

Is This An African I See Before Me?

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The title of my talk tonight is simply “Is This an African I See Before Me?” Now, I’m sure most of you recognized my title as a play on a soliloquy from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, which goes something like this:

Macbeth's Soliloquy: Is this a dagger which I see before me

Is this a dagger which I see before me,

The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee.

I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.

Art thou not, [fatal](#) vision, [sensible](#)

To feeling as to sight? or art thou but

A dagger of the mind, a false creation,

Proceeding from the [heat-oppres'd brain](#)?

(Shakespeare, 1992 edition)

Introduction: “Is This An African I See Before Me?” A Word on Misrecognition and Overdetermination of the Man Who Stands Before You.

The Canadian political scientist, Malinda Smith (2005), poses a question which I find a good hub around which to place the spokes of my talk when she asks, “Is Africa the ‘dark continent’ or the continent about which we, in the west, are frequently in the dark?” (p.164).

I want to use five moments of my own existence to speak to how I think the West conceptualizes and depicts Africa and Africans. This involves autobiography in a sense because I use my own life, but the discussion is not about me but about western conceptions and representations of Africans as reflected in the following five contextual moments, namely the present, my birth, my initial move to Canada, my more recent move to UBC and the possible future. I want to speak mostly to how the academic disciplines in the west have contributed to western conceptions of Africa (and to trouble those depictions somewhat). I chose to play on Macbeth’s soliloquy for the title of my talk to convey the idea that, in my view, Africa and Africans have been continuously mis-recognized and overdetermined by western academic discourses, seen not in reality but as Africans of the Western mind, a false creation, proceeding from the collective historical and contemporary heat-prejudiced Eurocentric brain.

It was the Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor (1992), who popularized the notion of “a politics of recognition” in relation to the workings of multiculturalism. Taylor used

the term to indicate that people wanted and needed to be recognized in terms of their individual and group identities and that such recognition of individuals and their ethno-racial and cultural make up within the Canadian mosaic is essential for the success of multiculturalism.

So what do I mean by the misrecognition of Africans? I mean the opposite of proper recognition, the failure to fully see or to fully believe what one sees when one considers the existence of Africans in Africa and especially the presence of Africans in western multicultural countries like Canada. When we are located outside of the continent, and when we reflect multiple identities and identifications, especially, we Africans can become suspect, disappointing, even ephemeral to westerners: we are unexpected in our immediate proximity, less valuable, less attractive and less real due to our perceived loss of authenticity, exoticism and distance; due to our contamination by modernization and westernization.

Are you and can you be recognized as authentically African if you are like me? If your accent can be readily understood; if you are middle-class and highly educated; if your family in Africa are well fed, clothed and sheltered; if you do not need aid, if neither you nor any member of your family is a victim of HIV/Aids; if you are not from a village but rather are and always have been urban; if you are a cosmopolitan, global citizen (whatever that is); if you insist on identifying yourself as originating from a specific country (Sierra Leone, Kenya, Morocco, Zimbabwe), rather than a generic Africa; if you are not located in your “natural environment,” continental Africa, but rather have lived studied and worked for half your adult life in the west, in Canada and the US; if you could trace your ancestry not from the West back to Africa but from Africa back to Nova Scotia or Jamaica; if your

first name is German and your last name is English and only your middle name is Yoruba, let's say, for example, Handel Kashope Wright?

As I stand before you, I am all these things and these characteristics apparently rub against the grain of the general western perception of who an African is, the dominant western shorthand of African identity. This fact that these characteristics trouble the western conception of who an African is and what characterizes African identity, is the tip of the iceberg of the misrecognition of Africans.

What such misrecognition reveals is that there is a western storehouse of very general knowledge, indeed breathtakingly sweeping generalizations (and often a shocking accepted lack of knowledge of the specifics) of what Africa and Africans are like. Westerners already know and readily recognize Africa and Africans through a long history of western depictions and representations. Television in various western countries, for example, provides fitful, overly brief but amazingly consistent images of parched earth and starving famine victims, unsanitary hospitals and village huts and dying AIDS victims; ethnic conflicts, marauding rebels and civil war victims; refugees and refugee camps in African countries and waves of desperate refugees and economic migrants trying to get into western countries. And all this is just one thin slice of a huge pie of supposed knowledge, a burgeoning body of western academic, scientific, literary, journalistic, popular and new media texts of representation of Africa and Africans, one that drowns out any other voices of representation, including the voices of Africans themselves. It is this body of texts which, collectively, constitutes what I would refer to as the western overdetermination of Africa and Africans. As Malinda Smith (2005) points out, overdetermination points to

“discourses that rule out consideration of alternative representations or explanations of the African condition.”

Africans in the Western Disciplines: Before I was Born, I was Already Known

I was born and grew up in Freetown, Sierra Leone (which I often have to explain is a country in West Africa), but even before I was born I was already known to the West. This is because I could be placed in the context of a continent and peoples that had been described repeatedly by western academic and popular discourses. There is a long history of not mere misrecognition but outright racist denigration of Africa and Africans in western academic work. Let us consider just one specific example, *A View of Sierra Leone* by Frederick Migeod (1926, 1970), a typical British colonial travelogue and anthropological text published in 1926, and the specific descriptions the author provides of four Sierra Leonean ethnic groups, the Loko, the Temne, the Krio and the Mende:

The Loko is somewhat slow though not exactly lazy but yet not far removed from the drone. It is slow of action and slow to adopt new measures. Like the Sherbro, it seldom migrates (p. 29).

The Temne is somewhat peevish...and when once his anger is aroused it is difficult to talk him to reason (p. 27).

My own people, the Krios, fare relatively well in Migeod's account, for, as he points out, having been exposed to a basic colonial schooling, they have “in all probability reached the

highest point to which the African black-man can attain” (p.8). High praise indeed for those of my people who had actually achieved elementary western education.

And in case one wants to fault him for making sweeping, unsupported generalizations, Migeod provides very scientific details and classifications on which his generalizations are based. For example, in his chapter on another Sierra Leonean ethnic group, titled “The Physical Characteristics of the Mende,” he describes the Mende as a race (no less), who can have up to “twenty types of faces,” each distinct face giving clear indication of the individual’s degree of character and behaviour, mental capacity and social taste (the very highest of which is still well below the European races, of course).

In her critique of Migeod’s text, the Sierra Leonean cultural studies scholar, Kadiatu Kanneh (1998) makes the important point that *A View of Sierra Leone* is typical of colonial academic work: they are texts that are based on a firm pre-knowledge of the inferiority and savagery of the peoples of empire and the harshness and danger of their environment, both in need of naming and taming, and what they do is produce details to fit and flesh out these already known “facts.”

But is it fair for Kadiatu Kanneh and I to critique historical texts? Yes, the West made mistakes in the past but surely we have moved past the imperialist arrogance of the scramble for Africa, the western depictions of Africa in literature as the Heart of Darkness, in geography beyond maps that label Africa, “here be monsters,” in science beyond the dubious science of phrenology. Well, yes and no, mostly no. We now have new denigrations and wholesale dismissals of Africa, ones which, interestingly, still keep alive and utilize many of the old images and concepts. Witness Lance Morrow’s 1992 *Time* magazine article titled “Africa: The Scramble for Existence” with its play on and implied

defense of the actual 1883 scramble for Africa, witness W.P. Hoar's article titled "Darkness Covers a Continent," with its obvious play on Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, witness Morrow's dismissal of Africa as "a basket case of civil wars and suffering," and the May, 2000 cover story in the *Economist* titled "Hopeless Africa."

Malinda Smith summarizes things well when she asserts that

"A survey of this kind of talk in academic and popular media discourses over the past decade illustrates how Africa is constructed as unsafe, a security threat, as existing in a brutish state of nature, and as culturally inclined towards a despotism that is dangerous and destabilizing for the global commons.... [T]hese discourses are not new to the extent [that] they reproduce nineteenth century colonial narratives that portray Africa as inhabited by barbarians or "natural slaves," and as the white man's burden." (p. 166).

Coming to Canada: Black at Last, Black at Last, Thanks God Almighty, I'm Black at Last

After my undergraduate studies and two years teaching high school in Freetown, I came to Canada, initially on a Commonwealth scholarship, to pursue graduate studies, which I did at the University of Windsor (M.A English), at Queen's University (MEd.), and at the University of Toronto (Ph.D Education). When I arrived in Canada I became Black. Yes, you heard me right- I moved to Canada and became black. If you are confused by this declaration, allow me to deepen your confusion. What I am suggesting here is what I have suggested in some of my academic writing, that is, that "black" Africans are not particularly

black in Africa, they are not even particularly African. Living among other black people, blackness is not an important form of identity. One does not go around in Lagos or Freetown contemplating one's blackness. Blackness as skin color is not a particularly meaningful form of identity to the average person in Africa and blackness as singular ethnicity (the idea of making race and ethnicity synonymous being problematic aside) is almost meaningless in the context of the great multiplicity of African ethnicities. James Brown's (1968) exhortation, "Say it Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud," resonates meaningfully, movingly in the west, in a context in which whiteness is the norm and the majority, a context in which blackness is marked as different, minoritized and denigrated, a context in which there is a need to assert and take pride in one's difference. When virtually everyone around you is black, blackness is not a form of identification. It falls rather flat to declare, "Say it loud, I'm black and I'm proud- just like everyone else." Identity in the "black" African context is rather about ethnicity, language, village or city of birth, religion, gender, etc.

In contrast, according to western discourses, Africanness is automatically and inescapably linked with blackness since the discourse and classification of races was based on the premise of the inextricable and natural linking of race and place. While there are several candidates for the position, Robert Bernasconi (2001) makes a strong case for Immanuel Kant as the inventor of the concept of race. In his systemization of race, Kant relied on skin color and in his essay "Of the Different Human Races," (Kant, 1774), he identified 4 distinct races: Whites, Blacks, Hindustanic, and Kalmuck, each of which belonged naturally to a specific part of the world, their differences produced by climate- the effects of air and sun. European climates produce white people, African climates produce

black people (and their phenotypical characteristics then continue over generations even if they are removed from their natural climatic environment). Kant and other early race theorists' linking of race and place has translated to our current notions of natural homes for the various races which so easily facilitates the white western racist declaration, "go back where you came from," a declaration that is an interesting forgetting that they too came from somewhere else, that this is Canada, "our home on Native land."

Not that Kant merely refined the definition of race in a purely descriptive and neutral way and with a purely scientific agenda (if there is such a thing). He is a renowned western philosopher and anthropologist but black people might be forgiven for not holding him in too high esteem: after all he was also blatantly racist, declaring in his essay "Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime" (Kant, 1960 edition), for example, that the fact that someone was completely black from head to toe was clear proof that what he said was stupid. While western philosophy has glossed over Kant's racism, the Nigerian philosopher, Emmanuel Eze (1995) does a pretty good job of outlining the racism that characterizes Kant's work, especially his anthropological work.

So westerners draw on an anthropological notion that has become common sense, namely place-based race identity, and see black Africans as black with Africa their natural home. In contrast, Africans' black identity only comes to the fore for us when we see from or find ourselves outside of Africa. To enter Canada is to be thrown into the deep end of the pool of blackness, with all the negative and positive implications entailed. It is to gain instant membership into everything from the positive celebration of racial and cultural diversity that is official multiculturalism to the racist history of western conceptions of blackness, from "everyday racism" (a concept which arguably originates in Frantz Fanon's

(1967) famous book, *Black skin, white masks* and which Surinamese-Dutch sociologist, Philomena Essed (1991) explores in a fine grained manner in some of her work), to the negotiations of representation of people of color in institutions, from the supposedly objective study of Africa, Africans and blacks in academia to the struggle for Afrocentric African studies, from the positive African-Canadian black solidarity with and appropriation of Africa and African identity to recent problematizing of the very concept of race (and therefore racial identities).

This is quite the bewildering list, I realize, and only a partial one, and I provide it to give you a sense of what it feels like for Africans to become black in the West. Allow me to elaborate a little on just the last two examples, to flesh them out a bit so you get something of a sense of the complexity of the issues. Most scientists and social scientists now agree that race does not hold up as a scientific concept, that it is, in the end, a socio-historical construction. There's now even something of a movement against the concept of race: the term is put in inverted, problematizing quote marks by some authors ("race") and the Black English cultural studies scholar, Paul Gilroy (2000), has written a compelling argument of a book with the self explanatory title, *Against Race*. But it would appear that while race can be challenged, the problem of racism remains perennial. No one has put things more cogently than the African-American literary critic, Henry Louis Gates, who declared, "race may be a social and historical construct, but that does not help me get a cab in NY city on a Saturday night."

My second example involves the observation that even as we Africans are entering blackness in the West, we find that there are black people in the west who are claiming an African identity (not the state sanctioned, hyphenated identity of African-Canadian, mind

you, but identity as African period, sometimes spelt militantly with a “k”). Canadian dub poet, Ahdry Zina Mandiela (1991) provides a clear example of this when she declares that she is “afrikan by instinct” in a poem by the same title:

“...you & me
 never seen the motherland
 still afrikan
 our memory/ourstory makes me:
 afrikan
 by instinct
 afrikan...”

Arrival at UBC: The Fourthworldization of Africa

I was quite disappointed, shocked even, when I got to University of British Columbia and discovered that there was no Africana studies at this institution: no undergraduate, let alone graduate program, no African studies, no black studies; no Africana studies; no Africa and its diaspora studies, no African-Canadian studies- call it what you may, it simply did not exist at UBC. How could this be when my old institution, the University of Tennessee, had a thriving Africana studies undergrad program, when all sorts of small colleges in the US had some form of Africana studies, even if only as a component of an ethnic studies program? And other major universities in Canada (U of Toronto, York University, Dalhousie) had African studies (and Dalhousie actually houses the James R. Johnston Chair in Black Canadian Studies).

I came to UBC in the summer of 2005 and earlier that same year, while a professor at the University of Tennessee, I was invited jointly by the African Studies program and the Simpson Center for the Humanities at the University of Washington to give a talk on future directions for African Studies. They were interested in innovative ideas to place their African studies program on the cutting edge and I presented a talk on the possibility of utilizing cultural studies as an interdisciplinary approach to African studies. Now here I was, a few months later, arriving to make my academic home at an institution that did not even have an African studies program. The irony of my situation was not lost on me.

Stunned, I asked around and found that a number of reasons had been proffered: There isn't a big enough African or black population in BC to justify African studies; universities cannot cover everything but have to prioritize and so select some areas to cover and some to leave out; Canada has historical ties with Europe and is now forming ties with Asia and these are the areas we should study at UBC. Frankly, these reasons simply did not wash with me. If as a student in Sierra Leone, literally one of the poorest countries in the world, I could specialize in the Tundra region of North America for my General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level geography exams and read the English literature canon at school and at University, surely UBC can provide the option for students to study Africa. There were many ways in which I was made to feel welcome at UBC as an academic and an educator but as an African I did not feel particularly welcome at an institution that could justify marginalizing my entire continent in the name of academic expediency. The Egyptian political scientist, Samir Amin (1990), predicted in 1990 what he described as "the fourthworldization of Africa," by which he meant that a time was coming when it would be possible to speak to world affairs while completely ignoring

Africa; a time in which Africa and Africans could and might well be pushed much further to the margins, when they would go beyond being third world to become part of a fourth world, cut off from meaningful engagement in world economic, political, academic, commercial and cultural flows. I could not help but feel that because UBC believed it could afford to not have African studies, it was participating in the fourthworldization of Africa. One of the first groups I joined at UBC was a set of students and faculty who were agitating for a change in this situation, for the establishment of African studies. The good news is that the hard work of several years of these faculty and students has resulted in the University of British Columbia consenting to the establishment of an African Studies undergraduate minor.

Conclusion: In the Future, Can You Hear the Word “Africa” Without Reaching for Your Wallet and a Box of Tissues?

I am not an apologist for my continent. Many countries in Africa face a daunting host of problems- from the AIDS epidemic to crushing poverty, from ethnic and national conflicts to systemic corruption. My problem is with the west’s failure to see the continent or when it is seen, the tendency to see Africa solely as the sum of its problems. On the one hand Africa is ignored or dismissed as a “basket case.” Perhaps equally problematic, on the other hand, Africa is seen in very patnatlistic terms as being solely in need of being saved (Save the Children and World Vision videoclips, Live Aid concerts, etc., images and activities which make the average person in the west reach either for their wallet or a box of tissues or both when they hear the word “Africa.”).

This restricted and restrictive perception of Africa causes the west to miss so much. The traditional notion of the *abiku* among the Ibos of Nigeria or *Inkumbulo* among the Zulus of South Africa as coping mechanisms to deal with the death of children, for example, help to explain a traditional African resiliency which is hardly ever mentioned in western conceptions. In more academic terms, by not incorporating Africa and Africans in academic work, the west loses out on the opportunity to really exchange knowledge and to learn from African continental and diasporic academics. Faculty and students and our general global exchange of ideas suffer as a result.

By initiating an undergraduate minor in African studies and through other measures such as the establishment of the Africa initiative by the Faculty of Education and even this forum by the Museum of Anthropology, the University of British Columbia is taking steps towards opening up the institution and its students to a more comprehensive set of conceptions of Africa and Africans. It might now be possible for students of literature to learn of Chinweizu's *bolekaja* literary criticism and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's African Marxism; sociology and gender studies students might learn of Molaria Ogundipe Leslie's STIWANISM and African womanism; and perhaps most interestingly, we could all discuss the end of the isolation of Africa, the extension of Africa beyond the continent into the rest of the world. As Molefi Asante (1990) once declared (albeit somewhat presumptuously), "Wherever people declare themselves as African, despite the distance from the continent or the recentness of their out-migration, they are accepted as part of the African world" (p.15). The notions of an extended Africa include Marcus Garvey's Garveyism, Paul Gilroy's Black Atlantic, Leopold Senghor and Aimee Cesaire's Negritude, and Kwame Nkrumah's Pan-Africanism. We would have an opportunity to undertake the University of British

Columbia's 2010 project of global citizenship in a way that involves the entire globe, including Africa and Africans- those Africans on the continent and those, like me, the Africans who live among you and who you see before you.

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