

**HUMSU COMMUNITY OVER INJUSTICE
NEWSLETTER**



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Cover image credit: Rupie Braich, SFU student

Check your privilege

By: Lauren Thomson

I remember being in a discussion with some classmates in junior high around the time of the American 2016 Presidential election. The topic of immigration came up. I remember some of my classmates saying how they sided with those who said that immigrants were stealing American jobs, and how a wall should be built, and the citizens should be prioritized, and how we should do similar things in Canada. So I questioned them (and I am paraphrasing here), “Should we just kick them out, focus on Canadians, or in America’s case, Americans?” Some would say yes. My next question was this, “okay then, if we are kicking them out, does that involve me?” Confusion at first would hit those who did not know that I am an immigrant, and then next it would be trying to make up excuses.

As many as you have already guessed by now, the immigrants that those classmates were talking about were people of colour, and people from the Middle East, Mexico, Africa, etc. It really made me check my privilege. If my family were not white we would have faced so many challenges, especially considering that we moved to a fairly white, conservative city in Alberta. I have never known what it is like to make someone uncomfortable just because of the colour of my skin or because of my accent. I had to educate myself on these matters, and I learned so much more when coming to Vancouver for university, and hearing other people’s experiences.

It continues to baffle me how some Americans and Canadians will protest immigrants when the country they live in is built on colonization from other countries; nearly every person living on these countries are immigrants or descended from them, but I suppose for them, it is only okay to be an immigrant if you come from a European, heavily white populated nations. And if you are like me, you haven’t faced this type of discrimination, please check your privilege and educate yourself, because you will not just be helping yourself but others.

The Minority Alliance

By: Sara Wong

In the book *The Hate U Give*, the scene that stuck with me the most is when protagonist Starr Carter and her friend Maya Yang form a “minority alliance” after their other friend’s racism becomes more blatantly obvious. It was a short scene, so naturally it didn’t make it into the movie, but I found the message extremely powerful.

Now, Starr and Maya’s minority alliance has become part of a real-world movement. #asiansforblacklives has garnered 18.4k posts on Instagram. Why is this significant? My take is that the hashtag is recognizing that the Black community is the most in need of support right now; that although hate crimes against Asians are also prevalent in Western society, racism targets Black people more. In other words, #asiansforblacklives is helping to reinforce that we should be saying “Black lives matter” as opposed to “all lives matter”, and that until Black lives are truly valued, we cannot progress in the fight for global equality.



Image source: DELCO.Today

The Race of Capital and the Future Perfect of the In-Common

By: Alessandra Capperdoni

The horrific killing of George Floyd at the hand of a (white) police officer has sparked well-deserved outrage and public protests in large measure in the United States as well as across the world. Such protests have made visible anew the impelling need to address racial inequality and systemic racism in our societies. But by mobilizing the linguistic signs attached to the specific circumstances of Floyd's death ("I cannot breathe!") they have drawn attention to the structural violence that feeds systemic racism, bringing the body at the very centre of the discourse of social justice. The letters speaking to us from the banners at the protests of the Black Lives Matter movement and their allies, do not speak specifically about the black body and yet force us to think about the experience of blackness. "I cannot breathe!" is felt in its raw dimensions by each one of us.

The horror of the video, which more or less everybody has been able to watch, weighs on our lungs as we read the message on the banners. Depending on our individual circumstances, many of us have experienced at some point in our lives a sense of choking, even if the conditions were not life-threatening. But the physical experience is effectively linked to what the message stands for: the lives of some people are in a constant state of breathlessness. Years ago, a (queer) friend of mine speaking about the sense in which heterosexist societies made her feel, described her experience as if "your physical and mental universe is shrinking"—an image which bears a strong similarity to breathlessness. Since the killing of George Floyd, testimonies to the bodily dimension of racism have multiplied. Not that we could not imagine it. But somehow, the discourse of the body seems to have moved from the question of "color" and "difference," so central to identity politics, to a broader question of embodiment in conditions of structural violence.

In his introduction to *The Wretched of the Earth*, Jean-Paul Sartre condensed Fanon's critique of colonial structures in a now famous phrase: "The Condition of Native is a nervous condition" (17). Breathlessness is clearly connected to the nervous dimensions of colonial (or neo-colonial) societies. It is also connected to all those states in which the body registers and symptomatically responds to structural violence, that is, violence

produced through the unjust distribution of resources and rights. And what the body does is to remind each one of us that social justice must be a universal project that is syncretic with the exigencies of the particular. Is this an achievable project or an unrealistic dream? This question is crucial. In the short space of this contribution, I want to gesture toward the words of African theorist Achille Mbembe: “There is therefore only one world, at least for now, and that world is all there is. What we all therefore have in common is the feeling or desire that each of us must be a full human being. ... To build a world that we share, we must restore the humanity stolen from those who have historically been subjected to processes of abstraction and objectification” (6). This restoration can only be achieved through a struggle for rights and responsibilities. It must occur, as Mbembe points out, not in separation but “in solidarity with humanity itself” (176). The loud scream that “I cannot breathe!” utters is precisely in the name of solidarity with humanity, a solidarity necessary to unhinge the divisions and hierarchizations operated by the logic of capitalism and necessary to create, instead, a common world for the future.

In the Humanities, we work together to create a space to work for such a world. It is not perfect but the first step is always work. Only those who do not work don't make mistakes. Because “the path is clear: on the basis of a critique of the past, we must create a future that is inseparable from the notions of justice, dignity, and the in-common” (Mbembe 177).

Works Cited

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Splinters

By: Samir Gandesha

Widely regarded as the first film made in Black Africa, *Borom Sarret* (The Wagoner) by Ousmane Sembène provides a profound glimpse of immediate post-colonial reality. Made in 1963 upon the auteur's return from learning his craft at the Gorkii Studios in Moscow, it portrays the unfolding of a day in the life of a cart driver in Dakar, Senegal. Its formal minimalism enables *Borom Sarret* to reveal several layers of complexity. In the economical space of approximately 18 minutes, it discloses the structural violence established and consolidated through colonial class and gender relationships that live on, uncannily, in the post-independence period. It is a vivid and crystalline cinematic depiction of what Frantz Fanon had called just two years earlier in *Wretched of the Earth*, the "pitfalls of national consciousness" and the way in which precisely such an imaginary served to mask the real, which is to say ruthlessly exploitative relationships among citizens of newly "liberated" states. It provokes suspicion of the now ubiquitous idea, at least in the global north, that the abstraction of racial identification alone could ever be organizing principle of solidarity and therefore politics.

We follow the driver, and are privy to his interior monologue delivered by Sembène himself, while he transports a series of passengers and materials to their various destinations. The cart driver considers the exertions of an unemployed man futile and irritating; he is coldly unsympathetic to his plight. He is accosted by a severely crippled yet reasonably affable beggar who asks for money but is even less solicitous and ignores him: "there are so many of them, they are like flies." Yet, the driver is more than happy to pay the well-fed and well-dressed griot or folk singer, who builds up the driver's ego ideal by his ingratiating and obsequious praise of the warrior-identity of his ancestors.

Then there's the solemn father whom the driver transports with the corpse of his infant child to the cemetery only to be turned away because his papers are not in order; he is, we learn, a "foreigner." The artificial borders of the "nation-state" constructed ex nihilo by the colonial powers continue to enact their violence, unremittingly, on the most vulnerable. The driver carefully places the corpse of the child on the ground and drives away, leaving the bereft father to suffer alone.

The narrative begins to tighten with the approach of a well-dressed and apparently wealthy African man who wishes to be taken to the formerly French quarter of Dakar—the Plateau; here, cart drivers require special permits. The man is moving to the Plateau, he tells the driver. The camera pans in the direction of the former European quarter to reveal a shockingly different cityscape. As the soundtrack shifts from the syncopated rhythms and xalam (lute) of traditional Senegalese music to 18th century European classical music, the sand and rock give way to paved streets, the horse-drawn carts to orderly modern automobile traffic. In a few short miles, we traverse centuries.

As soon as the driver nervously enters the Plateau, he is immediately confronted by a scowling police officer who promptly issues him a fine and confiscates his cart. As he is writing the ticket, the officer steps on the wagoner's medal, most likely for the driver's service in the French army. Meanwhile, the wealthy passenger absconds in an awaiting car. In this single gesture, the continuity of the corruptions of Empire is laid bare. Racial solidarity is revealed for the myth that it is. The police are there to protect the wealthy Blacks from poor Blacks, whose labour power is nonetheless required for the production of wealth; the inclusion of the worker is premised on their spatial exclusion. They are what Jacques Rancière calls "the part that has no part."

The driver returns home with his horse, devastated and bewildered. His wife rises, matter-of-factly gives him their infant child to look after, and promises that they would have food that evening and leaves. According to the Director of NYU's Institute of Afro-American Affairs, Manthia Diawara, the common interpretation—consistent with themes in Sembène's other films—is that she is off to participate in sex work and this was not to be disparaged but accepted as a legitimate form of labour; sex workers were to be accepted as proletarians and neither stigmatized nor condemned, as they were, of course, by the imams.

Today in the midst of the global uprising, amidst the Covid19 pandemic, against anti-Black and anti-Indigenous state violence, and the related re-emergence of fascism, Borom Sarrett can be seen to be, in Walter Benjamin's terms, blasted out of the continuum of history and shot through with "now time" (Jetztzeit). Such "now time" crystallizes in at least three ways.

First, as I have recently argued in my book *Spectres of Fascism* (Pluto, 2020), the return of fascism provokes a reconsideration of Aimé Césaire's theory of endocolonialism—fascism as the application of techniques of domination perfected in Europe's African and Asian colonies to the European context itself. The fascist

imaginary was anchored to German and Italian colonial projects in Africa and the US Republic's genocidal westward expansion.

Second, at the same time, however, the brutalities of policing cannot be reduced to "White supremacy" alone, but must be also situated in class and gender relationships. The role of the police is to protect private property, which is to say the separation between the worker and the means of production. Separation from the means of production is the condition for the possibility of exploitation as workers must sell their labour power which is rendered abstract, temporally quantifiable and measurable. Borom Sarrett makes this explicit insofar as the wagoner is literally deprived of his own means of production at the moment that his cart is confiscated. The abstract violence of this gesture forces his wife—both means of production and worker in one—into the nexus of the sex industry in order to engage in socially reproductive labour.

Third, the police also, of course, maintain the specifically spatial separation common to virtually all African cities, that between the natives' quarters or the "Medina," on the one hand, and the settlers' quarters the "Plateau," on the other, which, as Sembène shows us, is taken over by the post-colonial African bourgeoisie.

Today, in the West, but especially North America, we see the intimate ties between fascism, on the one hand, and an increasingly militarized police apparatus. Here, we see the brutal over-policing of Black people in US and Canadian inner cities and Indigenous peoples in their own territories, in particular. What Fanon calls the "well-built town" of the settler anticipates the White "gated community" fortified by increasingly privatized and militarized police forces which function, for all intents and purposes, like armies of occupation in the precincts of the poor and indigent. A society of separation; a society of the post-colonial spectacle.

Movin' On Up

By: David Mirhady

Movin' on up!

Today, June 11, 2020, with the help of 3 family members and Alice and Maria, I moved the last of my things out of AQ 5122 and on up, across to the "east side" of the hallway, to AQ 6190 (the office of Andre Gerolymatos), leading a sort of exodus of the Humanities Department from its home of more than 20 years to its new home, with wonderful new colleagues, in Hellenic Studies.

I'm riffing a bit on a television comedy from my teens, the Jeffersons, a black family who moved from their house in the Queens borough of New York to a "deluxe apartment in the sky", on the east side of Manhattan, as a result of their success running a chain of dry cleaning stores. The Jeffersons blazed a trail in illustrating an upwardly mobile black family, confronting issues we're facing acutely now, together with our American friends.

Issues such as racism, slavery, and the use of violence in social control recur very often in the texts we read and discuss in Humanities, where differing perspectives are debated. And several of the jokes we see on the Jeffersons can also be found in the comedies of Aristophanes.

THANKS FOR READING!



#MaskUpSFU

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