

Black Skins White Masks Revisited: Why I Am No Longer Talking to Nigerians About Race

I had been a lazy author. I was so absorbed in my excitement for my first visit to Nigeria, that I didn't bother to look through Aké Arts and Book Festival's draft program in time to communicate any adjustments I had before it had to be finalized. When I did finally look through the program days before the 2016 edition I discovered a curiously titled panel: "The Irony of Black Lives Matter in Africa." I was concerned for two reasons. First, I felt there was no "irony." Second, there was only representation from West Africa: moderator, Nigerian Patrick Okigbo, Nigerian novelist Helon Habila and Ghanaian-Kenyan Kinna Likimani. As soon I saw this I pestered Lola Shoneyin, the festival founder and organizer, to add me onto the panel. I was sure that the experience of living between two African countries that suffered white minority, settler-rule late into the 20th century—by virtue of my having been born in Zimbabwe and raised in South Africa—would lead me to have a different response to the two Nigerians and Ghanaian-Kenyan on the panel.

Months earlier, my first visit to Uganda for the 2016 Writivism Literary Festival had given me my first real encounter with the "experience gap" between black people on the continent. During the day Uganda National Museum, Writivism's venue, is a hive of schoolchildren. I was struck by the appearance of a particular group of girls from Gayaza High School. They had the most beautiful school uniform I have ever seen: an assortment of red, yellow, green, orange, pink, purple and blue short sleeve dresses that sung against the girls' dark skin. More than that, their heads crowned in a variety of beautiful natural shapes and styles—short, medium sized, buns, round, square. A product of the South African "Rainbow Nation's" schools that insisted on unflattering uniforms (including my high school's kilt-inspired skirt) and hair very intimate with sodium hydroxide, I found myself staring, and, overcome with emotion. When it came time to introduce myself during the Festival's schools outreach, I tried to express how happy I was to see the girls: You look so beautiful. Can I take a picture to take home? The other African writers and the girls themselves didn't get it. That every girl had natural hair was nothing to talk or write home about,

let alone take pictures. What else would I have them do with their hair?

They couldn't understand why I was making such a fuss, because that to them, was the default. With some help from Nigerian-Barbadian-South African writer Yewande Omotoso, I tried to explain why it would be noteworthy that they had hair the way they did. I was unsuccessful. Not for a lack of words, but a lack of context.

All of these different attacks on black bodies—whether on African soil or outside of it—is not unrelated to white racial capitalism and coloniality which is sophisticated enough not to need the presence of white bodies to function. This is after all why, for example, African countries remain one of the world's largest markets for skin lightening creams.

If I had visited the Gayaza Girls just a week later, I would have given them the example of their South African age mates at [Pretoria Girls' High School who, on the very day that I returned from Uganda, were protesting against bans on afros and other racist practices at their historically white school](#). This incident would have helped me explain how the absence of visible racialized markers—namely white teachers and white classmates with hair “that falls” and is the acceptable standard of feminine “neatness” in school codes of conduct—meant that the Gayaza Girls were spared the same kind of explicitly racial pathological relationship to self and body. The girls were avid readers, and so, if I had had better presence of mind I might have given them a black girlhood reading list: Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Merle Hodge's *Crick Crack, Monkey!*, Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, Kopano Matlwa's *Coconut* or even their own country woman, Doreen Baingana's *Tropical Fish*. Without these examples, the Gayaza Girls and I fumbled our way to some of sort of understanding about this hair issue. The girls thought it a strange experience, but as readers who had developed enough empathy and curiosity to learn of the experiences of far off lands, they smiled and nodded as I shared anecdotes from my years as a black girl aspiring to and failing the standards of “hair that falls.” I was at first a little frustrated that I had to explain, but I quickly reminded myself that this was how it *should* be. This was the beauty of a childhood in which your imagination is fully formed before encountering the daily delusion that is whiteness.

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I had something of this regional “experience gap” in mind when I gate crashed the Aké panel, which began as I expected: How can we as Africans be concerned about Black Lives Matter in the United States when we were not looking after our own in our countries? What are African Americans saying about the Chibok girls? While some of these rhetorical questions contained valid concerns, they were undermined by the generally dismissive and flippant tone towards the subject of race and blackness that I’ve come to expect from many Africans who did not grow up in “former” settler colonies. Fortunately, Kinna Likamini, who had also lived in Zimbabwe and the United States, was able to make the global and historical links of black people within the context of global white supremacy.

All of us are suffering coloniality, it's just that the significant presence of white bodies in South Africa and the United States make it easier to visualize

I complemented her by offering examples of the specific experiences of “former” settler colonial South Africa where, under black governments protecting white property interests, black lives have clearly been shown not to matter. The first was the example of Marikana massacre, where 37 black mine workers demanding decent wages were killed after orders from then-Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa, a shareholder board member of the company, for the police to take “concomitant action.” The second was closer to home. It was my experience as a student in the “Fallist” movement that effectively debunked the myth of Mandela’s Rainbow Nation ever having existed. It began when shit literally hit the University of Cape Town’s (UCT) statue of Cecil John Rhodes’ and students demanded its removal, part of a call to decolonize Eurocentric symbolism, curricula and staff demographics of historically white university campuses such as UCT and Wits University, where I was studying at the time. It then took on a more “bread and butter” focus with the #FeesMustFall protests driven by black students’ demand for a “free, quality decolonized” education. I related how the movement often used the bodies of white students as human shields when encountering police because we knew that they would not let a bullet pierce white skin. And more importantly, we knew and understood that Black bodies, or indeed life do not matter.

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the visibility and presence of whiteness in one location and its invisibility and absence in another, both spaces continue to suffer similar kinds of psychic, material and discursive impact.

Together, Kinna and I argued that the indifference to the missing Chibok girls in Nigeria, the country with the largest black population on the planet, is as much linked to the unpunished police shootings of unarmed black people in America as it is linked to the murder of black mine workers demanding better wages in South Africa as it is to extra-judicial killings in Kenya. All of these different attacks on black bodies—whether on African soil or outside of it—is not unrelated to white racial capitalism and coloniality which is sophisticated enough not to need the presence of white bodies to function. This is after all why, for example, African countries remain one of the world’s largest markets for skin lightening creams. It is why Africans still prize white intellectual labor and cultural output as supreme (whether we admit it or not). It is why a fluency in the colonizing languages of English, French, German, Portuguese, instead of our own indigenous languages, remains the true marker of not only of educatedness but sophistication and worldliness across the continent. It is why in times of emergency our governments will often choose to address foreign press before they address us, their people. It is why a black person in position of authority or wealth might be called “*oyinbo*,” “*muzungu*,” “*umlungu*,” “*murungu*” or “*obroni*” depending on where you are on the continent. All of us are suffering coloniality, it’s just that the significant presence of white bodies in South Africa and the United States make it easier to visualize. The sophisticatedness of white supremacy means that even with the visibility and presence of whiteness in one location and its invisibility and absence in another, both spaces continue to suffer similar kinds of psychic, material and discursive impact.

As we spoke, it wasn’t lost on me that this debate over the “irony” of having to state that “black lives matter” in Africa was taking place in Abéòkuta, or Aké, the storied hometown of Wole Soyinka who had been so unimpressed and impatient with the Negritude movement spearheaded by the Francophone writers of African descent that he famously dismissed them at the 1962 African Writers Conference held at Makerere University, quipping: “A tiger does not proclaim his tigritude, he pounces.” At a conference in Berlin two years later, Soyinka elaborated this: “a tiger does not stand in the forest and say: ‘I am a tiger.’ When you pass where the tiger has walked before, you see the skeleton of the duiker, you know that

some tigritude has been emanated there.”

It's not that Soyinka was the only one to critique the Negritude movement. It was just that he was the loudest, and perhaps the most flippant, in his response. For years I puzzled over what it was that might have made Soyinka so dismissive of his Negritude counterparts. After all, the tiger can only be free to pounce on the poor duiker if his environment is free. Just what kind of environment might have induced Soyinka to pounce on his fellow Africans in the way that he did? The view of Aké from its highest point, Olúmọ Rock, provided me with part of the answer.

After a brisk hike up the Olúmọ Rock stairway, a careful negotiation around the Ifá divination shrines (and their devotees), I turned to an unwitting Nigerian writer: “My brother, *this*, you call a mountain? Come and visit Zimbabwe, the Great House of Stone. You will see boulders and granite mountains so large they make the villages below them look like toy houses. You will see Olúmọ Rocks in everybody's backyard and then you will never waste visitors' time again with *this*.” My Nigerian brother could only offer an apologetic laugh. This time the “giants of Africa” did carry last. Standing out of earshot, I allowed myself to admit that there was something that did impress me at Olúmọ Rock: the view of Abéòkuta, the “refuge among rocks,” the nearly two centuries old African town unmarked by the generational trauma of apartheid era bulldozers and trucks that segregated people into “European” towns and farms and “non-European” “townships” and “homelands” and instead etched with a history that preceded colonialism and succeeded it through its very own idiom, that made the sprawling, undulating terrain of Soyinka's childhood appear to me as luminous and magical as it appears in his 1981 memoir *Aké: The Years of Childhood*.

In his introduction to *In My Father's House*, Ghanaian-American philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah uses Soyinka's Aké childhood to explain why it is that what race meant to the “New Africans”—the generation of African intellectuals of the 1960s educated in the West such as Jomo Kenyatta, Kwame Nkrumah, Kenneth Kaunda and Julius Nyerere—was different to what race meant to “educated blacks in the New World” such as African-American, Afro-Caribbean and Black British people. Appiah argues that, unlike their counterparts who grew up facing the crudest forms of racial and colonial discrimination in the West and the Francophone subcontinent, the likes of Soyinka were “children who were extracted from the traditional culture of their parents and grandparents

and thrust into the colonial school [but] nevertheless fully enmeshed in a primary experience of their own traditions” in cultures where black people were both in the majority *and* their cultural lives continued to be largely controlled by indigenous moral conceptions.

Unlike Soyinka, whose homeland had known a total of 60 years of indirect rule beginning in 1900, his South African contemporary Es'kia Mphahlele, whose country had suffered settler rule since 1652, could relate to the “double consciousness” that black people in the West, Africa’s settler colonies and the Francophone subcontinent know only too well. And so, Mphahlele’s apartheid upbringing led him to criticize the Negritude movement for reasons both more sophisticated and different to Soyinka. Mphahlele’ criticized the “evolue” class of Francophone writers for their “black romanticism” and pointed to Senegalese poet-president Leopold Senghor as a “classic representation” of the movement’s “unholy alliance” with Africa’s emergent national bourgeoisie. In other words, Mphahlele, like many other black South Africans felt that negritude was not radical enough in its challenge to colonial logic.

South Africa’s late poet laureate Keorapetse Kgositsile, who had been exiled to the United States in the early 60s and worked closely with members of the Black Arts movement, persistently argued against Negritude on the grounds that it was a purely cultural or aesthetic approach to black self-determination, that in itself was too dependent on white aesthetics, and so offered a vision of black liberation limited by its concern with justifying itself to a white audience. Disappointed by the First World Festival of Negro Arts hosted by Senghor in Dakar, Kgositsile wrote in his 1968 essay, “I Have Had Enough,” that Negritude is a type of “an academic masturbation or deviation, a kind of mannerism—fornicating with the white eye and then emerging on some stage with Western arguments for the validity and glory of a black Virginité.”

Kgositsile’s critique of negritude’s dependence on white aesthetics and approval was informed by his involvement in the Black Consciousness movement, South Africa’s answer to Black Power and Negritude formed by political leaders such as Bantu Steve Biko, cultural figures such as poets Mongane Wally Serote and Kgositsile and jazz saxophonist Winston Monwabisi “Mankunku” Ngozi. Through it, they defined Blackness beyond simply being oppressed as a “non-white” but as a positive state of mind. For the likes of Mphahlele who grew to adulthood in apartheid South Africa

where their existence was officially defined in the negative as “non-European” and “non-white,” there was no irony in *positively* declaring their “capital-B” Blackness or to demand that the curriculum be decolonized. They were dehumanized as “non-whites” on African soil, and so it was necessary to proclaim their Blackness in order to reclaim their humanity, a feat that was both incontrovertible and incomprehensible to the likes of Soyinka. Mphahlele himself would eventually become the champion of what he called “African humanism,” a philosophy that attempts to undo the kind of psychic damage wrought by apartheid and so poignantly illustrated in his classic 1959 childhood autobiography *Down Second Avenue*.

Even with the creep of British indirect rule, Soyinka’s Aké was not Mphahlele’s Marabastad. If Soyinka’s Aké is enlivened by the strong wafts of the market women’s deep fried akara that “jostled for attention with the tang of roasting coconut slices within farina cakes which we called kasada; with the hard-fried lean meat of tinko; the ‘high,’ rotted-cheese smell of ogiri; roasting corn, fresh vegetables or gbegiri” and his mother’s akara, ogi, moin-moin and agidi, apartheid impoverishes little “Es’kia’s Second Avenue kitchen table so much that it rarely offered more than coffee and bread (with butter when there were visitors) for breakfast and porridge served with meat (or fried tomatoes when there was no money) and on, a Sunday, vegetables too, for supper. Where four year old Wólé could lose himself in pursuit of a police band across the horizon of Aké’s parsonage only to be returned home on the crossbar of a Hausa policeman’s bicycle, Es’kia’s” movements are boxed in by the baton and the open palms of the white and African policemen who patrol their township.

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As an adult, Mphahlele is compelled to leave South Africa for Nigeria in 1957, not only for himself, but for the sake of his two small children and soon to arrive third born. He despairs watching the way his four-year-old Motswiri clings to you tightly when he sees a constable walk up or down the road and says Ntate, is the policeman going to arrest me is he going to take you is he going to take Mamma? You hold the frightened kid close to you and think of Second Avenue the long long great divide. Another time Motswiri comes to you with imitation handcuffs crudely made of wire and shouts “Bring your hands here, where’s your

pass? I'll teach you not to be naughty again." Now he wants a torch and a baton and a big broad belt and a badge, how agonizing!"

Once in Nigeria, the "new air of freedom" is initially bewildering to Mphahlele, but in time he and his wife Rebecca are relieved that their children are visibly happier and "will be able to learn something worthwhile, something that is fit for all mankind, not for slaves." Mphahlele eventually ends his autobiography during his time teaching at CMS Grammar School, Nigeria's oldest secondary school, where he observes that his Nigerian schoolboys are "worlds apart" from his South African boys. For Mphahlele, there is a "complacency" within CMS's "placid" atmosphere, whereas he and his South African schoolboys "were both hungering for many things and getting little, which in turn sharpened the edge of our longings. I responded to every throb of pain and restlessness in them, and I think they responded to my yearnings."

Empathy outside your mother's house

In Mphahlele's sentiments about the differences between his South African and Nigerian schoolchildren lies the question at the crux of this essay: If it is true that we of African descent have grown up in different households, that shape our experiences of the world differently, how do we respond to the pain and yearnings of our sisters? What happens when that pain that is unfamiliar to us because it is pain particular to their households but foreign to ours? If our sisters say there is a fire in their house, do we deny it because there is no fire in ours? Do we shout over their shouts for help because our house is not burning? What if we have never encountered a fire before? Do we criticize the way our sisters try to fan out the flames before we have learnt the nature of fire?

How can we have any meaningful pan-African, and indeed any other kind of, solidarity if we lack empathy for those whose experiences we do not share? Where would the world be if sharing a common experience was the first requirement for supporting another's struggle?

This is exactly what Soyinka did when he pounced on the Negritude writers and proclaimed his own Tigritude. Nigerians who dismiss our understandings of race often use their lack of experience of racial discrimination as the reason for their positions. This is unconvincing. What I find missing in my interactions with many Nigerians who dismiss our experiences of race is this: a profound lack of empathy

that takes the form of unwillingness to understand and share the pain of another, as well as a willful refusal to self-examine the tacit, but powerful presence of the racialized politics that already operates in their own society.

A lack of a direct experience of another's pain is not the basis for dismissal, it is an opportunity to demonstrate empathy and, more importantly, solidarity. How can we have any meaningful pan-African, and indeed any other kind of, solidarity if we lack empathy for those whose experiences we do not share? Where would the world be if sharing a common experience was the first requirement for supporting another's struggle? The irony which seems to be lost on Nigerians who choose to dismiss the struggles of their black sisters is that their country has a long tradition of supporting the struggle for liberation in Southern Africa's minority white settler regimes. Just as Nigeria was preparing itself for independence in October 1960, the 21 March Sharpeville Massacre of 59 black South Africans protesting pass laws led the Nigerian public to pressure what would become Abubakar Tafawa Balewa's government to condemn the apartheid regime. Two years later when Rolihlahla Nelson Mandela clandestinely traveled to Nigeria to get support for the armed struggle, he received it. The next year Prime Minister Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa declared, "We in Nigeria are prepared to do anything towards the liberation of all African countries." Nigerians kept their word. By 1976, Nigerians paid from their pockets to support the liberation struggle through the monthly "Mandela Tax" on civil servant salaries paid into the Southern African Relief Fund (SARF). Young Nigerians, who had been moved by the plight of their South African age mates who had been killed in the 1976 Soweto Uprising formed anti-apartheid clubs such as the Youths United in Solidarity for Southern Africa (YUSSA) and the Nigerian African National Congress Friendship and Cultural Association (ANCFCA), voluntarily contributed to the SARF too. For twenty years Nigeria chaired the United Nations Special Committee Against Apartheid until South Africa finally achieved its democracy in 1994. By then, Nigeria had contributed an estimated US \$61 billion towards the anti-apartheid effort.

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When we talk of solidarity politics we must ask ourselves: What happens when we find ourselves as visitors to the houses of our brothers and sisters? What if we find ourselves permanent adoptees in their homes? How do we behave in our adoptive homes? How then do we respond to the fire in our sisters' homes? When

we do criticize our sisters do we do so out of love or out of contempt? A deep sense of empathy or superior dismissiveness?

The answer is critical.

Of late I think much about these questions, questions of racial and political solidarity, because I've recently moved to America and often have to remind myself that this is not my mother's house. There are things I do not quite understand and must learn about this country. This is despite the fact that it's a country I've always felt quite familiar and comfortable with as I shared in the long-held kinship and solidarity ties between black South Africans and African Americans. From Charlotte Maxeke and WEB Du Bois; Pixley ka Isaka Seme and Alain Locke; Es'kia Mphahlele and Langston Hughes; Miriam Makeba and Sarah Vaughan; Hugh Masekela and Miles Davis; Lewis Nkosi and James Baldwin to Keorapetse Kgositsile and Gwendolyn Brooks; Bessie Head and Toni Morrison; and Ellen Kuzwayo and Audre Lorde, black South Africans and African Americans have always had a way of understanding each other and helping each other through it despite coming up in different homes. When I was a teen developing my political consciousness, Biko's *I Write What I Like* I read alongside *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Matlwa's *Coconut* alongside Angelous's *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* with Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*.

Unlike many Africans Coming to America, I have been black for as long as I can remember. I was black long before I came here. I did not need America to know that I am black. For this reason I often feel I relate far more easily to African-Americans than I do to my African sisters. Indeed, I've long stopped reading a certain type of African immigrant essay. It usually begins with, or includes the assertion that, "the first time I knew I was black was when I arrived in [insert Western country]". It's a favorite essay topic for liberal publications interviewing non-American black people. This essay "genre" would be useful if it were an entry point into a deconstruction of the fallacy of race as biological fact, but all too often all this simply ends in an exposition of what will become life-long indignation that the author could possibly be degraded to the status of black and rarely leads them to develop a broader politics of racial solidarity.

What is perhaps most frustrating about these Africans writing of their sudden awakening to the fact of their blackness is that they rarely fail to reflect on the

crucial fact that their racialization as black people did not occur in the moment of (varying degrees of) voluntary migration to the West in the last few decades but centuries ago when the first Africans were forcibly taken to the New World as enslaved people. If we were, for example, to return to Soyinka's Aké and look more closely at the landscape, we would be confronted with the fact that, while it may be unmarked by the tracks of segregating bulldozers, the terrain does bear scars of the many settlements and displacements wrought by the transatlantic slave trade's destructive path. A closer examination of history would reveal that Ègbá peoples founded Abéòkuta amongst the protective rocky outcrops in the early 19th century as they sought a place of refuge from warring enemies, including [the slave raiding kingdom of Dahomey who unsuccessfully invaded them in the mid 1800s.](#)

It is also true that that very same landscape bears the marks of many other complex settlements and displacements, conquests and defeats which over time has defined how Nigerians might imagine themselves. Long before the British, Nigeria suffered its first wave of colonialism by Arabs who wiped out cultures and instituted the Arabic way of life chiefly in Northern Nigeria. Within the arbitrary border drawn up by the British, the Nigeria of today contains multitudes. Be it in total number - more than 180 million people. Or sheer ethnic diversity - more than 250 ethnic groups. The largely middle class Nigerian writers, students and artists I have read and spoken with over the years about the race issue do not represent the full and highly complex picture of larger Nigerian identities and histories. Indeed, for many, Nigerian identity in and of itself is still up for debate. For many Nigerians, their first consciousness might be as Yorùbá, Igbo, Hausa or any of the other ethnic groups. Aspects such as religion, class and gender further shape the contours of this consciousness. In the end, the tensions between the many Nigerian national consciousnesses are the reason behind conflicts most tragically exemplified in the Biafran War. In a highly unequal society, class wars between the ruling, middle and working classes would also shape much of the Nigerian identity writers bring to bear when they come to [insert Western country]. How an undocumented working class Nigerian will approach American race relations will likely be different to how a multiple passported middle class Nigerian will do.

As a friend told me of his own experience as a working class Nigerian poet in America, those working class Nigerians, particularly with no papers, long accustomed to the experience of operating at the margins of society even in their home countries, would not only likely find it easier than their middle class counterparts to grapple with the kind of marginalization blackness confers in the West but, find it easier to empathize with and stand in solidarity with the racial struggles of their hosts. (We get something of the impact of class difference in recent African immigrant fiction, where for example, the Princeton-going Ifemelu of Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* and the Ivy League family of Taiye Selasie's *Ghana Must Go* (who would very easily fit Selasie's Afropolitan tag) take on American racial politics in ways very different to the asylum seeking limousine driving Jende Jonga of Mbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* and Darling, the undocumented preteen of NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*.)

This complexity of identity is true of many other African countries also suffering the consequences of arbitrary colonial borders, nonetheless, it's still troubling that the African writers making claims about blackness as only "discoverable" in the West are speaking as though the racialized understanding can only come as a result of experience. More than ever, before we can only no longer say we are unaffected by racial consideration no matter where we may be located because its shapes and contours are beamed to us daily through our screens (and, long before that, if we cared to *really* read each other, that is, with a deep sense of empathy, we would know the pain of our sisters' homes intimately). It seems a disingenuous claim. It's one thing to say they may not have experienced it directly but to say they are not aware of racial subjectivity and subjection is willful ignorance and a lack of emotional and political imagination. These are writers after all: does that mean that everything they write about they have experienced or have familiarity with it? The question is what is the political purchase or utility of making such a declaration? Why are so many of these writers seemingly so apolitical around race politics and deliberately refuse to understand these basic ethics of solidarity and instead bask in the glory of individuated reward of model minority?

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For all my familiarity and ease with American racial politics, I constantly have to remind myself that this is not my mother's house. What I mean by that is that I am

a newly arrived “cousin-sister” to the house built by my African American sisters and currently occupied by white Americans. For all the similarities black South Africans and African Americans share, there are important differences between a white-dominated white majority country and a white-dominated black majority country, and so, perhaps for some time, I should keep quiet and observe how and why things are done as they are in the house before I begin to pounce with my declarations on how best to do things.

Long before I moved to America, my years as a Zimbabwean born African living in South Africa since I was three years old taught me something of the political ethics involved in making a home of my sisters’ house. (To be clear, I claim both South Africa and Zimbabwe as my homes). Among them is to understand that the cardinal rule for white nations is that everybody always loves somebody else’s n*gger. It is why the French will welcome African Americans in France, while shunning Francophone Africans and Arabs. It is why white Americans will welcome (documented) Africans while shunning African Americans. It is why white Australians will welcome Africans while shunning Aboriginal Australians. In response to this, the foundational rule is that wherever you find yourself in the world, in whose house you find yourself, it is your duty to align yourself with the struggle of the oppressed in that country and actively resist being used to undermine that struggle. Abiding by this duty is made possible by having the humility to understand that if it weren’t for the very struggle you might feel inclined to dismiss (because you have yet to understand it), you would not be able to make a successful life in your adoptive country in the first place. Likewise, it is your duty to actively seek an understanding of the historical context of your sisters’ historical and current struggle, so that you aren’t liable to the popular ahistorical and decontextualized myths about their conditions you will encounter outside of your mother’s house.

During my brief stint in corporate South Africa, I once had a lunch with my (non-black) boss who praised me as a model black as he bemoaned the (black) South Africans workplace performance by throwing around statements that are not uncommonly used by the Zimbabwean community in South Africa: “[Black] South Africans are uneducated, they don’t like school.” Too often I’ve heard fellow Zimbabweans, who take pride in our supposed status as Africa’s most educated population, glibly agree with white South Africans that black South Africans “don’t like school” and are “uneducated.” When we do this, we dismiss

history and we dismiss context. Despite my growing political consciousness, I hadn't developed a politics of solidarity that could grapple with the anti-black roots of the South African xenophobia (as I've since done [here](#) and [here](#)) that myself and many foreign-born nationals experienced and so I didn't use my knowledge of the country's history to rebut my boss's claims about black South Africans as I should have. I should've told him that while black Zimbabweans also suffered a colonial education system, it did not reach the degradations of the apartheid government's Bantu Education system which not only tribalized education and destroyed the mission education system that had produced the earliest generation of nationalist leaders such as Mandela and Mangaliso Robert Sobukwe, but was explicitly designed to teach black students to be, in the words of the grand architect of apartheid Hendrik Verwoerd, "hewers of wood and drawers of water". I should have told him about black South Africans who demonstrated that they "don't like school" by, for example, getting banned from teaching Es'kia Mphahlele as did a result of his activism and losing their lives, as hundreds of Black Consciousness Movement inspired high school students did during the 1976 Soweto Uprisings against the introduction of Afrikaans as the medium of instruction. If I had a sufficiently developed politics of black solidarity at that time I would have told my boss not to use my example as a second-generation university graduate, (curtsey of post-independence state sponsored loans and bursaries that made it possible for mission educated black Zimbabweans like my parents to have a tertiary education) to perpetuate falsehoods about black South Africans' educational achievement.

Had I been more knowledgeable, I might have taken something from the example of the late Nigerian-American anthropologist John Ogbu who actively sought to disprove racist myths about the academic achievement gap between racial minorities in the United States, where Nigerians are the most educated population group in the country, often held up as a "model minority". Ogbu's seminal research demonstrated that cultural differences alone cannot account for differences in achievement, arguing that in the American context, one of the key reasons "voluntary minorities" such as Nigerian-Americans tend to outperform "involuntary" or "caste-like" minorities such as African Americans is because they lack the "historical baggage" that leads them to develop to an oppositional position to the dominant white American culture. This lack of "historical baggage" puzzlingly leads to

an ahistorical attitude among highly educated African immigrants who bemoan the “laziness” of their African-American counterparts and seem unable to acknowledge the important history of black struggles for the very education they enjoy. The ahistorical attitude sees them unable to acknowledge the contribution of historically black colleges and universities to African American advancement, the tireless campaigns that pushed through Brown vs Education Board, or the brave black children who faced jeers, spit and death threats from children and adults alike to desegregate the very institutions they now excel in.

Ogbu’s example is a useful counterpoint to the kind of anti-black falsehoods contained in the late *African Sun Times* publisher Chika Onyeani’s 2000 best-seller *Capitalist Nigger: The Road to Success, a Spider-Web Doctrine*. Onyeani’s book did the rounds in the South Africa of my teenagehood, a time when much of white South Africa began to kick up a fuss about the emerging black middle class and then President Thabo Mbeki’s Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) policies - not because they were truly invested in a leftist or black radical critique of BEE’s neoliberal “trickle down economics” that have not addressed the fundamental questions of post-apartheid economic justice and redistribution, but because it was money in undeserving black hands. In this contested climate, *Capitalist Nigger* spurred much debate for its central argument that black people are an unproductive consumer race who must mimic Asians and adopt what he calls a “spider-web doctrine. Long before the debates about colonialism set off by *Things Fall Apart* (shockingly, our first set work by a black African writer) in our final year of high school, the national debate set off by Onyeani’s book found its way into a discussion between my white schoolmates and I. Without the tools to meaningfully engage the subject many of us teens eagerly parroted the book’s many pseudo self-reliance arguments such as this: “Blacks are economic slaves. We are owned lock stock and barrel by people of European-origin ... I am tired of hearing Blacks always blaming others for their lack of progress in this world; I am tired of the whining and [victim-mentality](#). I am tired of listening to the same complaint, day in day out - racism this, racism that. It’s getting us nowhere.”

Aside from the many inaccuracies Onyeani relied on to make his arguments, he leaned heavily on tired racial myths and stereotypes. As [the infamous keynote speaker at a Black Management Forum \(BMF\) conference held in Johannesburg in October 2005](#), Onyeani drew on stereotypes of “lazy blacks” and “successful and

entrepreneurial Indians” to infamously “critique” the state of black economic transformation eleven years after the end of apartheid saying: “The black middle class in South Africa must study what has happened in the 52 African states and also in India. You are not only middle class but also black intellectual class. The African renaissance demands that we purge ourselves of this parasite. You don’t have to be parasitic on the rest of society because you feel you are entitled. I don’t want us to mortgage the future of our children for a quick-fix economic solution.”

Ironically, the conference session was chaired by Xolela Mangcu, a South African scholar and biographer of Steve Biko and his politics of black self-determination. Mangcu, a long-time critic of Onyeani’s economic gospel, reminded Onyeani that India’s success in the world economy, particularly in the United States, was the result of generations of the wealthy class preserving and passing their wealth on. Importantly, in the US where people of Indian descent have the highest per capita income, this had nothing to do with India achieving independence in 1947. Within India itself, he went on to point out, there is a huge wealth divide that leaves the majority dirt poor. After Mangcu cited several academic sources to support his claims, Onyeani retorted: “Our intellectual class likes putting forward ideas which other people have written.”

We could all too easily dismiss Onyeani’s “original ideas” if there weren’t the likes of US-based Nigerian Booker Prize shortlistee Chigozie Obioma to take on the mantle of bootstrap race “analysis” in a more sophisticated manner. A few months before the 2016 Aké Festival Black Lives Matter panel, Obioma saw it fit to make his intervention into the debate as the wave of protests over the murders of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile in July 2016 engulfed the United States. The thesis of Obioma’s Foreign Policy op-ed titled [“There Are No Successful Black Nations”](#) is that “the core reason why black people have remained synonymous with the denigrating experience of racism. It is, I dare say, because of the worldwide indignity of the black race.” This argument is tolerable enough until Obioma pulls an Onyeani by insisting that “Black elites and activists across the world have adopted a culture of verbal tyranny in which they shut down any effort to reason or criticize us or black-majority nations by labelling such attempts as ‘racism’ or ‘hate speech’.” To bolster his argument, Obioma makes a familiar appeal to “[g]reat men like Marcus Garvey, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Malcolm X” who understood that “the future of their race could not be advanced by endless

protests or marches of “equality” or “justice.”

After dismissing the necessity of protest in struggle, Obioma goes on to hold up his country of birth Nigeria as an example of an African state on the brink of collapse because of a “culture of incompetence, endemic corruption, dignified ineptitude, and, chief among all, destructive selfishness and greed.” While these are undeniable contributing factors, Obioma’s argument remains shallow as he fails to nuance it by speaking, for example, to the continent’s historic underdevelopment (see, for example, Walter Rodney), nor the history of Western nations undermining democracy by intervening and propping up the very dictators he bemoans (see, for example, [the CIA’s declassified documents](#)). The net effect is an argument with an unfortunate lack of analysis of power, political economy and history echoing Onyeani’s, that black people should shut up about their oppressions and simply pull themselves up by the bootstraps.

This Soyinka-esque impulse to wade in and pounce on debates on the racial struggles of their sisters is as baffling as it is laughable. If it is that the impulse comes from the sense of superiority derived from having “never experienced racism”, you would think that our Ethiopian sisters, the only ones amongst us all to have never been colonized, would be pouncing all over race debates too? Surely they would be the loudest and most biting in their dismissal of the protests of their colonized sistren? Much in the same way that I do not expect white people to have well developed racial politics, I do not expect Nigerians I come across to have well developed racial politics. It is, quite frankly, guilty until proven innocent.

I borrow this essay’s title from British-Nigerian journalist Renni Eddo-Lodge’s best-selling *Why I’m No Longer Talking to White People About Race* because I do believe that my Nigerian sisters have the ability to engage racial politics meaningfully. It’s just that a significant number choose not to. And when they choose not to engage meaningfully they usually choose to do it loudly. In response, I choose to engage “Africa’s Giants” at their level by borrowing from the famously combative style of the (Black Arts Movement) inspired Bolekaja intellectual tradition championed by the notorious troika of Chinweizcu Ibekwe, Ihechukwu Madubuikwe and Onwuchekwa Jemie. Since you will not be quiet my Nigerian brothers and sisters, Giants of Africa, *bolekaja!* Come down from your glass house and let’s fight! Come down and let’s fight about this thing we call race.

Redeeming Nigerian Tigritude

Just before I traveled to the 2016 Aké Festival, my first experience of Nigerian “Tigritude” took place within the Johannesburg consulate in which the low-grade international diplomacy war between South Africa and Nigeria plays out. It was there that I first encountered the decidedly abrasive and confrontational manner that is an adjustment for many of us in Southern Africa who tend to be more indirect and polite (although we can never match the “*Pole, Pole*” of Zanzibaris).

As I sat waiting for my turn for my visa to be processed, a white man turned up. He demanded to speak to the manager. With the arrogance typical of white South Africans in their dealings with black South African civil servants, the white man rolled out his best “Where is your manager routine?”. The Nigerian civil servant he was shouting at to look up from his desk and reply calmly, “I am the man”. The white man continued to shout. The Nigerian manager rose to his full height. He reprimanded the white man like he was his schoolboy. As a headmaster does, he finished his dress down of the white man by instructing him to sit down. He would serve him when he was ready. The white man did as he was told and thanked the manager for his time.

Having suffered many South African queues in my lifetime, I can almost certainly guarantee that if a black South African manager had decided to defend their dignity, they would do so by first declaring that they are a proud black person and on that basis would not allow themselves to be treated by a white man in this way. The ordeal might have lasted longer, drawn in more people and unlikely have ended with the white man expressing his gratitude for the black man’s graciousness. While it is true that the manager’s booming voice and imposing physical stature already gave him an unfair advantage, I can say almost certainly that it was his Nigerian “Tigritude” that allowed him to summarily dismiss the white man’s temper tantrum, not necessarily because he was a racist oyinbo (which he almost certainly was), but simply because he was a client with bad home training behaving badly in his house. Negritude? Tigritude!

I will never repeat these words anywhere else, but let it be said here: sometimes it is only Nigerian arrogance that can successfully stare down white racial arrogance. With a little more sobriety, I use this example to argue that there is indeed much to be gained for black people all over the world in having the most

populous black nation be one in which black people walk tall and do not cower in the face of white supremacy. The trouble is when that confidence veers into the kind of loud and dismissive arrogance that it so often does.

Aside from the late Ogbu, there are many other Nigerian academics, writers, artists, and intellectuals such as [Bibi Bakare Yusuf](#), [Olu Oguibe](#), [Ashley Akunna](#), [Hakim Adi](#), [Biodun Jeyifo](#) and [Moses Ochonu](#) who have engaged with the subject of race with that rare combination of rigor and empathy, using their Nigerian experience as an opportunity to build and not to undermine broader black struggles. They act within Nigeria's long tradition of supporting black struggle. Since Nigeria's independence in 1960, individuals (including Soyinka himself), movements, organizations and the state played an important role in Southern Africa's liberation struggles against white settler rule. Along with the Frontline States, Nigeria was actively involved in the negotiations, embargoes, boycotts, and economic sanctions that eventually brought an end to official apartheid. Shortly after the recent passing of Okwui Enwezor, a son of Anambra whose groundbreaking work in the art world demonstrated a fierce commitment to a radical ethics and politics of black and pan-Africanist solidarity, African American artist Hank Willis-Thomas hailed him as a "true titan", saying, "[I once asked how he was able to walk into so many spaces being the only one and accomplish so much radical change with such poise. He replied simply, 'It's because Nigerians are Fearless.'](#)"

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If Nigerians want to be the true Giants of Africa and, indeed, the world, they must walk it with the empathy and humility befitting of a true politics of black and pan-Africanist solidarity. If instead, you walk as giants blind to the pain and the struggles of your sisters, your presence only serves to destroy the work done by others instead of elevating us all to new heights.

Editors note: This essay was originally published in [Africa as a country](#) with the title, *Why I'm no longer talking to Nigerians about race.*