



# AMERICA'S CASTE SYSTEM: Race and belonging in the Age of Trump

By Mkawasi Mcharo Hall



When I was growing up in Kenya, I was taught that my ancestral land was the only place I was allowed to call “home”, whether I lived there or not. Anywhere else that I lived was a house. It was near sacrilegious to call a house in the city “home”.

It wasn't until I got to college that I decided to resolve that post-colonial cultural disorder for myself. While living with my aunt and going to college at the same time, I consciously decided to defy the elders, the ancestors, and the feared keepers of cultural dogma. I started calling my aunt's place “home”.

I had no knowing at that time how much that decision would help me find belonging in lands far away. Kenya is home, the land that has refused to surrender my first belonging, and where I continue to sow seeds of unwanted civic agitation. America is home, the stolen lands that have soaked in the sweat of my brow and sprouted the sprigs of my second belonging.

## The road to voting

A few days ago, I joined the long early voting queues at the American mid-term elections and voted for the candidates I felt would best serve the interests of my State. A couple of days later, I checked in at a polling precinct where I was assigned to serve as an election judge. There, I spent sixteen

hours with fellow officials helping run the voting process and ensuring the integrity of the vote.

On my way home, I reflected upon my service in this role. This was the third election I had served at the polls, and like always, I left with a sense that I had partaken in the serving of sacrament in a temple - to the rich and the poor, the old and the new initiates, the cautious cynics and faithful believers in democracy. I had come a long way too from the village that raised me.

The face of the latest wave of new Americans is little understood by those who now seek to protect this country against an influx of non-Caucasian immigrants. I represent the African immigrant population that has been ballooning significantly in the past two decades. We bring with us an already educated mind, most of us having finished high school or a first degree in an African country. We are the F1 student visa careers that got caught up in the change of immigration policies soon after 9/11, because most of the hijackers had also come in as students. Renewing one's visa was no longer that easy, and working odd jobs was heavily restricted. Many felt stranded, unable to leave or to continue with their education.

This change in policy inadvertently led to many African immigrants staying much longer than they had hoped because they were determined to return home with some measure of success. History records the stories of American immigrants in the 1800s - men who left their families with promises to return. They went west in search of gold and lands and riches told in tall tales, and when they lost it all in life's gambles, they chose not to return home. The shame of failure was too great to bear.

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African immigrants have also done what all immigrants who have come to the United States have done for centuries past - survive through shame, tears and tatters and eventually thrive. For many of them, seeking American citizenship was not an ambition they came in with; it became so with time, out of unforeseen necessity. They too have become builders of this land. They are the latest patch on the American quilt.

### **The African caravan**

A smart government knows that immigration policies that allow for a fluid traversing of documented populations is the safest and most beneficial way to build a 21<sup>st</sup> century nation. It means you know where people are. The U.S. government can track my goings and comings, my toil and my taxes, because I leave a citizen's footprint wherever I go.

The millions of undocumented and out-of-status immigrants in the U.S. simply present a conundrum that has to be addressed at some point, not by clamping down and purging, but by offering legal freedom of movement. You would be surprised at how many immigrants living in the shadows would leave the country if they had the legal means to do so. It would allow for a citizenry as physically fluid as what technology has wrought upon the world. They would also invest more as transnational citizens, a trend seen from Diasporas that have become Americanised.

It is confounding why the American power structure keeps going through this repeated cycle of fear of new immigrants when it is clear that immigrants have made America the industrial superpower it became. This fear and suppression has been happening with each new wave since the 1880s when the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed. Then came the National Origins Formula that restricted the

influx of immigrants from Eastern Europe as they were deemed unskilled and influenced by Russia. The legislation also gave preference to immigrants from ethnic Caucasian countries.

It wasn't until the 2000s that African immigration to the U.S. shot up dramatically. The Refugee Act of 1980 opened the doors to a huge influx of Africans into the U.S., so much so that by 2018, Ilhan Omar, a 37-year-old Somali woman who had migrated to the U.S. as a refugee in 1995, was elected to the United States Congress. The large population of Somalis in Minnesota no doubt gave wind to her sails. It is worth noting that Ms. Omar lived part of her life in a refugee camp in Kenya, having fled from war-torn Somalia with her family. She would probably love to go back and make a difference in Somalia.

A Liberian refugee was also elected as mayor in the deep Trump country of Montana in 2016. He too had come in as a refugee.

However, the African home countries that have held our dreams of return have betrayed some of us as life there has become more difficult to knit into desired destiny. The suitcases that were never unpacked upon arrival in the U.S., awaiting triumphant return, were finally emptied of their content after lengthy years of study and surrender to American belonging. The continental African diaspora continues to develop the countries of their foreign abode, including in Europe where more are also taking up public office.

While many Africans in America will never feel truly American, they continue to thrive and grow in numbers. In an article published this year, the American reporter Molly Fosco identified the Nigerian diaspora in America as the most successful ethnic group in the United States. A Migration Policy Institute report also states: "Most members of the Kenya diaspora in the United States were well educated and more likely than the U.S. general public to have completed a university degree [and] to be in the labor force: 80% versus 64%."

The Pew Research Center places continental Africans as the fastest growing immigrant population in the U.S., with a growth rate of 41% between 2000 and 2013. Meanwhile, African governments continue to suppress diaspora civic engagement in their home countries. Most have completely failed to recognise the strategic power of their diaspora. At best, they seek to milk their hard-earned wealth without engaging with them.

American-born second generation continental Africans identify with their countries of cultural origin only when they grow up to discover the value of claiming a cultural identity. However, this identity is only seasonal. Among Kenyan-American youth, for example, you will only see this identity on display during festivities organised around Kenyan public holidays, such as Madaraka Day or Jamhuri Day. It is the kind of seasonal pride displayed by Irish youth on St. Patrick's Day. But both are bound by the common identity of being American. And it is in America where the Kenyan-American, the Irish-American, the Chinese-American, the Hispanic-American will run for office and shape the future of the United States. If this diverse ethnic make-up of America is a foregone conclusion, then the current rising wave of white nationalism and its attendant supremacist goals are futile.

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## White fury, brown fruit

There is rising fury of white nationalism in America that is based on a fear of extinction. Immigrants are accused of needing healthcare, food, housing and education at the expense of American taxpayers who themselves have few opportunities.

This unfounded argument has been used on every new wave of immigrants. The white race at the top of America's social pyramid is more afraid that their kind will be "browned out". But the face of America is slowly changing, as is the face of the world. Robert Wuthnow, author of *The Left Behind*, reminds us that 90% of rural America is white, a population that brought Trump to power. It is also the population from whence this wave of white nationalism has steadily risen. But this 90% white rural America base is slowly eroding, especially with the ever-increasing Hispanic population.

The United Nations projects that Africa's population will grow to 2.5 billion by 2050, making 1 out of every 4 humans on earth an African. There is no escaping the browning of the globe. The raging storms of white supremacy seen in Charlottesville and in the rise of the lone white male terrorist are all a waste of good energy that would be better used figuring out how to make amends for past injustices that have contributed greatly to a world of resentment between the privileged and the hoi polloi. It is not lost on the world that in the past several centuries our world has been shaped by a dominating race that enslaved, colonised and plundered other nations.

America's current president recently came out openly as a nationalist. It is unclear how this helps America's future. America's diverse races cannot be exterminated. A continental African who arrived here in 1998 and voted as an American citizen in the recently concluded U.S. mid-term elections has the rights and responsibilities to ensure a just and equitable American society as much as the descendants of the Pilgrims who arrived from Europe in the 1600s escaping religious persecution, the grandchildren of those who escaped war, poverty and famine from 19<sup>th</sup> century Czarist Russia and Ireland, the progenies of Chinese labourers who came in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries; the children of Jews who escaped the Holocaust in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and many others who formed the United States of various peoples, all seeking a home away from home.

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There is some sorrow and irony in the burden of racial superiority. This became clear to me upon reflecting on an encounter I had when I had just started my graduate studies in New York. A white male student struck up a conversation with me at the college library and told me all about his woes as a student immigrant from Poland. He had come on an F1 student visa but had fallen out of status. I knew little about immigration woes then. Like most of my African student peers, I had no interest in staying in America beyond graduation. My mind and soul were still tethered to my country of birth. Of course, American life would later on slap me silly and awaken me to the need for new belonging. It wasn't until I ventured out beyond my college cocoon that I began to encounter other immigrants with legal status issues.

The Polish student's story went in one ear out the other. He might as well have been telling me about cheese. He was the first "illegal" immigrant I'd ever met, and for a while, the people I thought of anytime I heard about "illegal" immigrants were white people from Europe stuck in limbo in America. There are many white immigrants grossly alienated because they choose the comfort of blending in with their race at the top of the pyramid even when they do not have the legal papers

they need to survive and thrive in America. But they don't get called names, they don't get go-back-to-your-country spat in their face with disdain, and they don't stick out like a sore thumb and get punched at Trump rallies.

### **Dismantling America's caste system**

American society has a big self-inflicted festering wound. In every application form in the U.S., be it for employment, school or what-have-you, one is asked to check the box that identifies one's race or ethnicity. These categories are officially determined by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget. The official reason for including them is to ensure equitable opportunities and distribution of resources, but it is no secret that this is a caste system that constitutes institutionalised racism.

It gets worse when the name on your résumé is strange and definitely not white. Once, after receiving a letter of regret for a job I had applied for, I submitted the very same résumé with the whitest name I could think of, and I got a call for a phone interview immediately. My accent, however, didn't do me any good. It is no different from Rwanda's past when citizens were required to have their ethnicity on the national ID. After the genocide, they got rid of this tribal identifier, and it helped build a new nation.

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In the United States, those with access to race and ethnic data easily use it to remap legislative districts in a way that is favourable to the person or party wielding the power of manipulation. Gerrymandering and voter suppression is America's system of rigging the vote. While African countries rig at the ballot, America rigs before the ballot. This was never more evident than in the recent mid-term elections that led to the recount of votes in at least three races.

The manipulation in Georgia's recent gubernatorial race had been done systematically and over time by the person who had the means to manipulate voter registration – Brian Kemp. As Georgia's Secretary of State, he got the upper hand and paved the way for himself to win the governor's seat, and this affected the integrity of the vote. Calls for Kemp's opponent, Stacey Abrams, to challenge the election in court have been reminiscent of Kenya's bitter election in 2017. It is likely that Kemp will preside over a bitter people, half of whom will not recognise him as a legitimate governor. Political rancor that looks an awful lot like third-world politics has become the norm in America since 2016.

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If there's a dim light in the sinking story of American politics, it is that American society still highly values the Cinderella story. If a person deemed least likely to succeed dares to conquer all odds, chances are that a wave of support from all races is going to cheer this person on until he or she reaches the mountain top. In the mid-term elections, the Obama phenomenon has been repeated in the wave of minority candidates – women and Muslims who had been bartenders, refugees, and

socialists are now headed to Capitol Hill.

Even more evidence of the browning of America and the hope of the future is the Generation Z phenomenon. In a *New York Post* article, Jeff Brauer, a political science professor at Keystone College, describes this generation as diverse and only 55% white, making them quite likely the tail-end of white majority America. “And they have the most positive outlook toward the nation’s growing diversity of any previous generation,” wrote Professor Brauer.

Brauer sees this generation as likely voting for Trump if they had a chance, simply because they find him authentic and disruptive of the status quo. However, I disagree with this opinion. Generation Z is an equally politically diverse group, which was evident from the protests of the high school students whose power recently shook America following the mass shooting at Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida. They marched to the capital, took to the media and linked arms with racially diverse students across America whose voices were heard for the first time. It was a show of solidarity that challenged the impenetrable conservative wall of power that shields gun lobbyists. If this is the future of America, then the future is bright.

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