

STATE OF POWER 2017

White Supremacy as Cultural Cannibalism

– *Gathoni Blessol*



“The universal is a fantasy. But we are captive to a sensibility that defines the universal, still, as white.”

– Claudia Rankine

“Racism is a blight on the human conscience. The idea that any people can be inferior to another, to the point where those who consider themselves superior define and treat the rest as subhuman, denies the humanity even of those who elevate themselves to the status of ‘gods’.”

– Nelson Mandela

There is a lens that is largely being ignored and in most cases simply eclipsed in the current attempts to imagine post-capitalist futures. This missing lens signals an evasion of the fact that capitalism is born of white supremacist thinking and domination. In other words, capitalism is inherently anti-black, and relies on the erasure of black lives and futures.

The failure to see this anti-black systemic underpinning of our world is based first on a lack of meaningful engagement with the origins of capitalism in the project of Empire, which perpetuates the flawed assumption that humanness is an uncontested concept. And second, on the continued validation of ‘being human’ as the proximity to whiteness and (secondarily) to capital – an existence that is structured by dominance, greed and the need for constant accumulation. As different societies across the globe increasingly invest in these white supremacist-based structures and relations, we risk narrowing the potential for nurturing alternative (less annihilating) versions of expressing and being human.

This observation comes as a suggestion to global justice organizing networks not to underplay the (past and) recent public displays of white supremacist systems in mobilizing a following. The consolidation of fascist 1 resonances has both reflected and reinforced the minimizing of global citizens’ capacities to relate beyond their own identities and perceptions of being ‘human’. This realization has shifted my focus as a community worker to re-evaluate the ways in which the category ‘Human’ has been applied across time and space in various legal, economic, cultural and governing systems. This has provided both a lens through which to think about (African) black lives, and also a mirror to reflect on the interconnectedness and other cosmic ways of existing as communities.

Organizing within African communities

As a person brought up on the East African coast, I grew up with different understandings of being ‘human’ that strongly resisted the devastating histories of slavery, colonialism, and globalization of white supremacy.

From the early stages of life, despite living in an urban setting that was (and still is) socially, economically and politically isolated, I recall a sense of abundance. This was expressed in creativity, grounding and spirit. It was shared across generations, among peers, in social gatherings, across religious groups and sometimes, on a good day, learning spaces. This sense of abundance allowed me, periodically, to decipher the harsh realities of socio-political and economic conditions. It became

a way of seeing and of being. It was a constant 'call' – to remain humbled and respectful – to all life; always to remember, share, and seek to change existing narratives, in both the present and the future. In principle, it offered avenues to bridge existing gaps within individual and communal ties, and effectively to transform present responsibilities into future possibilities.

Therefore, in my understanding, community organizing became a space for the creation and informing of collective existence, consciousness, responsibility, and relationships based on a different set of values than those embedded in contemporary modes of capitalism.

Today, the state, in protecting capital, is invested in undermining the extent to which communities, when organized, are powerful and effect change. As a result communities have to push back against the erasure of their role in shaping different cultures, and reaffirm capacities to build, grow and transform our existences, spaces and systems of cohesion. Communities have a key role in ensuring the right to life and protection of resources – acting as a site of persistence and resistance, as well as a space of continuity to the narratives of a people. They are a place to understand individual–collective responsibility and how it relates to the larger eco-system – the Earth and all life.

This sense of abundance allowed me, periodically, to decipher the harsh realities of socio-political and economic conditions. It became a way of seeing and of being.



Black women's organizing

These roles came together importantly for me in November 2015, when I joined the Black Women's March in Brasilia. This was a historic global gathering that brought together diverse, transnational, intergenerational, intersectional black women's struggles and narratives. Initially the march had been prompted by a bill passed in a commission of the lower chamber that sought to limit access to morning-after pills and information on abortion for rape victims. As sisters from various struggles, our presence was to express our solidarity with women and feminist organizers from Brazil.

In the conversations leading up to the march, this assemblage – comprising community organizers, activists, scholars, spiritual healers and artists – held deep dialogues, where women shared experiences, tactics and strategies that they had used within their movements and other allied groups. For the majority of participants, who worked within local and national contexts, it became a genuine space to expand consciousness and understand different social justice organizing backgrounds. It brought forth powerful and diverse stories and examples of black women's resistance, solidarities and blueprints.

The dialogues also enabled us to reflect on the historical and ongoing projects of Empire, across Africa, Latin and North America. These reflections exposed the colonial underpinnings of white-supremacist capitalist, systems-logic and ways of being- that were directly or indirectly exercising violence, silencing, commodifying, overexploiting and killing Afro Brazilian, African American and African populations.

This essay is therefore a 'coming together' of these narratives and my own engagements with social justice communities that are organizing in the context of a general sense of disjuncture in our present societies, and with a desire to create alternative spaces that articulate and aim to shift heinous injustices and *unfreedoms* within the current white-supremacist imperial systems.

African (black) peoples' narratives and struggles

During the discussions in Brazil, the *common denominator* in the experiences of extreme violence and criminalization – whether expressed by community organizers of the *favelas* in Brazil, domestic workers in Ethiopia, the poor urban youth in Kenya or black communities in the US – was being black and unwanted in neoliberal governing systems.

These experiences stem from pervasive cultural and political notions (and realities) that black bodies can be commodified and consumed, and when of no use killed. These notions have played a fundamental part in re-formulating systems that dehumanize and subjugate people of African descent.

For 400 years, European societies relied on the ownership of African peoples as slaves in order to expand their own economies. And this did not change until early 19th century when there was a shift in the priority and planning of economic projects – not of core values and systems – and the need to capture and enslave people gave way to other methods for the physical expansion of Empire and the global accumulation of power, known as colonialism.

These modes of accumulation were embedded and became 'standard practice' in the modern administrative structures of African colonies, imported by explorers, missionaries, non-government organizations (NGOs) and administrative powers.

As these colonies became 'independent' nations and assumed control of the 'human governing systems' from the colonial masters, these socio-economic and cultural systems – which considered African (black) lives as disposable – remained.

These experiences [of extreme violence and criminalization] stem from pervasive cultural and political notions (and realities) that black bodies can be commodified and consumed, and when of no use killed.

(Non)-choice: assimilation or disposability

One of the conditions in which young black people living in the context of capitalism find themselves is that of (non)-choice. This comes down in the end to the (non)-choice between assimilation into capitalism or, if one 'refuses' assimilation, disposability. We should understand that assimilation does bring benefits to some. For instance, we see black elites who assimilate and benefit, but the majority of black people are assimilated as labour to be consumed. Disposability functions, for example, through criminalization of black, usually poor, youths, often resulting in their imprisonment or death.

One of the key instruments for this system of non-choice has been the merging of market and state interests. The market embodies corporate interests that spread colonial economies and maintain imperial values. The state has become the means through which this is applied, seeing its principal role as 'safeguarding' economic interests rather than the people. The effects of such relations have been predictable, and have resulted in systemic controls that are violent and silence the autonomy and voices of the majority of people.

This market-state power structure has employed fascist understandings of what it is 'to be human', defining economically marginalized populations as 'other' in order either to dispossess them or to exploit their labour and resources. The ventures have been characterized by a world of borders, investment in war economies, as well as state and militarized violence. The massacre of 34 miners in 2012 in Marikana, by South African police colluding with mine owners is a well-known case of the how collusion between state and capital has prompted the least consequence when used to kill people living in poverty and particularly black people.

Another example can be seen in the preparations for the 2012 World Cup in Rio and the ways persistent racism affected the everyday lives of those living in the *favelas*. The 'clean-up' process to make the city 'safe' for the games concentrated black residents in substandard, precarious urban spaces effectively reserved for those without full rights. As in apartheid South Africa, spatial segregation is a form through which anti-blackness reproduces itself.

Spatial isolation allows the other modes of anti-blackness discussed here – criminalization and erasure – to remain invincible. Separated from the shiny spaces of capitalism, it enables those who benefit from anti-black capitalism to claim ignorance about its violent other side. But the realities of this violence are becoming ever more difficult to ignore.

#BlackLivesMatter is the most conspicuous example of movements exposing the persistent ways in which black lives have been made to 'unmatter'. And it has resonated with (African) black communities across the world. #BLM emerged as a response to the overt violence of the state's armed forces against black people, but has opened up conversations about the multiple ways in which the state renders black lives precarious. In the platform released by the Movement for Black Lives, there is an overt focus on the state-capital nexus as the heart of anti-black violence in the US and across the globe.

One of the conditions in which young black people ... find themselves is that of the (non)-choice between assimilation into capitalism or, if one 'refuses' assimilation, disposability.

Spatial segregation [whether in Rio de Janeiro or South Africa] is a form through which anti-blackness reproduces itself.

The reality of the non-mattering of black lives plays out internationally, notably in the US imperial missions for resource extraction and warmongering in Africa. These ventures are dressed up as solidarity in safeguarding 'the people', national interests and fighting against terrorism. But in Kenya, for example, this 'war on terror' has reinforced existing structures responsible for 'crimes against humanity' against various unwanted societies in the country. This war protects hegemonic economic interests (making the country safe for foreign direct investment (FDI)) under the guise of national security. This has enabled state police and military to profile, abduct and kill young, poor, black, Somali, Muslim, 'Others' in order to control and protect property. It is an example of how anti-blackness, Islamophobia and ethno-nationalism come together in the service of capital and Empire and end up creating a new 'non-white' Other.

Assimilation: the 'Africa rising narrative'

While we might acknowledge the crucial interlinking of racism and capitalism in cases where the state wields brute force against black communities, we must be equally aware of it in its softer forms. If not, we might see the shift from narratives of the 'dark continent' to those of 'Africa rising' as progress. One might even assume that the 'segregation, criminalization, erasure' described above can be mitigated through development.

The chants of 'Africa rising' are being sung on a daily basis across the continent. 'Development' – it is claimed – means that change has finally arrived and will 'eradicate poverty'. The substance of the rise is predicated on growing partnership between African economic and political elites and individuals, corporations, institutions and countries interested in wealth extraction. And it is sold as the only option to a people whose bodies and lives are still structured by the after-effects of colonization.

It is a language and practice of assimilation, requiring African states and peoples to let 'bygones be bygones', and 'move on' from the doings of colonialism (which traumatized both the colonizers and the colonized) in order to maintain good relations that *will* secure economic growth. Or, on the other spectrum, to remember a past history of anti-imperialism as an explanation for why current colonial extractive relations with China should be overlooked. As Quan² argues: 'Rather than a negation, the strategic partnerships between China and Africa exemplifies as yet another iteration of savage developmentalism and anti-democracy. Here, Third World solidarity is used as a particular device employed to masquerade the conducts of modern development.'

This 'Africa rising' frenzy, greased with economic interests and savage developmentalism has allowed the re-possession (or re-colonization) of land and the exploitation of natural resources by various foreign interests and their local proxies. There are whole projects between African states and foreign corporations (and governments), in which communal lands are being leased out to developers for 99 years.³ The accompanying trade agreements are dispossessing, dividing and ruling over the lives of African peoples at large.

In this case, the colonial interests may no longer walk in the same bodies, but they emulate the same cultures that reinforce anti-black and anti-poor sentiments.

This 'Africa rising' frenzy, greased with economic interests and savage developmentalism has allowed the re-possession (or re-colonization) of land and the exploitation of natural resources by various foreign interests and their local proxies.

Necessary truths

This pervasiveness of anti-blackness across societies implies that whiteness is not only spread through white people's bodies but at the *level of systems* that come to work through various bodies. It a system that functions primarily to benefit white bodies, but also one that has realized its survival depends on the assimilation, to different degrees, of other bodies. This has engulfed other non-white societies and institutions of '*power*' across the globe. It has become deeply embedded in most capitalist societies, accumulating reprehensible systemic failures and exposing a spreading cultural sickness.

This monolithic cultural positioning that places being white as superior to other ways of being human requires counter-active ways of being. These ways must take into account the role of white supremacy in the exploitation of African-descended peoples as well as the eradication of entire non-white, societies, wisdoms and cultures.

The negative cultural influences of white supremacy are on trial today. Struggles everywhere have questioned and are persistent in questioning white-supremacist 'prescriptions' of linear identities for the contemporary 'human being'. Globally, communities are exposing the invisible ways that whiteness codes, conceives and captures societies. They are highlighting its *limits* in terms of freedoms, connections, spirituality and understanding ourselves as part of a larger ecosystem. They are taking their responsibilities seriously to enslaved, dispossessed and disposed-of generations of ancestral indigenous descendants. They are converging our presence, thoughts and ancestral backgrounds at a universal level to recalibrate our compass towards humanity as a whole (rather than a subscription to whiteness) as a necessary step towards liberating futures for all humans alike.⁴

About the author

Gathoni Blessol is a social justice activist and community organizer from Kenya. She is currently based at /The Rules as their community advisor.

Endnotes

1. Umberto Eco 'List of the 14 most common features of fascism', available at: <http://www.openculture.com/2016/11/umberto-eco-makes-a-list-of-the-14-common-features-of-fascism.html>
2. Quan, H.L.T. (2012) Growth Against Democracy. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
3. Open Society Institute (n.d.) 'Country Report, Mozambique. Understanding Land Investment Deals in Africa'. Available at: https://www.oaklandinstitute.org/sites/oaklandinstitute.org/files/OI_country_report_mozambique_0.pdf
4. Indian Winter (n.d.) 'Standing Rock; The Story of Heroic Resistance'. Available at: <https://roarmag.org/essays/standing-rock-no-dapl-protests/>

AUTHOR: Gathoni Blessol

EDITOR: Nick Buxton & Deborah Eade

ARTWORK: favulas + Isk + no1

LAYOUT: Evan Clayburg

Published by Transnational Institute – www.TNI.org

Contents of the report may be quoted or reproduced for non-commercial purposes, provided that the source of information is properly cited. TNI would appreciate receiving a copy or link of the text in which this document is used or cited. Please note that for some images the copyright may lie elsewhere and copyright conditions of those images should be based on the copyright terms of the original source.

<http://www.tni.org/copyright>

This essay appears in TNI's sixth annual State of Power report. This year, it examines the cultural processes that are used by corporations, military and privileged elites to make their power seem 'natural' and 'irreversible'. It also explores how social movements can harness creativity, art and cultural forces to resist and to build lasting social and ecological transformation. Visit www.tni.org/stateofpower2017 to read all the essays and contributions.



The Transnational Institute (TNI) is an international research and advocacy institute committed to building a just, democratic and sustainable planet. For more than 40 years, TNI has served as a unique nexus between social movements, engaged scholars and policy makers.

www.TNI.org