to make it, he should not mix with losers, meaning Black people. This young man identifies himself more as African-American than as Kenyan-American. This myopic view of Black people causes Continental Africans in the diaspora to miss out on the gains they could make if they joined hands with their Black brethren in the countries where they now reside. They become insular in their immigration woes, choosing to hide rather than fight.

The Kenyan diaspora community, for instance, has lost its unity and has become an each-one-for-themselves society, at best uniting around ethnic identities. This kind of unity is weak and ineffective when it comes to moving legislation in the diaspora’s favour. Only recently, the self-styled “General” Miguna Miguna, who has aligned himself with the National Resistance Movement in Kenya, toured the US and became a major magnet for diaspora Kenyans; only it was mainly one ethnic group that showed up for these rallies.

These ethnic-driven passions do nothing to solve the needs of the diaspora. Continental Africans in
the diaspora have completely ignored the power and resourcefulness that could come with aligning themselves with Blacks. Fortunately, the young second-generation Africans align themselves more with Blacks than with Africans, and that might spell the realisation of a much needed Pan-Africanism.

**Cultural appropriation:**

Cultural appropriation is a concept that should not be given room to flourish. Black movements have always come with some form of African pride expressed through fashion or re-invented nuggets of African traditions. Black people who have arrived at a point of reconciliation with their African identity also pick and choose what, when, where and how much of this identity they can add on to give authenticity to who they are. A dashiki here, an African name there – one with just the right phonaesthetics.

Whether the declared African meaning is real or imagined is inconsequential, and that’s just fine. A black model named Roshumba once said on national television that her name meant “beautiful” in Swahili. At the time, I was flabbergasted, and that’s because I was still newly arrived from the motherland and had not learnt the intricacies of lost identities that are the burden of brothers and sisters shipped here hundreds of years ago.

As a descendant of a people violently separated from their culture and identities centuries ago, a people who have lost track of where on the continent they came from, Roshumba has every right to arbitrarily attach semantic value to a name that she or her parents decided is Swahili. Forget that no such word exists in the Swahili language. It does not become a corruption of the language; it becomes a creative addition to a language, not by a colonial force but by a fellow African long separated from her unknown language by tragic circumstance.

My journey as an African in the diaspora who has had a close and personal connection to African-Americans has stamped in me a fierce responsibility to defend the right of Black people to find their own African identity, as long as that process does not diminish African people. While Africans can and should provide a correction to a cultural misnomer, they also do not have a monopoly to decide what is African. For example, naming a child “Mwizi” and declaring that it means “king” in Swahili when it actually means “thief” is something a Swahili speaker can correct. At the same time, such corrections should not come with an expectation that “Mwizi” should always mean “thief”.

A lesson I learnt in my linguistics class many years ago is that the relationship between a morpheme and its semantic value is arbitrary. In other words, a word can mean anything its speaker wants it to mean, and that is how language evolves. If the person who named their child “Mwizi” was misinformed, and the child has grown to believe it means “king” and no one questioned it because no one else knows the original meaning, then the semantic value of “king” becomes valid among those found within that region.

I take pains to unpack this identity repurposing because it’s a conversation we Africans have had often concerning strange “Swahili” names that Black people acquire and their equally odd meanings. Granted, the current generation of Blacks has adopted a trend of creating names based purely on stylish phonetics devoid of semantic value, such as De’Quisha. That too is valid cultural dynamism
that is both unique and self-affirming. My own ethnic community has names whose meanings have been completely lost to time and traversing.

Continental Africans should also remember that those who were captured into slavery as late as the eighteenth century preserved African traditions that retain an ancient authenticity. The Gullah-Geechee people of North Carolina and Georgia maintain the highest concentration of African customs brought in from Sierra Leone where their ancestors were captured in the 1700s. Some have migrated up north and carried with them these authentic African traditions. They are much like the Falasha Jews of Ethiopia who have maintained some of the oldest Jewish traditions as a result of thousands of years of separation from other Jews.

The sudden spike in African pride, thanks to *Black Panther*, could be a flash in the pan. It could also potentially enhance the rift between Blacks and Continental Africans in the diaspora by the latter claiming to be the authentic custodians of everything African, especially the good stuff. Let us not forget that one of the greatest gifts, in my opinion, that Black people have given to the world is the Kwanzaa festival, a non-religious ceremony that uses African language, symbols and consciousness. The value in Kwanzaa transcends race, religion and nationality and could easily become as universal as Christmas.

Black people should embrace active custody and practice of all good things African, be they real, reimagined or repurposed for the greater good. This points to a socio-cultural diplomacy where African conscience becomes a lifestyle and an aspiration on a global scale. It would be an equivalent to the spread of the American Dream, which played a major role in boosting America’s economy and stature in the world. It is mind vibranium, a soft power for launching a 21st century Pan-Africanism that young people can buy into.

**The Old Pan-Africanism**

A young generation now lives out its life largely through social media. Africa has the world’s largest young population, which the United Nations estimates at 200 million aged between 15 and 24. They have time and again shifted centres through social media activism, using platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. Kenyans On Twitter, for example, got CNN to retract and apologise to Kenyans for calling the country a “hot-bed of terror”.

Siyanda Mohutsiwa, a famed writer and speaker from Botswana, makes the case for a Social Pan-Africanism led by the digital revolution. She is young, she has roused up globally trending hashtags such as #IfAfricaWasABar, and she understands the bee-hive effect of social media platforms that can be used to usher in a new Pan-Africanism. She calls it Social Pan-Africanism, an idea that would allow Africans to communicate and solve the issues of their times unencumbered by borders or nationality, untouched by oppressive governments or censorship. It also easily bridges this great void made worse by African peoples’ unwillingness to think beyond nationalistic, ethnic or diasporic enclaves.

Siyanda Mohutsiwa, a famed writer and speaker from Botswana, makes the case for a Social Pan-Africanism led by the digital revolution.

But I see a crater that could swallow all the efforts towards a youth-led social Pan-Africanism if they don’t sustain it through a merger with the foundations of political Pan-Africanism that established freedoms for African peoples across the globe. Political Pan-Africanism is rooted in the painful place that young Continental Africans and Blacks do not want to revisit. They do not need to dwell in the
past, but they need to tether themselves to the anchors of the past in order to create a mind-blowing future.

This is a lesson *Black Panther* communicates well for those familiar with Africa's history. Wakandan Afrofuturism was a reality somewhere in the past, albeit without the sci-fi gizmos. For a stretch of 700 years, economic Afrocentricism ruled the world when African kingdoms controlled global trade. The last powerful monarch, Mansa Musa of the Kingdom of Mali, saw the construction of a global university and an empire so advanced that Europeans, then in the dark ages, might have looked upon it as we did when Wakanda technology flashed before us.

Let us remember that before slavery and colonisation there were African kingdoms across the continent in various stages of political and economic power, well before the United States rose to be a superpower. If there was one thing that led to the fall of Africa’s “Wakanda” past, it was the Europeans’ discovery of trade routes through the Atlantic that erased the powerful Trans-Sahara trade routes. The cheaper and more efficient sea routes controlled by Europeans opened the doors to shipping more merchandise from Africa, including humans, which became easier after African kingdoms began to weaken in the 16th century.

Reconstructing an African people united by common past and common destiny started during slavery with the abolitionists who also advocated a return-to-Africa movement, and continued through the Civil Rights movement and into the African independence struggles. The fact is that the Black diaspora that descended from slaves has always been an active participant in seeking the liberation of colonised Africans. Marcus Garvey, W.E.B DuBois, the Congressional Black Caucus, the TransAfrica Forum, the Nation of Islam and the Rastafari Movement all held a Pan-Africanist soul at their core, a belief in the common struggle and destiny of the Black race that drove them to reach across oceans to save fellow Africans suffering under colonisation and apartheid. They did this through activism, legislation, art and scholarship. There should be a monument of African-American Pan-Africanists in African countries. It is fitting that Ghana recognized W.E.B Du Bois’s role and built a Centre for Pan-African Culture in his name.

While celebrating Venezuela’s Independence Day at their embassy in Washington DC, I ran into a now elderly Harry Belafonte, and he told me about the time he, together with Miriam Makeba, sang at Kenya’s independence celebrations. He spoke of Jomo Kenyatta and the Mau Mau movement with pride. Belafonte has blended art, diplomacy and activism for the Black cause with power and dignity. As his tall frame faded off towards his car, it struck me that there is a fading generation of Black diaspora Pan-Africanist giants that have been bridging this Black divide for a long time. Organised Pan-Africanism started soon after the First World War when the 1st Pan-African Congress met in 1919 expressly to demand that Africans be granted home rule by their colonial masters, a demand Du Bois revised to self-rule at the second Pan-African Congress.

**Black Noah**

Kwame Nkrumah drank from the fountain of Garveyism. Marcus Garvey was a Pan-African purist who believed in the segregation of the races and preached an Africa-for-Africans philosophy. His faith was made true by his works, evidenced not only by his founding of the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) early in the twentieth century, but more significantly by the Black
Star Line he started for the purpose of shipping Black people back to Africa. He was the black Noah that built a boat to save the African race from the deluge of Maafa and its drowning effects. He believed it was the responsibility of the diaspora African descended from slaves to save the African in Africa from the oppression of colonisation. Only his plan for salvation did not quite work out the way he envisioned, and the floods of imperialism in Africa and Jim Crow in the United States remained regional catastrophes the Black race overcame without the global unity he had purposed.

Politically, African countries were moving farther away from any form of Pan-Africanism as the formation of successful independent nations became a greater priority. The formation of the Organisation of African Unity did not foster much of a shared responsibility towards Africa’s common destiny. Many founding leaders of newly independent African nations turned to their colonial masters instead of building an Africa that could depend on itself. African nations became pawns on the neo-imperial chessboard of their former colonial masters. For a continent as endowed in natural wealth as Africa, it is tragic that the plausible dream of Pan-Africanists like Garvey failed to take root. But it is not all together dead. Garvey left a dream of the rise of Africa that one can glean from restless young and awakened Black activists. Erik Killmonger picks up where Garvey left off. Where the Black Star Lines failed, the Killmonger attitude will step in to usurp power from insular African leaders who have failed to use their resources for the good of the African people.

I have met Erik Killmonger, and he is a Republican. I have met him in the minds of Black Republican friends in Washington DC longing for the rise and liberation of the Black race from the high rates of poverty, neglected neighbourhoods, incarceration and political powerlessness. In conversations whispered in shared car rides, a Republican friend narrates to me the vicious circle of need in inner city black neighborhoods, and how Democrats are to blame because they’ve been in leadership in these cities far too long. My friend says she has spoken to many Black single mothers who do not want welfare hand-outs. They want opportunities, and Republicans want to instill in that get-it-at-all-cost attitude. It’s the Killmonger drive – grab fearlessly what is due to you, fight for it and do not expect entitlements.

I’m a Democrat. And a Kenyan. I’m not too religious about party politics. I agree with what she is telling me, and on any good day, she might have converted me. Except that when I zoom out and take in the Republican view of global politics, I cannot buy into it. I find it to be one that seeks domination as opposed to cooperation. Doctrines such as with-us-or-against-us, as espoused by former President George Bush, have justified preemptive attacks and wars that have killed too many in foreign countries. African countries have become battlefields in a global war against terror that they never started, one that benefits a corporate world that runs the world’s economy. That is also the Killmonger hunger for domination.

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It is tempting to buy into the rise of Africa as a dominant power, knowing we have been there before, but this time around, Africa would have the advantage of new technology. But that would mean nothing short of an arms race and wars. Nations have thrived better through cooperation than through exclusivism and domination. If there was a Killmonger in real life, perhaps Muammar Gadaffi could have fit the bill. He was a Pan-Africanist who believed in an African currency that could easily dominate the world economy. After all, Africa’s natural resources, such as coltan, are still the “vibranium” that drives new technology.

Bridge To Kibera
“I was in Kenya last year,” my Republican friend continues.

“Oh?” I want to hear this. It’s always a pleasant surprise to know an African-American has travelled to an African country. I hold my breath, hoping she will say something good about Kenya. During my last trip to Kenya, I had been robbed at gun-point. I was not ready for a guest’s sh*thole testimony about my country.

“And I stayed in Kibera during my entire stay!” My heart sunk. Couldn’t she have stayed in a hotel? For heaven’s sake, Kibera? What was she thinking? She has money, a lot of it, and she is someone who has held advisory positions with several Republican White House administrations. So why does she sound excited about having stayed in Kibera for... what? Did she just say three months?!

“My Kenyan friend welcomed me to her home in Kibera!” She truly was excited about it. The way she said it, as if there was nothing to it but someone’s hospitality in its purest form. I will never doubt a Black Republican’s down-to-earth passion for the well-being of Black people anywhere in the world. No matter one’s political leaning, true Pan-Africanism has to have the heart to extend from the White House to Kibera.

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