Fractures and Tensions in the Anti-Racism Movement

By Sanya Osha

Sometimes tensions between continental Africans and their African American brethren mount over trivial things due to their ostensibly deep-rooted differences. But really these differences ought not be so significant as to weaken the quest to confront and defeat racism wherever it is found. The deaths of Trayvon Martin, George Floyd and Breonna Taylor are all testimonies as to why white supremacy is so toxic.

African Americans are undoubtedly best equipped to read, analyse and deconstruct white supremacy, having been on the battle lines for over four hundred and fifty years. From centuries of slavery to Jim Crow segregation, systematic lynching, civil rights activism and disillusionment and the present age of mass incarceration, African Americans have seen it all, and continue to suffer the devastating effects of living in the trenches of institutionalised racism.

Being minorities in a white-dominated United States, contained in bleak urban ghettos that are now undergoing steady gentrification, they also have to endure the traumas of constant police brutality. They are a community under siege on multiple fronts as their neighbourhoods are being decimated by fractured and disappearing families, targeted gentrification, mass incarceration, drug abuse and despair.
During the COVID-19 pandemic, death rates among African Americans have been disproportionately higher than other racial groups and this had led to considerable public outcry. Again, their position within American society demonstrates their obvious vulnerability. They are especially vulnerable not only to disease but also have relatively few means of redress.

The #BlackLivesMatter movement has received mixed reactions within the community as many argue that it lacks grassroots support and is being sponsored by white liberal donors and sympathisers. Since the era of Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Medgar Evers, Kwame Toure (formerly Stokely Carmichael) and Huey Newton, amongst others, there has not emerged a cohort of black leaders with the vision, commitment, sincerity and energy to match those illustrious forebears.

After the civil rights movement of the 1960s, the assassinations of Malcolm and Martin, the penetration of radical activist groups by the FBI, and the heroin epidemic that blighted black neighbourhoods, the political momentum has arguably not been sustained.

Following the gains of the civil rights movement, Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton further inflicted harm on the black community through a series of repressive legislation that birthed the age of mass incarceration, chillingly covered by the author and academic Michelle Alexander in her bestselling book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*.

The scourge of crack cocaine must also be added to this already malevolent social equation. Families and neighbourhoods were denuded of health, social services, stability and financial viability. Knowledge, wisdom, and wholesome experience were substituted with fear, paranoia and degeneracy.

Hip hop as a cultural form was in its ascendancy, having managed to crawl out of the neglected borough of the Bronx. Just like funk, R&B and other black music forms, this particular genre also aspired to be therapeutic, or at least soul-lifting. For a while, it represented the angst and perplexities of the “hood”, and subsequently, the righteous rage of the bona fide political rebel. But after experiencing phenomenal success, it fizzled out in an anti-climactic tsunami of bling, bombast, shallow consumerism and toxic misogyny.

For the first time in recent memory, blacks were able to produce a music utterly devoid of soul meant to soundtrack the last days of an era indelibly marked by Babylonian excess and decadence. In South Africa, droves of no-talent copycats, seduced by the grand spectacle flashed by mainstream American hip hop, discarded their indigenous traditions and sheepishly adopted American mannerisms.

A source of tension between Africans and African Americans is the type of black people who are admitted to the United States to live and work. Radical black Americans claim that since the supposedly unfavourable experiences of white supremacists with radicals, such as the redoubtable black pioneer Marcus Garvey, who was originally from Jamaica, and activist Kwame Toure, who came from Trinidad and Tobago, white supremacists in the US have been careful with the type of people they admit from the Caribbean and Africa. An argument is made by black American radicals that only those who readily support and uphold the tenets and institutions of white supremacy are now being admitted.
Those same black American radicals point to the fact that the first black president of the United States, Barack Obama – who is not considered a foundational black American (FBA) by any stretch of imagination – whose father was of Kenyan origin, did nothing for black folk but went out of his way to benefit the LGBTGI community and immigrants, particularly from Mexico and other countries in the region. Obama, they claim, was not accountable to black America, and did not want to be accountable because he had not been made by black America.

Kamala Harris, the current vice presidential candidate of the Democratic Party, has a father originally from Jamaica and an Indian mother. According to radical black Americans, Harris is bound to create the sort of problems they encountered with Obama. They argue that the ever-calculating white media attempts to present her as a credible political representative of black America because she apparently looks like them. But all similarities end there. The white media is trying to foist Harris upon the black electorate with claims that she attended Howard University, a historically black college. But black radicals are not having any of it.

Instead, they (black radicals) dug into Harris’s past professional conduct and discovered that as an attorney working for the state of California, she notched an alarmingly high rate of prosecutions, convictions and incarceration of black people. Indeed these frightening rates could only please white supremacists and not black folk. So black radicals claim that if she is voted into power under a Joe Biden ticket as vice president, black folk are not to expect anything better from her. Before they give her their vote and support, they are asking her for tangible deliverables.

As of this point, Harris isn’t talking. Black radicals claim the days of black political representatives receiving their vote merely because of the colour of their skin are long gone. They now preach the mantra of “tangibles” to any prospective black political representative.

On the question of political and cultural representation in the present culture of hoods created by blacks, there does not appear to be a music genre that can inspire and transform lives as in the days of yore. Policies and strategies of integration pursued by US governments (which were meant to fool everyone) in the wake of the civil rights movement deceive no one. The partiality, inequality, division and bigotry are there for everyone to see.

However, the lives and accomplishments of Nat Turner, Harriet Tubman, Ida B. Wells, Marcus Garvey and a host of other pioneers are not always accorded their rightful place in the American public mind. And only “woke” folk know the true meaning of Pan-Africanism.

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On the African continent, befuddled by disemboweled US hip hop culture and the hype of #BlackLivesMatter, we attempt to take hesitant steps towards the blinding glare, unsure of how to act or how we would be received. The derelict hoods of the US seem to mirror our own mismanaged and misgoverned countries, which have variously been described as failed states.

African Americans, on the other hand, are filing into Africa at encouraging rates, tracing their genetic ancestry back to the motherland, often settling permanently along the coast of West Africa, longing to ingest melanin-rich air indefinitely. Away from relatively melanin-deprived political and cultural environments, they genuflect before myriad departed ancestors in rituals of ineffable spiritual communion: “We have come home, receive us steadily into the ceaseless warmth of your unfathomable bosom.”
Lost African youth, on the other hand, see these rejuvenated American returnees and hear the conflicted sounds of Lil Wayne, Kid Cudi, Fetty Wap, ASAP Rocky and Lil Nas X and sense Eldorado, a tortuous and deadly path of escape from the Western media-created images of their insufferable hell holes.

On both sides, namely black America and Africa, mass confusion often abounds, creating expectations that remain largely unfulfilled and hungers that are unlikely to be satiated.

First, in the recent past, the Western media manufactured false narratives about the Dark Continent. Now, children of both black America and Africa often neglect to discover the real truth about their heritage, leaving them both to re-live the unimaginable horrors of their past anew, only that this time around, they are locked in mental prisons entirely of their own making.

Undoubtedly, continental Africans have a lot to learn from their African American cousins in relation to race politics and white supremacy. In this regard, a great deal of humility and restraint is required. As things stand, African Americans have too much on their plate already. The chameleonic properties of racism are remarkably protean. American society was built on the prolonged enslavement of blacks, hence the rise of American Descendants of Slaves (ADOS) activism. Then there was Jim Crow oppression and the destructive infiltration of the civil rights movement and other strategies of containment and suppression specifically targeting blacks.

Under the auspices of ADOS and its growing drive for social transformation and reparations for black Americans due to the multiple forms of suffering caused by slavery, the term African American is becoming obsolete. Black American, once fashionable and then passé, is returning as the appropriate term to call peoples of African descent in the United States. This group makes it abundantly clear that they are quite distinct from Africans and people from the Caribbean based in the US – a distinction that justifies their quest to secure the fruits of reparations. While initially it might prove to be a compact strategy for obtaining reparations, it blurs the Pan-Africanist vision and makes it arguably less potent. In this regard, ADOS, or foundational black Americans (FBA), as they now prefer to call themselves, may be viewed as somewhat shortsighted and unduly materialistic, which throws out of the window the accomplishments of the likes of W.E.B. Dubois, Marcus Garvey and John Henrik Clarke.

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The phases of oppression developed by white supremacists simply keep mutating, refining tactile mechanisms of suppression even before their intended victims are able to anticipate them. These strategies have had centuries of experimentation to improve themselves. And then they possess false ideologies to camouflage themselves. Black resistance, on the other hand, is often reactive, kept on its hind legs, forever on the defensive due to the fact that oppressive mechanisms are constantly shifting. This is black America’s greatest challenge – to move successfully from a defensive posture to a proactive one while at the same time keeping in mind the many lessons learnt from centuries of struggle.

The Haitian Revolution, which birthed the first independent black country in the Western hemisphere, continues to be a shining example. In order to accomplish its success, it had to purge
itself of its internal doubters and dissenters.

Currently, as mentioned earlier, black America has very few, if any, leaders within its ranks that possess undeniable mass appeal and grassroots support. It is also fractured by numerous ideological factions and tendencies that make it difficult to identify and pursue a cohesive agenda. Furthermore, the various institutions of racism have become more diverse and entrenched.

Nonetheless, all is not lost; true revolution has always been the art of the impossible and black America generally has proven itself, time and again, to be uncommonly resourceful and courageous.

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