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Meditations on the Dead, the Dying and the Displaced: Theorizing Structural Anti-blackness as the Root Cause of Africa's "Forever Wars"

Abstract: This chapter interrogates global anti-blackness and white supremacy as enduring, foundational forces that choreograph and haunt the genealogy of international relations, alongside the formation of modern African governance, sovereignty, sociality, subjection and insurrection. It critiques mainstream Western scholarship and media representations that attribute the provocation of African insurgents to supposed cultural or moral deficiencies, and/or to biological inferiority. Instead, this chapter puts forth the argument that Africa's humanitarian crises, particularly the proliferation of protracted wars in the post-Cold War era, are entrenched within a global anti-black onto-political order forged by the system of transatlantic slavery and sustained in its afterlife. Bringing into relief the cases of enduring conflict in Liberia and Sudan, as well as the death-bound trajectories of black migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea, this chapter interrogates the inordinate conditions of violence enclosing African life. The chapter further critiques the conceptual inadequacy of international relations theory to address the violence of global anti-blackness, given its historical complicity in vindicating slavery, colonialism and imperialism. Employing Afro-pessimism and racial capitalism as interpretive frameworks, this chapter situates Africa's crises within the transnational historical schema of the circum-Atlantic world. The chapter foregrounds the "migratory" logics (McKittrick, 2013) and operations of the plantation as both a material and symbolic site sustaining the modern international order. Withal, contending that as the struggle for black liberation is border crossing and spatially unbounded, we must liberate our theoretical inquiries in ways that confront the global machinations of racialized subjection, expropriation and immiseration.

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Key Words: Transatlantic slavery, anti-black violence, ethnonationalism, armed conflicts in Africa, Mediterranean migration.

Introduction

The categorization of post-colonial African conflicts as merely ethnic in nature distorts their underlying sequelae—that is their complexities and forerunning histories¹—and consequently forecloses several critical affordances. However, since the end of the Cold War, a burgeoning body of international relations (IR) literature has affirmed and indexed European imperialism, particularly the colonial era “divide and rule” *modi operandi*, as a pivotal aspect in the production of colonial difference and as a “root cause” of the proliferation of organized ethnonationalist violence and political unrest in Africa.² And while it is recognized that the profits generated from transatlantic slavery sponsored Western European expansionism and the development of industrial-capitalist societies,³ the catastrophic bearing of racial slavery on the socio-political and cultural topography of West and Central Africa and its still-unfolding reverberations has not been fully reckoned with. Certainly, it is imperative to consider how the spectre of the plantation is a constitutive aspect in the genealogy of modern forms of African governance, sovereignty, sociality, subjection and insurrection. Moving beyond ideas of the African continent as a discrete or insular political, social and cultural unit, we must attempt to re-think Africa’s history and enduring predicaments vis-à-vis a broader history of the circum-Atlantic world.

Articulated in this chapter is a theoretical and epistemic intervention into discussions about Africa’s “unending wars” as a “puzzle”⁴ for political thought. Indeed, white supremacy (anti-blackness) functioned as the most significant Euro-American cultural export of the early 20th century, moulding, in its own image, the development and contours of racism in the subaltern regions of the globe.⁵ It remains disconcerting, then, that IR theory has yet to adequately account for the materialization of US plantation racism beyond American borders. This forwards a general problematic as the dehumanizing logics of chattel slavery

1 Do Céu Pinto Arena (2022). The impact of ethnic groups on international relations.

2 Fanon (1968). *The wretched of the earth*; Berman (1998). Ethnicity, patronage, and the African state: The politics of uncivil nationalism. Nkrumah (1965); Young (1986); Ranger (2012).

3 Van de Walle (2007). *African economies and the politics of permanent crisis: 1979–1999*; Williams (1994); Rodney (1982); Mkandawire (2001).

4 Vasquez (2009).

5 Vitalis (2000), p. 337.

extend far beyond the physical enclosure of the plantation, enfleshing all African people with the degradations constitutive to racial slavery, irrespective of their histories outside the Americas.⁶ To echo WEB Du Bois' (1906) enunciation of the problem, "the Negro problem in America is but a local phase of a world problem".⁷ And while there exists an extensive body of historical literature interrogating the impact of slavery on the African continent, providing insights into demographic shifts and community-level political impacts ascending from the trade,⁸ systemic analyses of race and racialization are inadequate. Such theoretical failings persist with few exceptions. Against this discursive scene, this chapter raises questions about why, then, the transatlantic slave economy and "post-colonial armed rebel movements in Africa"⁹ continue to be treated as discrete phenomena. Surely, if war is a continuation of politics by other means,¹⁰ we should consider how the vestiges of colonialism and racial slavery persistently haunt systems, drive the ideologies held by political actors, orchestrate their manoeuvres, and shadow our methods for studying and analyzing modern warfare and international relations at large. Such a consideration might unearth new insights from well-trodden discursive terrains. What sorts of breaks or conceptual spaces surface when we study Africa's predicaments from the vantage point of Afro-pessimism and struggle with how anti-black hierarchies of "the human" have configured international affairs and liberal order? Given that the struggle for black liberation is border crossing and spatially unbounded, how might we liberate our theoretical inquiries in ways that confront the global machinations of racialized subjection, expropriation and immiseration?¹¹ This chapter attempts to do just that.

The chapter begins by tracing the genealogy of racial blackness as both a metaphysical construct and a global structural relation, forged through sustained symbolic and material violence. By centering the structural specificity of anti-blackness, we move beyond liberal development discourses and confront capitalism not as a neutral, meritocratic system but as an inherently racial and racializing global-historical order.¹² Racial capitalism, defined as "the process of deriving social and economic value from the racial identity of another person" (Leong, 2013, p. 2152), is predicated on the categorical distinction between

6 Walcott (2021). *The Long Emancipation*, p. 201.

7 Du Bois (1906). *The color line belts the world*.

8 Rodney (1982).

9 Mkandawire (2002). The terrible toll of post-colonial 'rebel movements' in Africa, p. 181.

10 Clausewitz (1918). *On war*.

11 Kuumba (2003). Introduction: African feminisms in exile: Diasporan, transnational, and transgressive.

12 Fraser (2023), p. 20; Robinson and Kelley (2000); Williams (1994); Blackburn (2010); Paton (2022).

blackness and “the Human.” This ontological distinction sustains a global order under which black life is structurally positioned as fungible and expendable, governed by necropolitical¹³ logics that normalize prolonged suffering and premature death as the quotidian condition of existence for African populations.

I argue that any phenomenological analysis of ethnic nationalism in Africa must trace its origins to Europe, where the ideologies of race, ethnicity and nationalism were first manufactured. Like blackness, ethnonationalism is not native to Africa; rather, it is a European invention that has been pathologized and criminalized when mobilized in African states post-independence. While the prevailing corpus of literature attributes these conflicts to factors such as ethnic and religious antagonisms, economic inequality and political exclusion, this chapter demonstrates how such factors are symptomatic of the afterlives of racial slavery. Particularly, ethnonationalism is always operating within the fold of a gratuitous anti-black world-making scheme where the manoeuvres of “corporate, state, individual, and institutional bodies are sometimes beyond the self-possessed will of the living” (Dillon, 2012, p. 114).

The Political Nature of Empathy

I write this chapter in the aftermath of Donald Trump’s second election victory in the United States—a moment marked by his rhetoric of countering so-called “anti-white sentiment”.¹⁴ I find myself meditating on a global mise-en-scène defined by the resurgence of fascism and white supremacist nationalist movements, escalating humanitarian emergencies, and protracted armed conflicts in Africa—such as those currently unfolding in Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). I am reminded that in 2022, African students in Ukraine were blocked from crossing European borders following Russia’s invasion. The European Union’s (EU) sponsoring of migrant prisons specifically designed to incarcerate asylum seekers of African descent sharply contrasts with the swift and urgent humanitarian aid extended to white Ukrainians seeking safety. Even the United States proffered asylum offers to Ukrainians, juxtaposed with the concurrent deportation of Haitian and Cameroonian asylum seekers.¹⁵ Blackened people are imagined as the “carriers of terror”,¹⁶ that is to say, as a threat to

¹³ Mbembé, J., & Meintjes, L. (2003). Necropolitics. *Public Culture* 15(1), pp. 11–40.

¹⁴ <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/world/usa/news/trump-vows-fight-anti-white-sentiment-us-3602311>, accessed Dec. 2024

¹⁵ Osei-Opare and Loyd (2022).

¹⁶ Sharpe (2016), p. 15.

security,¹⁷ rather than bodies seeking refuge from the incessant terrors of war, systematic violence and persecution.

In the “afterlife of slavery”,¹⁸ these crises, and the callous indifference with which they have been met, exemplify global society’s generalized and unceasing “cultural disregard and disgust with Blackness”.¹⁹ The central proposition of my argument in this chapter is that seemingly disparate manifestations of anti-black violence are in fact interlocked. These happenings include the systemic criminalization and brutalization of black bodies sanctioned by the neoliberal carceral state (in the United States, Brazil, Canada, etc.), ethnically-driven conflicts across sub-Saharan Africa, the surge of migrants risking their lives to cross the Mediterranean, and the tepid and callous response of the nominal “international community”. I use “nominal” deliberately, as the term refers to a select group of powerful northern hemisphere states, existing in practice only as an exclusive geopolitical construct.²⁰ They represent the modern material and affective sequelae of the transatlantic slave trade, and demonstrate the enduring ways in which “Black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago.”²¹ Indeed, the exorbitant violence that chattel slavery unleashed has only become more established, obfuscated and perfected with the accumulation of modern time. Considering the worsening violence of our times, this chapter disavows any teleological narratives of African progress (i.e. the celebratory “Africa rising” narratives) and contends with the cyclicity of the structural and existential violence which continues to possess black life-worlds or, as Toni Morrison articulates in *Beloved*, “all of it is now [...] it is always now”.²²

I begin with a comparative example that provides historical context and clarifies my earlier point about the unequal affective and political responses to large-scale carnages that unfold in non-white geographies, and the resulting injury and loss of life. Consider that the devastation of the Holocaust in Europe during WWII (1941–1945) formed the conceptual basis of what is now referred to as “international human rights law” and “crimes against humanity”.²³ Indeed, the Holocaust in particular has come to be considered ground zero with regard to evidence of unspeakable violence and human depravity in the modern era—it

¹⁷ Ibrahim (2005).

¹⁸ Hartman (2006). *Lose your mother: A journey along the Atlantic slave route*.

¹⁹ Dumas (2016), p. 11.

²⁰ Pillay (2011).

²¹ Hartman (2006), p. 6.

²² Morrison (2019). *Beloved*.

²³ Germain (2022). *Why do Holocaust issues matter for foreign policy?*

constitutes *the* paradigmatic “state of exception” (*Ausnahmezustand*).²⁴ Conversely, the concentration camps/death camps (*Todeslager*) of Nazi Germany are historically contiguous with preceding colonial and genocidal regimes.²⁵ That is to say, modern concentration camps find their conceptual pedigrees, for instance, in the “indian removal” camps of the 1830s, originally devised to detain 22,000 Cherokee.²⁶ Nazi-state death camps are also contiguous with the occurrence of the Atlantic crossing that ensued through the “door of no return”, the door through which kidnapped Africans were chained and incarcerated in the congested holds of slave ships making the journey to the “New World”.²⁷

The framework of what is now recognized as “international law”, that is the rules governing intercontinental trade, maritime sovereignty and the conduct of nations at sea, was devised entirely by European powers profiting from the slave trade. Africans were categorically excluded from contributing to or shaping these legal norms.²⁸ The stolen African body was rendered fungible, made legible only as insurable cargo under the purview of property law, without claim to legal personhood. As Nourbese Philip writes in *Zong!*,²⁹ Africans were “transformed into a thing by the law”, reduced to meagre equipment for capitalist accumulation. The notion of this “infinitely suffering thing” (Elliot, 1920)³⁰ is constitutive to the foundational logics of modernity.

By way of another example, concentration camps are inextricably linked to the “contraband camps” established during the American Civil War, which were designed to detain and imprison fugitive slaves as outlawed cargo or enemy property.³¹ During the Jim Crow era, northern courts, through the invocation of *habeas corpus*, often facilitated the South’s efforts to recapture and return fugitive slaves to bondage. Enslaved people existed in an indefinite state of exception—positioned outside of the law yet subjected to its violent disciplining power. The Nuremberg Race Laws of the 1930s, which legally codified antisemitism and segregation in Nazi Germany, drew explicit inspiration from the racial caste system upheld under Jim Crow.³² In any case, the disembodied souls of those

24 Agamben (1998).

25 Weheliye (2014). *Habeas viscus: Racializing assemblages, biopolitics, and black feminist theories of the human*, p. 35.

26 Weheliye (2014), p. 35.

27 Brand (2001), p. 3.

28 Moten (2018). *Stolen Life*.

29 Nourbese Philip writes in *Zong!*, p. 196.

30 <https://poets.org/poem/preludes>.

31 Weheliye (2014), p. 35.

32 Whitman (2017). *Hitler’s American model: The United States and the making of Nazi race law*

who did not survive the Middle Passage, also known as the “Maafa” or the African Holocaust, endure: “those Africans thrown, jumped, dumped overboard”,³³ their atoms remain dispersed in the ocean, even today.³⁴ These are the spirits of the “lost ancestors whom Ghanaians mourn each year at sea when they mark the Maafa on their side of the Atlantic”.³⁵ Of course, the occurrences of exorbitant violence and genocide in modern human history are many (e.g. Rwanda, South Africa, Palestine) and providing a comprehensive list within this chapter is untenable. These cases are elucidated merely to map the historical continuity of the “state of exception”.³⁶

Are the enumerated examples above not commensurate with the magnitude of violence that would constitute the absolutely catastrophic? Did not the historical manifestations of such terrible brutality demand not only humanitarian action, but also a moralistic repudiation of the injustice that permitted such pervasive terror and suffering to unfold? In posing this question, my intention is not necessarily to render extra-exceptional the condition of black life in modernity but rather gesture to an “ethico-political”³⁷ and epistemic dilemma concerning the “frames through which we apprehend or, indeed, fail to apprehend the lives of others as lost or injured (lose-able or injurable)”³⁸. Surely, no atrocity in human history has been commemorated as extensively and thoroughly as the Shoah (Holocaust). While slavery, colonization, apartheid, revolutions and their enduring impacts are not afforded the same degree, or even a comparable degree, of reverence or memorialization.³⁹ Incidentally, the culture of remembrance surrounding the Shoah, with its own extensive history, did not emerge naturally after the atrocities of 1939–1945 but was deliberately constructed to serve the specific political objectives of Israeli settler-colonialism.⁴⁰ The memorializing narratives centre exclusively on white European Jews, erasing the suffering of Africans who were also imprisoned in Nazi death camps, subjected to experiments, sterilized and murdered.⁴¹ This phenomenon of valuing certain lives over others constitutes the very condition of possibility for chattel slavery, which was founded

33 Sharpe (2016), p. 19.

34 Sharpe, (2012), p. 40.

35 Wilderson (2009). *Grammar & ghosts: The performative limits of African freedom*, p. 119.

36 Agamben (2005). *State of exception*; Mbembe (2003). *Necropolitics*. Schmitt (1921).

37 Agamben (1998).

38 Butler (2010). *Frames of war: When is life grievable?*, 1.

39 Sharpe (2016), p. 34.

40 Mishra (2024).

41 Mungazi & Marks-Woldman (2022, 27 January). *Black people were Hitler’s victims too—that must not be forgotten*.

on the construction of a racist libidinal economy. Within this framework, the ontological construction of “the human” was fundamentally predicated on the negation of black sentience. In such “conceptual and psychic spaces” black people “have no capacity to suffer” and their pain goes unregistered.⁴² In the afterlife of slavery, empathy is mediated in racial terms.⁴³ Along this spectrum, those originating from Africa are categorized as non-life, while those “Others” from the subaltern regions of the eastern world are reckoned with as dishonoured life. This system, deceptively simple in its structure, wields its insidious power through obscured and sophisticated mechanisms that sustain the status of African life as onto-political negation.

Before I proceed, let me be clear: this chapter is not intended to prescribe a remedy for the pathological and routine indifference of white people, that is those “people made White by a voyage”,⁴⁴ to the pain and suffering that erodes and exhausts black existence globally. Nor am I interested in rehearsing stories of suffering in a bid to appeal to a white moral consciousness. Such an exercise would be futile, insofar as blackness is overdetermined as a “political ontology of criminality”.⁴⁵ Black people are routinely disbelieved regarding the pain they experience, irrespective of the abundance of material evidence that substantiates their claims. As the opening epigraph of this chapter reminds us, “violence precedes and exceeds blacks”.⁴⁶ This is especially important given the rise of voyeuristic and sensationalized “trauma projects”, where victims of human rights abuses across sub-Saharan Africa find their access to food, economic and medical aid contingent upon their ability to convincingly perform their trauma, with women in particular often compelled to recount, in graphic detail, the acts of (sexual) violence visited on their bodies.⁴⁷ In the discussion that follows, I undertake a more meaningful and deferential endeavour (relatively speaking), focusing critical attention on how racial blackness continues to shape which humanitarian emergencies elicit genuine compassion and which are prefigured as imminent threats to the security of European and American borders. The subsequent section lays the conceptual foundation for analyzing the case studies of Liberia, Sudan and Mediterranean migration. These cases evince how racialized ethics or axiology (and the privation of empathy for the black body) augment

⁴² Terrefe (2012).

⁴³ Forgiarini, Gallucci, & Maravita (2011). Racism and the empathy for pain on our skin.

⁴⁴ Baldwin (1995), p. 44.

⁴⁵ Dillon and Page (2015).

⁴⁶ Wilderson (2010). *Red, white & black: Cinema and the structure of U.S. antagonisms*, p. 76.

⁴⁷ Niehuus (2024), p. 3.

systems of governance that perpetuate anti-black violence and dispossession globally.

Ontological Blackness and Racial Capitalism

Of the first order, I turn to the provocative question posed by Jean Genet in *Les Nègres*: “What exactly is a black?”.⁴⁸ The answer is bound to the reality that capitalism was the inheritor of racialism and not vice versa. Cedric Robinson⁴⁹ lays bare how a system of racism was already present in Europe during the feudal era and evolved into capitalism, intertwining labour and social class with racialism. Accordingly, in early modern Europe, the first racialized subjects were not the peoples of the “darkened” regions of the world but Europe’s own proletarians—Irish, Jews, Roma and Slavs. It was not in Africa but in the West that the “Negro” was first invented.⁵⁰ Robinson maintains that “the tendency of European civilization through capitalism was thus not to homogenize but to differentiate, to exaggerate regional, subcultural, and dialectical differences into ‘racial’ ones”. Indeed, as class-based grievances persisted, they were increasingly expressed in ethnic and racial terms, particularly in central Europe. Albeit these systems differed operationally from the institution of racial slavery, indirect rule in colonial Africa, or the regimes of Italian fascism and German Nazism, their logic must be understood as part of a broader historical continuum.

The transatlantic slave trade transcended its exposé as a mere incongruous economic phenomenon. As David Eltis⁵¹ polemically reminds us, Western Europe, specifically England, was densely overpopulated during the time of slavery, suggesting (and provocatively so) that had Europeans enslaved other Europeans—such as war prisoners, convicts, vagrants, Irish, Scots, as was routine in human history—labour demands would have been fulfilled at a considerably lower financial and human cost. The kidnapping of 12 million people from Africa, in contrast, constituted an act of genocide. The existential telos of the plantation laid not in a simple cost reduction and profit maximization economic calculation—albeit black labour power was paramount to the development of the global economy and the accumulation of capital by Western Europe’s ruling

⁴⁸ Genet & Frechtman (1969). *The blacks: A clown show*.

⁴⁹ Robinson and Kelley (2000).

⁵⁰ Robinson and Kelley (2000).

⁵¹ Eltis (1993). Europeans and the rise and fall of African slavery in the Americas: An interpretation, p. 1407.

and mercantile classes.⁵² Rather, it was in the formation of a universalized symbolic syntax of ontological human difference. This involved the deliberate invention of a nominal blackness and, by extension, the formulation of a nominal whiteness or, more broadly, a structural non-blackness.⁵³ Within this framework, the “peculiar” institution of racial slavery would be singularly tethered to the blackened African. Unlike earlier systems of exploitation, where enslavement was often temporary and contingent—tied to war, debt or criminality—the transatlantic slave trade fixed blackness as an immutable and inheritable condition. Definitively, racial slavery *is* and presaged an ontological standing for blackness. Indeed, the “constituent elements of slavery”⁵⁴ encompassed not only exploitation and alienation, as a Marxist analysis of social class relations would suggest, but also the accumulation and fungibility of the stolen African body.⁵⁵ Racialization is a means of displacing “what is with something else, with another reality”.⁵⁶ This modern matrix of race is simulacra, blackness is simulacra.

Racial Foundations of the Modern Nation State

The modern nation state, forged through the articulation of “Europeanness” as an ethno-racial construct inseparably tied to territorial sovereignty, established a global order in which access to coherent subjectivity, state power and protection is predicated on proximity to “whiteness”. The racist architecture of the modern sovereign state can be traced back to the 1492 Iberian Peninsula, where “the Castilian monarchs sought to create a homogeneous national homeland for Spaniards” by exiling the Muslim Moors and converting outsiders to Christianity.⁵⁷ This moment marked the genesis of a Western “racial cosmogony” that for

52 Robinson and Kelley (2000), p. 4.

53 Blackburn (1997). *The making of new world slavery: From the baroque to the modern, 1492–1800*; Wilderson (2010). *Red, white & black: Cinema and the structure of U.S. antagonisms*; Da Silva (2007). *Toward a global idea of race*; McKittrick (2014). *Mathematics Black life*; (Patterson, 1982; Spillers, 1987; Marriott, 2018).

54 Patterson (1982).

55 Wilderson (2010). *Red, white & black: Cinema and the structure of U.S. antagonisms*, p. 14.

56 Mbembe and Dubois (2017), p. 32.

57 The Castilian monarchy’s sponsorship of Christopher Columbus’s voyage marked the beginning of the colonization of the Americas. This expansion carried Iberian racial ideologies across the Atlantic, providing a framework that would later be used to justify the genocide of Indigenous peoples.

centuries would consider black people as aberrations of the divine.⁵⁸ Over time, these practices secularized into what Centeno⁵⁹ describes as a “state-sponsored liturgy”—a nationalist ritualism where people worship themselves as the state’s divine subjects. In this racialized liturgical nationalism, material bodies became subordinated to discourses of blood line purity, rendering coherent subjectivity and inclusion within the nation-state apparatus contingent upon abstract notions of racial origin, historicity and teleology.

Nationalism’s inherent contradictions have persisted and “nation-ness” has come to represent one of the “most universally legitimate value[s]”.⁶⁰ Within this context, ethnic conflicts in postcolonial nation-states should be seen as predictable outcomes—not due to any alleged racial or biological predisposition among Africans towards violence and anarchy, but rather as the logical consequence of nationalism fulfilling its primary purpose: upholding and entrenching racial capitalism in service of Western bourgeois expropriation and material accumulation. The proliferation of nations now far outpaces the number of recognized states, leaving millions of people displaced, dispossessed and stateless (such as the Kurds and Rohingya). The problems ethnonationalism has engendered are nowhere more apparent than in the Palestinian struggle against European Zionism and Israeli settler-colonial occupation, systematic torture, slaughter and genocide. This enduring violence underscores that nationalism, far from being a unifying force, functions as one of the most insidious instruments of “racial sensibility”⁶¹ and cultural erasure in the modern world. In this way, nationalism continues to operate as the principle ideology through which “Whiteness retains its hegemonic normativity”.⁶²

The Limits of IR Theory in Addressing Racial Capitalism

The prevailing accounts of armed conflicts in Africa often attribute the provocation of armed actors to biological predispositions, privative morality, or

58 Mamdani (2020). *Neither settler nor native: The making and unmaking of permanent minorities*, p. 1; Hucks, M. K. (2012). *Yoruba traditions and African American religious nationalism*, p. 23.

59 Centeno (1994). *Between rocky democracies and hard markets: The politics of economic liberalization in Latin America*, p. 176.

60 Anderson (2006), p. 3.

61 Robinson and Kelley (2000), p. 3.

62 James (2009), p. 470.

cultural pathology.⁶³ However, scholarship from postcolonial studies and related disciplines has challenged these reductionist non-explanations. This corpus of literature foregrounds the role of European cultural imperialism in manufacturing hierarchal and ethnic distinctions to facilitate the management and control of colonized bodies under systems of indirect rule. These systems mirrored the general protocols of European statecraft and relied on the cooperation of missionaries, religious groups and colonial administrators. Despite regional variances, all colonial projects adhered to the structural logic of white supremacy.

Still, much of this critical work engenders a general conceptual problematic as it regards ethnicity as having inherent explanatory power, as a cultural given, when ethnicity is itself a category that should engender interrogation.⁶⁴ Perhaps part of the reason such glaring contradictions remain unheeded lies in how “our” general understanding of African politics is overdetermined by an invented iteration of “traditional” African culture, which broaches from the provincialized experiences of European peoples, is arbitrated through their civilization, social structures and culture, and is therefore always already undergirded by a particular set of assumptions.⁶⁵ We ought to consider that the assemblage of cultural inheritances that make up what we now apprehend as “ethnic” identity, in Africa, assembled itself through an amalgamation of different political conditions, struggles for space and place, different registers of spirituality, nomadic interactions, sporadic episodes of migration, strategic calculations to evade capture by European enslavers, and invented traditions imposed by European colonizers and anthropologists.⁶⁶ Undoubtedly, precolonial Africa experienced its own conflicts; however, these disputes were not substantiated by hierarchical valuations of life—in all its forms. Such frameworks emerged through centuries of violent transatlantic encounters with European colonizers, accompanied by the concomitant erosion of precolonial African cosmologies and deep-rooted connections to land, traditions, spirituality and community.⁶⁷ In their place, settler-colonial ideologies introduced proprietorial and hierarchical ontologies of being, fundamentally restructuring the social and moral order. Accordingly, while culture is indeed relevant, the culture warranting closer scrutiny is that of Western Europe, not Africa.

⁶³ Mamdani (2007). The politics of naming: Genocide, civil war, insurgency.

⁶⁴ David Turton quoted in Keen (2008). *Complex emergencies*, p. 14.

⁶⁵ Robinson and Kelley (2000), p. 2.

⁶⁶ Alexander (2006). *Pedagogies of crossing: Meditations on feminism, sexual politics, memory, and the sacred*. Rodney (1982).

⁶⁷ Kelley (2017). *What did Cedric Robinson mean by racial capitalism?*, p. 269.

The study of ethnic divisions, patronage networks and state-sanctioned violence in sub-Saharan Africa often relies on tautological methods rooted in paradigms of state, society, sovereignty and subjectivity, theoretical tools forged in service of a European imperial expansionist project predicated on African suffering.⁶⁸ Accordingly, these frameworks are fundamentally ill-equipped to envision Africa's political futures beyond the precincts of "racial liberalism" (Mills, 2008, p. 1380)⁶⁹. Nonetheless, critical scholars of IR⁷⁰ have made significant strides in addressing the imperial and (settler) colonial foundations of the discipline.⁷¹ This chapter builds on these contributions by foregrounding the particularity of anti-blackness as a structural force and theorizing the "migratory"⁷² nature of planation logics in Africa.

Ultimately, the anti-black logics of the planation constitute the foundational infrastructure of the international liberal order, shaping both its prescribed responses to (or deliberate neglect of) of the crises engulfing Africa, and the epistemic core of IR's dominant frameworks for theorizing of modern warfare. Indeed, the conceptual and political tools at our disposal sustain a teleological narrative, implying that blackness can be reformed, redeemed or developed towards freedom—albeit within the confines of controlled biopolitical conditions.⁷³ In turn, this conceptual failure has led to misguided and reductionist policy solutions, such as consociationalism (i.e. ethnic power-sharing), which mischaracterize conflicts as "native" anomalies within a democratic liberal order presumed capable of stabilization. The following case studies—Liberia, Sudan and Mediterranean migration—demonstrate how these dynamics perpetuate systems of racial capitalism and white supremacy under the guise of bringing stability and order to Africa.

⁶⁸ Berman (1998). Ethnicity, patronage, and the African state: The politics of uncivil nationalism, p. 306.

⁶⁹ Mills, C. W. (2008). Racial Liberalism. PMLA, 123(5), pp. 1380–1397. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25501942>.

⁷⁰ Barkawi (2006). *Globalization and war*; Hobson (2007). Is critical theory always for the white West and for Western imperialism? Beyond Westphalian towards a post-racial critical IR; Hobson (2012). *The Eurocentric conception of world politics: Western international*; Sabaratnam, M. (2011). IR in dialogue ... but can we change the subjects? A typology of decolonising strategies for the study of world politics; Shilliam (2010). *International relations and non-Western thought: Imperialism, colonialism, and investigation of global modernity*.

⁷¹ Howell & Richter-Montpetit (2019). Racism in Foucauldian security studies: Biopolitics, liberal war, and the Whitewashing of colonial and racial violence, p. 4.

⁷² McKittrick (2013).

⁷³ Bhabha (1994). *The location of culture*, p. 83.

Case Studies

Liberia

Earlier in the chapter, I gestured to the relationship between the politicization of ethnic identity and the strategies indigenous communities employed to evade capture by enslavers. Liberia provides a distinctive and compelling case study of how these early processes later drove the militarization and political stratification of these groups, ultimately giving rise to the proliferation of armed rebel factions. Indeed, Liberia's *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (McKenzie and Prestholdt, 2009)⁷⁴ found that constitutive to the eruption of the first civil war (1980) in that country was the historical arrangement of Liberia as an apartheid state—of sorts—due to the historical segregation indigenous Africans ('natives') and Americo-Liberians ('settlers') and the utilization of violent means to fortify and consolidate Americo-Liberian political and economic power for over a century ("Root Causes," PeacebuildingData.org).⁷⁵ The tensions that such divisions engendered helped establish the groundwork for the deadly 'Rice Riots' of 1979 and the subsequent coup d'état, staged by military leader Samuel Doe, which brought William Tolbert's Americo-Liberian-inclined regime to a dénouement in 1980 (this year marked the onset of the first civil war). At first, the Doe stratocracy declared an uncompromising commitment to the formation of a cohesive Black national identity in Liberia and disavowed any divisions of the nation along ethnic lines (Outram, 1997, p. 360).⁷⁶ However—and not surprisingly—rather than overturning the legacy of ethnonationalist/race-based systems of political patronage, maintained by all the preceding regimes, Doe conceded economic and educational privileges for the ethnic group to which he belonged—the Krahn. And to further fortify and entrench his political power (Outram, 1997, p. 360), he installed Krahn people in the most politically dominant seats. Such a nepotistic arrangement only exacerbated existing ethno-racial tensions and other complicated grievances concerning the unequal distribution of power and

74 McKenzie, M.G. and Prestholdt, J. (2009) *A House with Two Rooms: Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia Diaspora Project*. St. Paul, MI, Minnesota: DRI Press.

75 Root Causes of the Civil War: PeacebuildingData.org. Harvard Humanitarian Initiative. [online] Available at: <www.peacebuildingdata.org/research/liberia/results/civil-war/root-causes-civil-war> [Accessed 8 February 2024]. [Google Scholar].

76 Outram, Q. (1997) "'It's Terminal Either Way': An Analysis of Armed Conflict in Liberia, 1989–1996. *Review of African Political Economy*, 24(73), pp. 355–371.

resources nationally, all grievances which had been hitherto subdued under Americo-Liberian hegemony (Conteh-Morgan and Kadivar, 1995, p. 9).⁷⁷

The origins of Liberia's ethno-political formations trace back to the 1600s, a period marked by frequent interactions between European merchants and Liberian coastal communities. During the early stages of the transatlantic slave trade, African communities grappled with the dual imperatives of survival and resistance. For instance, some Indigenous Liberians sought to defer their own enslavement by aesthetically and performatively exaggerating ethnological distinctiveness, effectively unmarking themselves as property. The Kru coastal people, for instance, marked themselves with a distinctive "dark blue tattoo one-half inch in width, rendering them ethnically recognizable to others",⁷⁸ stretching from their hairline to the tip of their nose. As intermediaries between African communities and European slavers were indispensable to the everyday operations of the human trade, such fleshly markings established a sort of visual treaty that recognized mutual obligations between European traffickers and the Kru people, protecting them from the threat of commodification.⁷⁹ However, these markers were not only tools of protection but also signifiers of political autonomy, laying the groundwork for future alliances and conflicts.

The colonization of Liberia in 1821 by the American Colonization Society (ACS) added another layer to these divisions. American slaveholders were wary of the possibility of insurgent political coalition between the emancipated and those still in bondage and so formed the ACS to uphold American plantocracy by expatriating free-born and manumitted black people back to Africa. Upon their arrival in Liberia in the mid-19th century, the black repatriated groups, who would later be known as Americo-Liberians, reinstated a regime of violence based on racist ideologies of sovereignty and commodity fetishism—that had previously haunted their existence in the Western hemisphere—used to subjugate indigenous inhabitants of the west African coastal region. Indigenous Liberians perceived the black "settlers" to be "culturally white"⁸⁰ while the "settlers" apprehended "natives" as "bush niggers".⁸¹ The encounter was saturated with antinomies. Throughout the 19th century, Liberia's political trajectory epitomized the exclusionary ideals of nationality, citizenship, and capitalist expansionism and accumulation. Americo-Liberians even incorporated a "Negro Clause" into the national constitution,

77 Conteh-Morgan, E., & Kadivar, S. (1995) 'Ethnopolitical Violence in the Liberian Civil War' *Journal of Conflict Studies* 15(1).

78 Clegg (2004), p. 78.

79 Harris (1993), p. 1721.

80 Clegg (2004), p. 97.

81 Starr (1913), p. 481.

which effectively denied “native” Africans access to citizenship well into the 1940s (Pailey, 2021, p. 6).⁸²

C.L.R. James says that historians “wrote so well because they saw so little” (1938, p. x)⁸³. The diagnosis proves accurate insofar as the eclectic corpus of “historically located” literature that theorizes the root causes of Liberia’s descent into a protracted civil conflict cites religion, economic inequality, ethnic tensions, and political exclusion as triggers (Kieh, 2009, p. 17; Ellis, 2001; Specht, 2006; Atkinson 1997). However, extant explanations falter in their failure to heed to the history of a complicated and volatile west African political milieu circa the 1600s to 1900s. It is difficult to fully grasp Liberia’s descent into violent conflict without attending to the institution of racial slavery in the circum-Atlantic world; the ‘Scramble for Africa’ and European colonial incursions into Liberia; reconstruction in America (1863–1877); the rise of Black/African nationalisms (Sawyer, 1998) and Liberia’s standing in the international sphere as the second independent Black republic in the world, after Haiti. Moreover, the enormous bearing the ACS had on Liberia cannot be adequately apprehended without proper regard being given to the plantation logics that animated the social, political, economic, and theological worldviews of the society’s founders—themselves members of the planter oligarchy. The central claim here is that anti-black violence and exclusion have always been not only normative to the idea of the ‘state’ in international politics but constitutive aspects of Liberian social, cultural, and political life, along with the establishment of the Republic.

Sudan

The ongoing conflict in Sudan exemplifies how racial capitalism, humanitarian governance and the necropolitical adjudication of black life as disposable operates in black-majority contexts. Mainstream analyses have mischaracterized the crisis as arising primarily from identity-based tensions between Arabized Muslims and non-Arab Christians, thus failing to engage with Sudan’s entanglement with the histories of trans Saharan slavery and systemic exploitation. In the 19th century, the region now recognized as South Sudan became a major site of human trafficking, with Khartoum functioning as a central node in the Mediter-

⁸² Pailey, R. N. (2021), ‘Introduction.’ In: *Development, (Dual) Citizenship and Its Discontents in Africa: The Political Economy of Belonging to Liberia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (African Studies), pp. 1–21.

⁸³ James, C. L. R. (1938), *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint Louverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. Penguin.

anean slave trade. Southern populations were forcibly removed, trafficked to North Africa and the Middle East. At the turn of the 20th century, the enslaved South Sudanese population constituted two-thirds of Khartoum's overall population.⁸⁴ Simultaneously, domestic systems of unfree labor underpinned agricultural expansion in Sudan's central riverain regions, persisting even after its formal abolition by the British in 1899. As the institution of slavery waned, the demands of industrialization under Anglo-Egyptian rule and subsequent postcolonial regimes ushered in a new phase of land expropriation and labour exploitation. Mechanized agriculture and irrigation projects displaced the populations historically targeted during slave raids, perpetuating cycles of subjugation and reinforcing racial hierarchies entrenched during the era of slavery. The term *abid*—Arabic for slave—continues to function as a racialized epithet against dark-skinned peoples in Sudan and its use has been documented during instances of genocidal violence enacted by militias and state forces.⁸⁵

Black in the Mediterranean

The general indifference to the large-scale violence visited on black bodies is institutionalized through policies that fund detention centers, intercept migrant vessels and externalize European border control to North African states. Libya, Tunisia and Egypt are funded by the EU to establish detention centers where migrants and asylum seekers are often held. Indeed, the EU has pledged billions of dollars to the Egyptian government in exchange for stricter migration controls to prevent refugees from reaching European shores.⁸⁶ Today, Sudanese refugees fleeing to neighboring Egypt have been met with general pushback, xenophobic sentiments, discretionary detainment, indefinite imprisonment and refoulements, in contravention of Egypt's obligations under international refugee law and its broader commitments to uphold human rights.⁸⁷ Rather than addressing the Egyptian government's human rights breaches, the EU's primary concern appears to be the approximately 8,000 Sudanese migrants who have entered the EU "illegally" by crossing the Mediterranean Sea,⁸⁸ instead of the immeasurable

⁸⁴ Abubakr (2021).

⁸⁵ Wise (2021), p. 196.

⁸⁶ Creta & Khalil (2024). *EXCLUSIVE: Inside Egypt's secret scheme to detain and deport thousands of Sudanese refugees*.

⁸⁷ Global Detention Project (2024). *Urgent appeal on the detention and refoulement of Sudanese refugees in Egypt*.

⁸⁸ Statewatch. (2024). *Ignoring the root causes of disaster: The EU and Sudan*.

human suffering and grief endured by countless people displaced by the conflict. There is routine indifference to the many carnages that have taken place within the Mediterranean seascape. For instance, in 2024 the bodies of 13 Sudanese migrants were recovered off the coast of Tunisia months after their boat capsized during an attempted journey to Europe.⁸⁹ Over a decade has passed since what would come to be named the “Left-to-Die” boat set off with 72 migrants from Libya’s coast for Italy. After being left adrift for 14 days, 63 migrants were left to die, despite multiple authorities and state actors being fully aware of the danger they faced, particularly given that the Mediterranean was, at the time, the most highly surveilled sea in the world. I imagine they died of hunger, dehydration, malady, injury, hypothermia and/or asphyxiation.

For black people, the water is where the “mathematics” begin, “where historic blackness comes from: the list, the breathless numbers, the absolutely economic, the mathematics of the unliving”.⁹⁰ The Mediterranean, like the Atlantic, has become a contemporary frontier where anti-black logics are enacted through the state-sanctioned laws that govern the sea. The treatment of black migrants demonstrates how sovereign power, when stripped of accountability, operates with absolute precision, rendering certain lives ungrievable and statelessness becomes a paradigmatic condition of abandonment. Statelessness constitutes the final “act of racial capitalism and genocide, where the state no longer has to kill in order to make people disappear and can continue its exploitative practices without opposition”.⁹¹

Abolition, Reparations and Ways Forward

Under the liberal international order, politics is *the* site through which subjection is practiced as well as apprehended as a sort of vestibule that holds emancipation’s unfettered possibilities. It generates the stuff of our optimism; it is here that if we toil habitually to strengthen the state, and cast our votes, we may find “the ‘answer’ to the ontological equation”.⁹² We are led to believe that the solution lies in a more progressive form of nationalism—even against the backdrop of ethnic conflicts, the escalating rise of the far right in the West and the ongoing erosion of minority rights. We are led to believe that the ongoing fortification of, and investment in, the nation-state system will serve as an effective counter-

⁸⁹ Al Jazeera (2024). *At least 13 Sudanese asylum seekers killed after boat capsizes off Tunisia*.

⁹⁰ McKittrick (2014). *Mathematics black life*, p. 17.

⁹¹ Stephenson (2021). “*Stateless*” *confronts anti-blackness in the Dominican Republic and Haiti*.

⁹² Warren (2015). *Black nihilism and the politics of hope*, p. 216.

balance to the forces of neoliberal globalism. Such notions border on dystopian levels of delusion and strategic distraction. These systems are sustained through state-sanctioned violence and deprivation and have stunted our political imagination and obscured the fact that societies have lived—and could live—differently.

In many African countries, where the democratic liberal state is a relatively recent imposition, many assert that freedom lies in fair elections, reduced corruption and the end of military regimes. Yet, there is often little recognition of a criminal paradox: the only reason democracy and the nation state appear to function in the West is due, in part, to centuries of extracting from and devastating African ecologies. The ostensible (and “benevolent”) financial aid afforded today pales in comparison to the enormous resources that have been stolen—and continue to be stolen—from the continent. This reality is often obscured, fostering the illusion that the West’s prosperity is purely the product of its strong and equitable democratic institutions, rather than being heavily subsidized by the historical and ongoing pillage of African lands and labour. The racialization of economic exploitation extends beyond Africa to wealthy nations such as the United States, where anti-blackness continues to structure economic disenfranchisement. In 2015, Africa suffered a net financial outflow of over \$40 billion, despite receiving \$162 billion in loans, aid and remittances.⁹³ Similarly, in the United States, white Americans hold 84% of the nation’s wealth, while black Americans, despite their resilience and post-emancipation wealth-building efforts, control only 4%.⁹⁴ These disparities are not incidental but are sustained by a global system in which black populations are consistently relegated to positions of economic and political precarity.

This continuity reveals the persistent operation of anti-blackness as a structuring force across the Global North and South. These dynamics exemplify why the systemic tools within the liberal international order do not have the potential to create new conditions of life. Instead, they compel participation in a global matrix of racial capitalism, which perpetuates and sustains this structural arrangement in its original and premeditated forms. My diagnosis is that we are confronting a cyclicity of occurrence, an inescapable circuitousness of so-called progressive time. The evidence lies in the fact that, for black people, time has moved not “like an arrow, but a boomerang”.⁹⁵ It should be evident by now that my focus is not on understanding why the infinite suffering of black people

⁹³ McVeigh (2017). *World is plundering Africa’s wealth of “billions of dollars a year”*.

⁹⁴ McKay (2022). *How the racial wealth gap has evolved—and why it persists*.

⁹⁵ Ellison (2001). *Invisible man*, p. 6.

is normatively disregarded. As Toni Morrison writes in *The Bluest Eye*,⁹⁶ “since why is too difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how”. This chapter, too, sought refuge in the how. It mapped how the current international “order of things”⁹⁷ is sustained by the specter of the plantation, racial capitalism, dispossession, environmental devastation and the necropolitical structures of governance that adjudicate black life as disposable.

We can no longer afford to envision freedom as a political negotiation, nor can we continue to *settle* for politics as such (Harney and Moten, 2013). To do so is to resign ourselves to sovereignty against all forms of relationality and to cling to the illusion that voting will reconcile the structural interstice between black life and all other life. The possibility of genuine freedom unyieldingly depends on the abolition of liberal humanism and the very logic that gives coherence to anti-blackness. And only through a radical reimagining of our political present and future, coupled with the material restitution owed to stolen, exiled and dispossessed lives, can we begin the work of genuine repair, healing, and freedom.

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⁹⁶ Morrison (2007). *The Bluest Eye*.

⁹⁷ Foucault (1970). *The order of things: An archaeology of the human sciences*.

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