

Racist Stereotypes About Africa in the U.S. Media Have Long Driven the Rape and Plunder of the Continent—But Where Is the Outcry?

Black Lives Matter should promote Pan-African solidarity and denounce U.S. imperialism in Africa

By [Jeremy Kuzmarov](#)

Global Research, September 16, 2021

[CovertAction Magazine](#) 15 September 2021

Region: [sub-Saharan Africa, USA](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice, Media Disinformation](#)

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The Black Lives Matter movement has had a major impact in raising awareness about police brutality and the ongoing persecution of Black people in the United States but has been remarkably parochial in evading discussion of U.S. imperialism in Africa and around the world.

While protest signs commemorating George Floyd and calling for defunding of the police have been legion at many of its demonstrations, few if any signs have called for the abolition of AFRICOM or indictment of Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama for presiding over the overthrow and lynching of Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi.

The latter omissions stem in large part from the ignorance of most of the U.S. population—whether Black or white—about Africa and the consequences of U.S. imperialism there.

The major fault for this ignorance lies with U.S. educational institutions and the mass media, which have for decades promoted stereotypes about the continent and its people, and evaded discussion of how it has been adversely impacted by Western colonialism.

Africans are still frequently characterized as “tribal people”—with all the attendant negative perceptions that spring from this word—whose poverty, conflict and disease-ridden countries can only be salvaged under foreign oversight.

Leaders who stand up to the Western powers like Qaddafi are demonized while those who acquiesce to their agenda are presented more favorably.

African voices are meanwhile marginalized—especially those that adopt a Pan-Africanist and

anti-imperialist message—and many Blacks come to internalize the message that they are inferior.

Manufacturing Hate

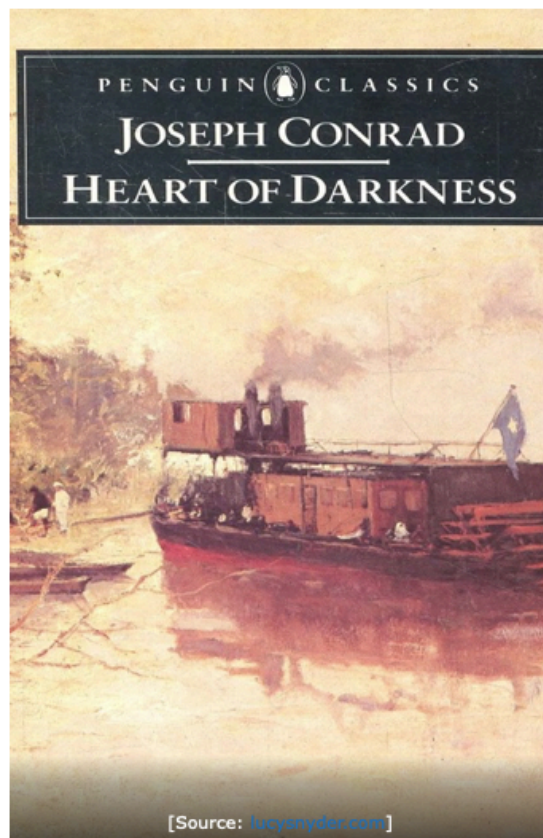
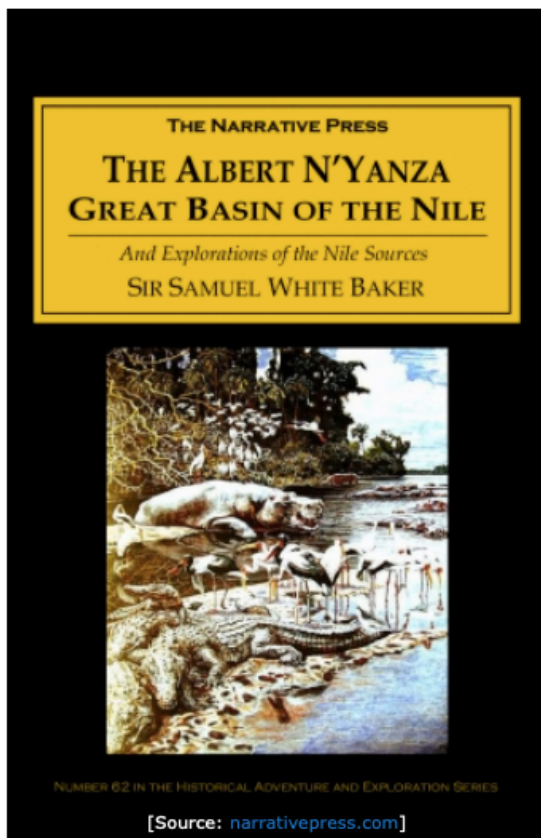
Milton Allimadi, a professor of African history at John Jay College and founder of Black Star News, has just published the book, [*Manufacturing Hate: How Africa Was Demonized in Western Media* \(Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt Publishing, 2021\)](#), which provides a history of racist stereotyping and media bias toward Africa that has helped skew American public opinion.

Allimadi starts his story with a discussion of European travelogues in the 18th and 19th centuries.

These presented Africans as being “trapped at a level of intellectual, socioeconomic and political development that Europeans had transcended centuries earlier” and helped justify the alleged obligation of Europeans to conquer and colonize Africa.

Sir Samuel Baker—Governor-General of the Equatorial Nile Basin (today South Sudan and Northern Uganda) between 1869 and 1873—set the standard in his 1866 book, *The Albert N’Yanza Great Basin of the Nile*, in which he wrote that “human nature viewed in its crude state as pictured among African savages is quite on a level with that of the brute, and not to be compared with the noble character of the dog.”

Joseph Conrad’s classic novel *Heart of Darkness* (1902) similarly depicted Africans as “primitive savages” and warned Europeans of Africa’s propensity to drive normal people insane.



The views cultivated by Conrad and other writers helped fuel support for colonization—which was considered a noble yet hazardous undertaking.

The New York Times' Heritage of White Supremacy

The New York Times, in [one of its earliest accounts of Africa published on July 1, 1877](#), claimed that Africans were “arrested at a position not so much between heaven and earth, as between earth and hell.” The article continued:

“The [“poor dark savages”](#) on the [“dark continent”](#) had “scarcely advanced beyond the element of art and science and even language” while, [“from within, \[they\] devoured and destroyed one another, willingly offering their throats to the knives of sorcerers, or paving the deep grave of some bloody monarch with the living trembling bodies of his hundreds of young wives.”](#)

These prejudicial comments ignore the flourishing of great African civilizations like ancient Carthage and the [Songhai](#) and [Mali](#) empires before the era of the slave trade and European colonization, which weakened and divided the continent.



Tunisia, Carthage in the 3rd century B.C. [Source: history.com]

The *Times* strongly endorsed British colonization over Germany’s and Russia’s, claiming that [“the introduction of European civilization would be most justifiable, and might well repay the cost.”](#)



Tomb of Askia, emperor of the Songhai Empire, at Gao, Mali, West Africa. [Source: [history.com](https://www.history.com)]

The *Times* went on to depict the 1879 Anglo-Zulu War in South Africa as a “contest between a civilized nation with great military and naval power and inexhaustible resources and a primitive and barbaric tribe [the Zulu], however brave and unyielding ... Sooner or later the powerful nation was destined to bring the savage tribe into abject submission or demolish it utterly.”

When Italy invaded Eritrea in the 1890s, the *Times* published a triumphalist account, claiming that the natives “welcomed the Italians as liberators.”

The *Times* adopted a more somber tone in reporting on Italy’s humiliating defeat at the Battle of Adwa in 1896—one of the greatest African victories against European imperialism—which the *Times* characterized as “terrible.”

In the 1930s, when Italy’s fascist leader Benito Mussolini reinvaded Ethiopia trying to reinvigorate the Roman Empire, the *Times* tried to diminish the significance of the Ethiopian victory at Adwa, while playing up the brutality of the “savage black warriors” who had “slaughtered nearly 40,000 Italians.”

Times reporter Herbert L. Matthews’s dispatch read like a press release from the Italian military command.

Known for his sympathetic reports of Fidel Castro’s rebel band in Cuba during the 1950s, Matthews had traveled in the same car as Italian military commander Marshal Pietro Badoglio as he entered Addis Ababa—and never bothered to interview any Ethiopians.

Support for Apartheid

The *Times* continued its pattern of white supremacy by supporting the odious apartheid system in South Africa from its beginning—and for many years thereafter.

In 1926, the “newspaper of record” published an article by Wyona Dashwood which supported the plan of South African Prime Minister James Barry Munnik Hertzog to segregate and disenfranchise Blacks in the Cape province as a way to deal with “the native factor.”

Dashwood claimed that the new system would help stop tribal fighting and give the “semi-civilized native”—whom she depicted as lazy and prone to theft—the chance to “develop along his own lines” and to begin to adapt some of the more “advanced economic, social and political systems of the white man’s civilization.”

Thirty years after Dashwood’s article, in May 1957, the *Times* ran a piece by Richard P. Hunt which reported on the perspective of apartheid leaders who had just passed a law empowering the new minister of native affairs, Hendrik Verwoerd, to ban Blacks from churches, clubs, hospitals, schools and other places if they would “cause a nuisance.”

An apartheid regime official was quoted as stating that the new powers were “needed to insure that the relations between black and white were to be those of guardian and ward,” which the article did not dispute.

When reporter Joseph Lelyveld began writing more critically about apartheid in the 1960s, his articles were toned down or distorted by editors, who made the system appear less brutal.

Lelyveld wrote to his editor in January 1983 that “virtually all the original reporting” he had conducted over a one-month period for a piece on the underfunding of Black schools had been omitted; the printed article, he said, was “like a salami sandwich without the salami, just slabs of stale bread.”

Always on the Wrong Side of History

Much like with its support for apartheid, *The New York Times* and other mainstream U.S. media outlets were on the wrong side of history when it came to African decolonization.

A DARK CONTINENT SEEKING LIGHT

INSIDE AFRICA. By John Gunther. 952 pp. New York: Harper & Bros. \$6.

By C. L. SULZBERGER

PROBABLY only John Gunther could successfully assimilate in one book the whole Continent of Africa. The size of the job would frighten anyone with less intellectual vigor. Yet Mr. Gunther, with his astonishing energy, his ability to amass and then tidily sort out extraneous facts, has accomplished the gigantic task he set for himself—and done so brilliantly. "Inside Africa" is informative, well written and a first-class piece of journalism. To my thinking, it is the best and most interesting of all his excellent "Inside" series.

The amount of work that must have gone into this volume is staggering to think of. Apart from the thousands of miles its author traveled in Africa during many months of considerable discomfort, he read through an extraordinarily complete bibliography, gathered thousands of press clippings and recorded notes on conversations with more than 1,500 people. His book is fresh, vivid and racy because he has never lost the enthusiasm of a cub for his reportorial work. John Gunther is a great journalist because he remains essentially his own legman.

As in every Gunther volume, one learns here a large number of new, unrelated and amusing bits of fact. Although I have traveled over almost as much of Africa as the author, I never before knew the following: That St. Augustine was a Berber. That "Home Sweet Home" was written in Tunis. That the favorite place for clients of witch doctors to carry poison is beneath the little finger nail. That a lion ticks the skin from a human body before devouring it. That the hippopotamus has a reddish sweat. That elephants like to make love under water. That in South Africa a black medical student cannot watch an autopsy on a white corpse. That the capital of Bechuanaland is in another country. That the King of the Bakuba in the Belgian Congo weighs 350 pounds and has 350 wives.

THE book remarks that "Africa is not in some respects a Dark Continent at all; it is flashing with vivid light. Much of it is luminous—in fact, incandescent. This is because, among other reasons, it presents the spectacle of millions upon millions of people being transformed almost overnight from a primitive, tribal way of life to aggressive membership in modern society. Africa is like an exploding mass of yeast. Its fermentations are not merely political and economic but so-

Mr. Sulzberger, foreign-affairs columnist for The Times, has traveled in and reported from most of Africa.

Mr. Gunther's Book Explores the Drives And Dilemmas That Beset Africa Today



"The plain fact of the matter is that awakening cannot be stopped."

Wood sculpture, Belgian Congo.

cial, cultural, religious. It is springing in a step from black magic to white civilization."

The complexity of this revolutionary process is continually stressed by the author as it assumes shape in areas as different from each other as Morocco, Kenya and the Gold Coast. "Africans," he writes, "want our education and techniques, our mode of life and standard of living, but not our domination or exploitation." And, as he points out, white domination of the continent is doomed, but Africa still can become our friend: "Much of Asia has been lost; Africa remains. But

Africa lies open like a vacuum, and is almost perfectly defenseless—the richest prize on earth."

Backward, underdeveloped, with few natural political or geographical frontiers, inhabited by peoples speaking 700 different languages, Africa is still an amorphous colonial entity where 5,000,000 white people, half of whom live in the Union of South Africa, dominate 198,000,000 colored inhabitants. The communications system is woefully inadequate. Illiteracy embraces perhaps 90 per cent of the continent. Per capita incomes in East Africa range between \$14 and \$28 per

year. The need for change is urgent. "The pace of events everywhere in Africa is very fast. Reform, education, training for administration must come at once, or it will be too late—that is, the Africans will refuse to accept further tutelage under European rule."

The book concedes that vast areas of Africa are not yet ready for self-government—whether under French, British, Belgian or Portuguese control. It stresses that the need to press more rapidly toward independence and to train future leaders is growing more imperative all the time.

The author and his attractive wife started and finished their African circuit in French territory. They took off eastward from Morocco, which, he concluded, "has a long way to go before being ready for self-government. Nevertheless, the nationalist movement cannot be dismissed and is growing stronger all the time. The French have done a great deal for Morocco, but not nearly enough." And the Gunthers wound up their journey in Dakar which, as the local joke has it, "is being fitted out to be the capital of France if the French are beaten in World War III" (a rather disquieting joke).

IT is impossible to summarize the observations made in this thoughtful if necessarily compressed book. Mr. Gunther points out that the French only gave their first franc for Arab education in Algeria three years ago. He urges that in Tunisia Paris should "make it clear that rule by force alone is a concept that the French themselves know to be out of date." He assays the merits and demerits of British, Portuguese and Belgian colonial rule, the varying degrees of race prejudice and color bar, what has and has not been done for their colonial charges by white rulers.

In the end he decides: "Taken all in all, British rule is the best. If I were an African I would rather live in a British territory than any other. The British do not give as much economic opportunity in some realms as the Belgians and perhaps not as much political and racial equality as the French in black Africa, but the average African in British territory has more copious access to the two things Africans need most—education and justice. No doubt the British make blunders on occasion. But Great Britain is the only colonial power that has as its official policy the systematic training of Africans for self-government."

Of all the areas he visited, that which was patently most distasteful to Mr. Gunther was the Union of South Africa. Here he discovered "The country has more (Continued on Page 32)

New York Times article in the 1950s on Africa adopting the "dark continent" trope, with the light seemingly coming from white Europeans. [Source: nytimes.com]

When *Times* reporter Leonard Ingalls wrote a letter demanding more sympathetic coverage, the foreign news editor, Emanuel Freedman, shot him down, preferring the traditional narrative in which Africans were depicted as "savages" and buffoons.

The *Times's* coverage of the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya adopted a "witch-craft versus civilization narrative." The Mau Mau were presented as a "secret tribal society whose campaign of murder [has] forced the imposition of martial law."

No indication was given that the Mau Mau emerged in response to colonial injustice. Nor that the violence of the Mau Mau rebels paled in comparison to that resulting from Great

Britain's scorched-earth military campaign which led to the deaths of thousands of Kenyans and the detention of thousands more in concentration camps.



Cover of a men's magazine that adopted stereotypical tropes about the Mau Mau similar to *The New York Times*. [Source: [reddit.com](https://www.reddit.com)]

Henry Wallace in Burnt Cork

The *Times's* Kenya coverage fit with the pattern of demonization of radical anti-colonial movements, particularly when they were led by left-leaning Pan-Africanists like Dr. Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana—who was voted Africa's Man of the Millennium at the dawn of the 21st century.

New York Times reporter Homer Bigart—a [Pulitzer prize winning war correspondent who was expelled from South Vietnam for criticizing U.S. client Ngô Đình Diệm](#)—wrote to Emmanuel Freedman in 1960 that “Dr. Nkrumah is Henry Wallace in burnt cork. I vastly prefer the primitive bush people. After all, cannibalism may be the logical antidote to this population explosion everyone talks about.”

Bigart's negative association of Nkrumah with Henry Wallace was reflective of a prejudice not only toward Africans but also toward the left-wing and pacifist views which Wallace had embraced.

The comments about primitive bush people meanwhile reinforced deep-seated stereotypes about Africans. And the joke about cannibalism being an antidote to population explosion—a concern reflective of the Western elite's view of Africans as a threat to be contained—was certainly in poor taste.

Congo

Like Nkrumah, Congolese Pan-African leader Patrice Lumumba was portrayed as a “wild eyed radical.”

Lumumba's killer, Moïse Tshombe—who led a secessionist drive in the Katanga province backed by Belgian mining interests and white South African mercenaries—was praised in *Time* magazine by contrast as the “antithesis of the African savage.”

Most admirably, according to *Time*, Tshombe had “no complexes about being black” and recognized the “brutal side of the African personality, and the phony side of African socialism.”

Pro-Lumumbaist rebels who fought against Tshombe after Lumumba's assassination were meanwhile depicted by *Time* as “a rabble of dazed, ignorant savages, used and abused by semi-sophisticated leaders.”

U.S. bombing operations—carried out by right-wing Cuban mercenaries—were hence justifiable, as was U.S. backing of the dictator Joseph Mobutu who was portrayed like Tshombe as a “responsible antidote” to Lumumba-style socialism.

Colonialism Dies Hard

At the end of the Cold War, numerous Western writers took stock of developments in Africa and concluded that the continent should be recolonized.

A characteristic piece from the era by Paul Johnson in *The New York Times Magazine* was titled “Colonialism's Back and Not a Moment Too Soon.”

The article was about the U.S. intervention in Somalia, which Johnson considered “a model for action in other African countries facing similar political collapse.” He concluded in a refrain familiar to Rudyard Kipling that “the civilized world has a mission to go out to these desperate places and govern.”

An ever more apocalyptic and racist article was “The Coming Anarchy” by Robert Kaplan, whose Malthusian doomsday scenario read like a description of Africa from one of the 19th century explorers' journals.

According to Kaplan, conditions in Africa were so dire, absent the white man's rule, that Africans no longer resembled human beings.

Wherever Kaplan traveled in a taxi, young men with “restless scanning eyes” surrounded him. He described the men as being “like loose molecules in a very unstable social fluid that

was clearly on the verge of igniting.”

Rwanda 1994

Historically, Western writers depicted Africans with alleged European features favorably, while demonizing those with so-called negroid features.

During the Rwanda conflict, Tutsis were adopted by some Western writers as honorary “Europeans” while Hutus were presented as the archetypical Africans.

The Tutsi Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF)—who happened to be staunch American allies—became the “good guys” by extension, and Rwanda’s national army, comprising mostly of Hutu allied with France, became the bad guys.

One of the earliest articles to use this racist characterization—which helped cultivate support for the RPF—was Alex Shoumatoff’s [“Rwanda’s Aristocratic Guerrillas.”](#) It appeared in *The New York Times Magazine* on December 13, 1992—two years after the RPF had illegally invaded Rwanda from Uganda and committed legions of atrocities against civilians.

[A Marine intelligence veteran who lived for a period on a hippie commune in New Hampshire](#), Shoumatoff was at the time married to a Tutsi woman, who had been a Ugandan refugee and was the cousin of an RPF spokesman.^[1]

RWANDA'S ARISTOCRATIC GUERRILLAS

BY ALEX SHOUMATOFF



Members of the Rwandan Patriotic Front, armed with weapons captured from Government troops, on a hilltop installation.

When the author married into a Watusi family, he found himself in the heart of a civil war waged by his 'cousin brothers.'

A LARGE CROWD OF UGANDANS IS WAITING AT Entebbe Airport to meet the daily flight from Nairobi, but I have no trouble picking out my greeting party. They are Tutsis, or Watusis, members of the Rwandan Patriotic Front, which is waging a guerrilla war in Rwanda, the tiny mountainous country just to the south. It's not that they tower over everyone — not all Watusis are tall these days. What distinguishes them from other black Africans are their refined, Ethiopian features.

We drive three hours to the Ugandan city of Mbarara, where we wait for night to fall. Then, under a cloak of pitch darkness, we proceed south in a different car, giving the slip to Rwandan Government spies and bribing with cigarettes the boys at the Army roadblocks that are sprinkled around Uganda for security reasons. Arriving at the border, we unload our gear, walk across a log that replaced a blown-up bridge and enter the 20-mile-wide strip of Rwanda that is held by the Patriotic Front. Past the empty customs booths, three young guerrillas in spotted fatigues are warming themselves at a fire. At 5,000 feet, it is nippy. We join them.

I wonder if I will be taken up to the bamboo forest under the Virunga volcanoes where the last few hundred mountain gorillas on earth live and where Dian Fossey was murdered. In May, Mrithi, a 400-pound adult silverback who was the leader of one of the family groups habituated to tourists, was gunned down by a Government patrol that had stumbled on the family's sleeping nest in the darkness. Mrithi sounded the alarm — a volley of blood-curdling "wraaghs" — and the soldiers, most of them 15-year-old city boys, panicked and opened fire in every direction.

"In the beginning, when we were still gathering strength, we needed to be in the forest," explains Girard Gahima, the front's media representative who is escorting me into the bush. "But now we are strong, and we appreciate the gorillas. Our presence in the forest has been scaled down to a few small groups."

"Why are you fighting this war?" I ask Guillaume, one of the young warriors.

"We are fighting to return chez nous," he says, using the colonial lingua franca of Rwanda.

In 1959 there was a revolution in Rwanda. The ruling stratum, the Tutsis, and their King were overthrown by the peasants, the Hutus. The insurgents had the backing of Belgium, the former colonial power in the country. Hundreds of thousands of Tutsis were butchered with pangas, or machetes, or chased into neighboring countries. Guillaume had been born, the son of refugees, in Tanzania; his comrades, in Zaire and Uganda. For the last 36 years, anywhere from 500,000 to 1 million Rwandan exiles have been living in these three countries and in Burundi, comprising one of the most protracted refugee problems in modern history.

Most of them are Tutsis, but it is as Banyarwanda — people from Rwanda — that they are discriminated against; even the new generation, born in these countries. None of these countries will give them citizenship, and they are subject to job quotas, turned away by schools and periodically massacred. The President of Rwanda, Juvénal Habyarimana, a dictator who came to power in a military coup in 1973, has refused to consider repatriating them.

And so, in September 1990, they took matters into their own hands, invading Rwanda with the aim of forcing Habyarimana to accommodate them or, failing that, of overthrowing

Alex Shoumatoff is the author of two books on Africa, "African Madness" and "In Southern Light."

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PHOTOGRAPH BY ALEX SHOUMATOFF

[Source: nytimes.com]

His article informed readers that the Tutsis were "refined and had European features," while the Hutus were "stocky and broad nosed." He continued that, in the 19th century, "early ethnologists had been fascinated by these languidly haughty pastoral aristocrats [Tutsis] whose high foreheads, aquiline noses and thin lips seemed more Caucasian than Negroid, and they classed them as false negroes.... The Tutsis were thought to be highly civilized people, the race of fallen Europeans, whose existence in Central Africa had been rumored for centuries."

After the RPF seized power, Shoumatoff wrote another piece for *The New Yorker*, sizing up the ethnic mix between Tutsis and Hutus in Burundi. Shoumatoff described the Tutsi as "tall, slender, with high foreheads, prominent cheekbones, and narrow features," a different physical type from the Hutus, who were "short and stocky, with flat noses and thick lips."

Such racist observations reinforced traditional stereotypes about Africans and painted a stark dichotomy that lent validation to the Tutsis genocidal campaign against the Hutu, which extended into the Congo.



Tutsi RPF leader Paul Kagame depicted by *Forbes* as a visionary. Shoumatoff in [“Rwanda’s Aristocratic Guerrillas”](#) quoted from a U.S. diplomat who [described Kagame as “Moses \[as he was\] going to bring his people home.”](#) Still in power today, Kagame may be responsible for more deaths than any living human being since the era of the Nazis. [Source: [twitter.com](#)]

Black Inferiority Complex

In a February 1965 speech in Detroit, Michigan, Malcolm X spoke about the damaging psychological impact of the demonization of Africa on Blacks. He said that

“the colonial powers of Europe, having complete control over Africa, they projected the image of Africa negatively. They projected Africa always in a negative light, savages, cannibals, nothing civilized. Why then naturally was it so negative it was negative to you and me, and you and I began to hate it. We didn’t want anybody to tell us anything about

Africa, much less calling us 'Africans.' In hating Africa and hating the Africans, we ended up hating ourselves, without even realizing it. Because you can't hate the roots of a tree and not hate the tree. You can't hate your origin and not end up hating yourself."

Thirty years after Malcolm X spoke those words, *The Washington Post* published a reactionary article by an African-American reporter, Keith Richburg, "A Black Man in Africa."

Richburg, who had covered the inter-ethnic massacres in Rwanda, described his revulsion at witnessing the "discolored, bloated bodies floating down a river in Rwanda towards Tanzania."

Richburg wrote that, as he witnessed the bodies, he realized how fortunate he had been; that he too "might have been one of the victims of the Rwanda massacre or he might have met some similarly anonymous fate in any one of the countless ongoing civil wars or tribal clashes on this brutal continent. And so I thank God my ancestor made the voyage [on the slave ship]."

Richburg's article formed the basis of his 1997 book, *Out of America: A Black Man Confronts Africa*, which Milton Allimadi calls "Conrad's Heart of Darkness for the new century."

According to Allimadi, Richburg offered a classic case of a Black man caught in the psychic pain of what Frantz Fanon called "internal inferiorization." Under this condition, negative stereotyping results in self-hatred and a desire to be affiliated with the dominant race.

As a youth, Richburg had been taught to believe that he was superior to other Blacks who came from poorer neighborhoods, talked loudly, had darker skin and nappier hair. When he went to the movies with his brother, they would cheer on the British soldiers attacking "Zulu tribesmen" in film.

This exemplifies the disorder Fanon and Malcolm X described. Its impact ultimately has been to neuter and destroy Black radical movements and solidarity. The legacy can be seen today, among other ways, with Black Lives Matter's silence about Africa—which should be corrected.

*

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Jeremy Kuzmarov is Managing Editor of *CovertAction Magazine*. He is the author of four books on U.S. foreign policy, including *Obama's Unending Wars* (Clarity Press, 2019) and *The Russians Are Coming, Again*, with John Marciano (Monthly Review Press, 2018). He can be reached at: jkuzmarov2@gmail.com.

Notes

1. An RPF fighter was the best man at his wedding. Previously Shoumatoff had written [an article in Vanity Fair about the murder of Dr. Dian Fossey that helped shape the script for the hit movie Gorillas in the Mist](#). Shoumatoff had served in a U.S. Marine intelligence unit that trained him to be parachuted behind the Iron Curtain and had Russian language training. It is certainly possible he sustained his intelligence ties and that his writing on Rwanda was sanctioned by the CIA.

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