



Actor and activist Danny Glover speaks during a rally against genocide in the Darfur region of Sudan outside the Sudanese embassy in Washington, August 25, 2004. YURI GRIPAS/REUTERS/LANDOV

# Slavery, Genocide and the Politics of Outrage Understanding the New Racial Olympics

**HISHAM AIDI**

The September 11 attacks and the war on terrorism threw American racial politics into flux, producing a new enemy, new alliances and sending different groups scrambling for a better spot in the ethnic pecking order. That background is crucial to understanding why the mass killing and displacement in Darfur has become a pressing political issue in the United States.

In October 1999, PBS aired *The Wonders of the African World*, a six-part documentary produced by the renowned African-American intellectual, Henry Louis Gates, wherein the Harvard educator travels from Egypt to Sudan

and down the Swahili coast of East Africa and up through parts of West Africa examining the encounter between Africa and Arab civilization and the role of Africans and Arabs in the enslavement of Africans. In Egypt, Gates reflects on the “facial features” of monuments in Aswan, noting the “blackness” of the pharaohs and pondering whether the construc-

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tion of the Aswan Dam that inundated ancient Nubia was an act of Arab racism. In the coastal Kenyan cities of Lamu and Mombasa, and on the island of Zanzibar, he talks to a number of natives who, to his dismay, define themselves as being of “Arab” or “Persian” descent. “To me, people here look about as Persian as Mike Tyson,” Gates remarks. “It’s taken my people 50 years to move from Negro to black to African-American. I wonder how long it will take the Swahili to call themselves African.”

*The Wonders of the African World* was guided by peculiarly American conceptions of race and blackness, the most obvious being the “one-drop rule,” by which anyone deemed possessing so much as one drop of black blood was to be considered fully black and subjected to the legal system of racial domination known as Jim Crow. Asked by one critic why he considered ancient Egyptians more authentically African than modern Egyptians, Gates responds: “I suspect that if the average ancient Egyptian had shown up in Mississippi in 1950, they would have been flung into the back of the bus. And that is black enough for me.”<sup>1</sup> By emphasizing the role of the Arabs and Africans in the slave trade, Gates was engaging in the common American practice of allocating “racial guilt,” in this case underlining Arab and African “blame” for slavery. As one African reviewer wrote, “Some of us fear that in [his] efforts to repair relations between White America and Black America, [Gates] may be sowing the seeds of discord between African-Americans and the peoples of the African continent.”<sup>2</sup>

Black nationalists are not the only group in the United States to claim certain cultures, spaces and eras of the Arab world as theirs for their own purposes. Christian and Jewish nationalists have long imbued the “Orient” with redemptive significance. But while Christian and Jewish cultural affiliations with the Middle East have historically been staunchly Zionist and pro-Israel, African-American constructions of North Africa and the Middle East have been ambivalent about Zionism and more willing to engage with other nationalist movements. Malcolm X, one of the first to try to reconcile Arab and black nationalisms, tells of a transforming encounter he had with an Algerian diplomat in Ghana: “I was speaking with the Algerian ambassador, who is extremely militant and is a revolutionary in the true sense of the word.... When I told him that my political, social and economic philosophy was black nationalism, he asked me very frankly, well, where did that leave him? Because he was white...he was Algerian, and to all appearances he was a white man. And he said if I define my objective as the victory of black nationalism, where does that leave him?”<sup>3</sup>

The presence of Arabs on the African continent—“white” ones like the Algerian ambassador, but especially those who appear phenotypically “black” but reject the label “African”—has elicited numerous ideological reactions, from Malcolm’s pro-Arab pan-Africanism to militantly anti-Islamic, anti-Arab strands of Afrocentrism. In the early 1970s,

a school of black nationalism emerged that is strongly distrustful of the Arab world. Since the September 11, 2001 attacks, that school has become stridently political, making common cause with movements, such as those of Christian evangelicals, Zionists and neo-conservatives, with which it has historically been at odds. The resurgence of this strand of black nationalism, which sees Arabs as “not our people” and “guilty” of inflicting the same devastation on Africa as the white West, is the result of centuries-old tensions between African-American Muslims and Christians, strained relations between African-Americans and Arab-Americans in urban areas, and a reaction to the clash between African and Arab nationalism in the Afro-Arab borderlands, particularly in the Sudan. More broadly, it comes in response to the de facto *mission civilisatrice* of Arab nationalism vis-à-vis non-Arab African peoples and cultures in North Africa and the Afro-Arab borderlands.

This anti-Arab black nationalism has found expression in the new initiative demanding reparations from the Arab League for “Afro-Arab slavery” and the campaign to penalize Sudan for the Darfur tragedy. Both efforts are inspired by the view that Arabic-speaking North Africans (of all hues) are an “alien race” on African soil. Since September 11, this view has gained popularity outside black nationalist circles, leading to a rapprochement between black nationalist groups and rival Zionist groups over Sudan, akin to the Jewish-evangelical reconciliation over Israel. Such developments are best explained by an enduring feature of US politics—racial scapegoating.

Historians have argued that racial scapegoating was crucial to the consolidation of the American nation-state, since intra-white conflict was often resolved by institutionalizing common prejudice against blacks.<sup>4</sup> Various reports assessing the impact of the September 11 attacks on American politics argue that the attacks reordered racial divisions. A survey gauging attitudes towards various ethnic groups, for instance, found respondents giving “more favorable ratings” to all groups except for Arab- and Muslim Americans, who “received less favorable ratings because they were associated with the attacks on the World Trade Center.”<sup>5</sup> These figures should come as no surprise. Nationalism, after all, has been defined as the “wish to suppress the internal divisions within the nation and define people outside the group as untrustworthy as allies and implacably evil as enemies.”<sup>6</sup>

The September 11 attacks and the “war on terror” have thrown American racial politics into flux, producing a new enemy, new alliances and sending different groups scrambling for a better spot in the ethnic pecking order. As in the early years of the Cold War, the post-September 11 period constitutes a critical juncture where past political alignments are coming undone, as some ethnic and political groups mobilize to resist reigning policies and ideas, while others rally to reap political benefits by staunchly supporting efforts to contain the Islamic threat. The “Save Darfur”

campaign in many ways captures the new racial climate, as different ethnic and political divisions have been set aside and grievances are “externalized” onto the Middle East. As in the Cold War, “race” has emerged as an ideological cudgel in the war of words between the US and the Arab world, as various actors use charges of racism to expose the other side’s alleged double standards.

Fears about how mass immigration from Latin America may balkanize the US in a time of war have also helped shape the post-September 11 racial landscape. Groups anxious about being superseded by the “ethnic succession” produced by Latino immigration have shifted right, becoming hawkish on foreign policy and supporting tougher border controls. Latinos eager to prove their patriotism are evincing conservative attitudes on the Middle East and voicing centuries-old canards about Moorish invaders and Oriental despotism. These trends suggest that a shift is taking place in the American racial hierarchy. If, historically, as Toni Morrison once argued, the assimilation of immigrants was achieved and America was kept united only after the “racial estrangement [of blacks] is learned,”<sup>7</sup> today it appears that assimilation and unity are achieved by “learning” the estrangement and ideological exclusion of the Arab/Muslim.

## Shifting Currents

Cornel West has argued that the most prominent African-American leaders of the last century, Marcus Garvey, W. E. B. Du Bois, Paul Robeson, Ralph Bunche and Martin Luther King, were initially committed Zionists, but “by the mid-sixties, especially [after] 1967 and the beginning of the occupation, the mood in the black community slowly, but significantly, [began] to be critical of Zionism.”<sup>8</sup> The biblical trope of Exodus of the suffering Hebrews being liberated from Pharaoh and returning to the land of Israel has long resonated with African-Americans. In the early twentieth century, many African-American leaders saw Zionism as a model for the African diaspora’s eventual emancipation and return to Africa. But the tide would begin to shift against Zionism long before the 1967 war. By the mid-1950s, the anti-colonial, anti-racist rhetoric of the Bandung conference and the pan-Africanism of Gamal Abdel Nasser and Kwame Nkrumah had gained sway in black America. The Nasserist regime explicitly appealed to African-Americans suffering in the “pure white democracy” of the US: “Greetings to the Free Negroes from Free Egypt, and from all Free Men.”<sup>9</sup> After the 1956 Suez war, Du Bois published a poem excoriating Israel for betraying the Jews’ historic suffering—its own “murdered, mocked and damned”—and lauding “the great black hand that Nasser’s power waves.”<sup>10</sup> The young Malcolm X also saw Zionism and Jewish diaspora politics as a paradigm for African-Americans to follow, but as one biographer notes, “Interestingly, after making a little-known

visit to the Palestinian homeland on the Gaza Strip in 1964, Malcolm stopped using Israel as an example, giving instead a Chinese analogy.”<sup>11</sup> During the early years of the Cold War, Arab nationalism enthralled many African-Americans. “We have a unique and rare personality in the person of Gamal Abdel Nasser,” a Harlem street orator declared in 1955. “This man’s ancestry is African and Arabic, but he refuses to follow the classic road of championing white supremacy and exploiting black people.... He made the freedom of Africa a major priority along with Arab unity and Muslim cooperation.”<sup>12</sup>

President Harry Truman soon realized that in the propaganda war with the Soviet Union and her allies, race was America’s “Achilles’ heel,” used by rival states to expose American double standards on human rights and undermine the US position as leader of the “free world.” To combat Communist propaganda about American racism, the State Department sent prominent black athletes and artists as good will ambassadors to tour the Middle East. In 1956, Dizzy Gillespie, Louis Armstrong and other “jambassadors” toured Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, Iran and Pakistan, giving performances with the objective of showing that, in America, individuals of any race could achieve success.

But the popularity of Islam and Arab culture in black America continued to grow unabated, disquieting a number of black nationalists and black Christians who were appalled that hundreds of thousands of African-Americans were converting to an alien faith. Islam has been viewed with suspicion in black America since the era of slavery, when Muslim slaves, some of them literate in Arabic, were often labeled “Moorish” or “Arabian” and put in positions of power as “house slaves” or “drivers” overseeing non-Muslim slaves.<sup>13</sup> From the days of the plantation, the view existed of Muslim slaves as arrogant people ashamed of being African, who would try to “pass” for “Arab” or “Moorish” to get better treatment from the white man. Reflecting that view, Booker T. Washington, in his autobiography *Up From Slavery*, scoffs at how a “dark-skinned man...a citizen of Morocco” is allowed into a “local hotel” from which he, “an American Negro,” is banned.<sup>14</sup> These anxieties were revived in the 1930s and 1940s, when the Moorish Science Temple and the early Nation of Islam began gaining urban followers who wore robes and fez hats and described themselves as Moors, Arabs and Afro-Asiatics.

The belief that conversion to Islam constituted a form of “passing” was only reinforced by the fact that many African-Americans who embraced Islam were not “Jim Crowed.” As Dizzy Gillespie famously pointed out, many jazz musicians who converted and took on Muslim names could enter “whites only” restaurants and even had “white” stamped on their union cards. As Gillespie put it, “Man, if you join the Muslim faith, you ain’t colored no more, you’ll be white, they’d say. You get a new name and you don’t have to be a nigger no more.”<sup>15</sup> The growing influence of Islam in black



Malcolm X meets with Sheik Abd al-Rahman Tag (right), the future rector of al-Azhar University in Cairo, July 18, 1964.

BETTMANN/CORBIS

America in the 1950s troubled prominent African-American liberals like Thurgood Marshall, who in 1959 referred to the Nation of Islam as “run by a bunch of thugs organized from prisons and jails and financed, I am sure, by Nasser or some Arab group.”<sup>16</sup>

The popularity of Malcolm X’s message of Islamic universalism as an answer to Western racism and imperialism drew critics beyond the African-American community. In 1971, Bernard Lewis wrote that although “Malcolm X was an acute and sensitive observer...the [Islamic] beliefs which he had acquired,” “prevented him from realizing the full implication of ‘the color pattern’ he saw” in the Arab world. Rather than an “interracial utopia,” Lewis argued, a quick reading of *The Arabian Nights* showed the “Alabama-like quality” and “Southern impression” of Arab life.<sup>17</sup> That same year saw the publication of Chancellor Williams’ *The Destruction of African Civilization*, which would emerge as one of the founding texts of the Afrocentrist movement. Williams described how since the time of pharaonic Egypt, Arabs had attempted to conquer Africa while Nubians and Ethiopians heroically resisted the white “Arab-Asian” effort to destroy the single black kingdom which originally extended from the shores of the Mediterranean to the source of the Nile.<sup>18</sup>

More recently, another prominent Afrocentrist, Molefi Asante, has argued that the Arab-Islamic invasions of Egypt destabilized the entire African continent: “The Arabs, with their jihads, or holy wars, were thorough in their destruction of much of the ancient [Egyptian] culture,” but fleeing Egyptian priests dispersed across the continent spreading Egyptian knowledge.<sup>19</sup> Given what they see as the Arabs’ historic hatred of blacks and their guilt in the destruction of indigenous Nile Valley civilization, the Afrocentrists are adamantly opposed to African-Americans embracing Islam, seeing it as “contradictory.” In the words of one critic, for the Afrocentrist, African-Americans espousing Islam were “cultural heretics” and “self-hating wannabes who had moved from the back of the bus to the back of the camel.”<sup>20</sup>

This notion of Arabs as invaders who destroyed African civilization and drove North Africa’s “indigenous” inhabitants below the Sahara is repeated *ad absurdum* by influential African and Afro-diasporan scholars, despite evidence to the contrary. In this view, the lighter-hued inhabitants of North Africa today are not “indigenous,” but are the descendants of invaders and enslavers, or worse yet, a mulatto class used to oppress the indigenous black population. But most scholars concur that North Africans have always been multi-hued, and there is no evidence of a black North Africa obliterated



Dizzy Gillespie charms a snake in Karachi, Pakistan on a State Department-sponsored tour of the Middle East and Asia, April 20, 1956.

BETTMANN/CORBIS

by invaders. One prominent geographer writes, “It was not that Arabs physically displaced Egyptians. Instead, the Egyptians were transformed by relatively small numbers of immigrants bringing in new ideas, which, when disseminated, created a wider ethnic identity.”<sup>21</sup> Another historian argues that both skeletal and ancient pictorial evidence “show ancient Nubians as an African people fundamentally the same as modern ones” and that the advent of the Arabs “has had a powerful linguistic, religious and cultural impact but has...not had a great influence on the appearance of the people.”<sup>22</sup> Even Cheikh Anta Diop, the grandfather of pan-Africanist historians, has called the belief that Arab invasions caused mass racial displacement into sub-Saharan Africa a “figment of the imagination.”<sup>23</sup>

## The Politics of Blame

Nigerian Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka is probably the most renowned proponent of the view that Islam and the Arabs

are as guilty of the “the cultural and spiritual savaging of the continent” as the West.<sup>24</sup> He has repeatedly argued that, because of Arab “racial guilt,” North Africa should not be considered part of Africa: “Africa minus the Sahara North is still a very large continent, populated by myriad races and cultures.”<sup>25</sup> Soyinka has also forcefully called for reparations from the Arab-Muslim world and the West. This thinking reveals the subjective treatment of slavery in black nationalist writing. Most historians concur that Africa was the victim of three slave trades: the “Occidental” that took slaves across the Atlantic Ocean to the New World, the “Oriental” which took slaves to markets in North Africa and Arabia, and the “African” slave trades—also called “internal” or “indigenous” slave trades—which transported slaves from one region in sub-Saharan Africa to another and which peaked after 1850.<sup>26</sup> Pan-Africanist thinkers of different political persuasions have always had to decide which slavery to downplay and which to emphasize as critical to Africa’s identity. Thus, Malcolm X, who came to believe in

a pan-Africanism that was “race-transcendent,” inclusive of Arabic-speaking North Africa, was well aware of the role played by Arabs in the Oriental slave trade, but saw it as an affair of the past, with American racism and imperialism in more urgent need of attention.

Similarly, Kenyan scholar Ali Mazrui has called for a pro-Arab pan-Africanism that includes North Africa, and demands reparations from the West but not from the Arab world, because the Western system of slavery (“first-degree slavery”) was worse than both the Oriental (“second-degree slavery”) and the “indigenous African slavery” (“third-degree culpability slavery”), the latter two being more racially assimilationist than the Western system.<sup>27</sup> This typology outrages many black nationalists, who see Mazrui as an apologist for Oriental slavery, treating it as “benign,” a position that is indeed held by many Arab and Muslim scholars. But Soyinka, like other black nationalists, is mysteriously silent on the subject of African slavery, generally abolished in the early twentieth century, but still existing in Niger, Mali, Benin, Mauritania and Haiti. Nigerian poet J. P. Clarke has criticized this selective outrage: “If the European states are to pay, so must the Arab states, and so must the African states set up by the Europeans...if the eminent personalities now addressing the matters of redress are not to be accused of casuistry and of applying double standards.”<sup>28</sup>

The subject of African slavery is still rarely discussed, despite the facts that slavery was necessary for the consolidation of the nineteenth-century West African states of Sokoto, Masina, Futa Jallon, and the Chokwe and Zulu states of southern Africa, and that slavery endured in Sierra Leone until 1926 and in Ethiopia until 1923.<sup>29</sup> Western anthropologists have tended to avoid the subject or portray “indigenous slavery” as “entirely benign...for fear of contributing to unfavorable stereotypes held by the wider public about cultures that [they] were committed to defend.”<sup>30</sup> The leaders of newly independent African states deliberately suppressed public discussion of indigenous slavery, also dismissing it as benign for fear of inflaming ethnic tensions.<sup>31</sup>

Black nationalist intellectuals in the diaspora rarely address the subject of slavery in Africa, treating it as an internal African matter (“black-on-black”) or a harmless form of servitude (“non-chattel”), for fear that such a discussion may, by shifting the blame onto Africans, undermine the black freedom struggle in the New World. Rather than a solidarity based on political objectives as put forth by Malcolm X and Nkrumah, black nationalists champion a pan-Africanism based on reconciliation between blacks in Africa and the African diaspora, which can be achieved by “forgetting” African slavery, eliding sub-Saharan Africa’s myriad ethnic and political differences, and coming together against the West and the Arab world (“the Orient”), two civilizations which have brutalized “the African.” The issue of slavery in Sudan thus emerged as a cause in the African diaspora only when it began to be seen not as an African form of slavery,

but as an “Oriental” one, with Arabs enslaving indigenous Africans and with northern Sudan as part of the expansionist Orient. This approach involves a good deal of intellectual gerrymandering. How can one distinguish between Oriental and African slavery? The trans-Indian Ocean slave trade, like its Atlantic counterpart, took African slaves to markets outside of Africa, but why is the trans-Saharan slave trade, which took slaves to North Africa, considered “external,” while the trade that took slaves to different regions of sub-Saharan Africa is termed “indigenous”? Why is the Sahara seen as a divide akin to the Atlantic Ocean simply because *sahil* means coast in Arabic?<sup>32</sup> Historians of different persuasions—not just black nationalists—seem to begin with the premise that North Africans are not Africans, thus making their participation in slavery on the African continent ethically different from African slavery.

These questions were dismissed at the Conference on Arab-Led Slavery of Africans organized in 2003 in Johannesburg, South Africa by the Center for Advanced Studies of African Society in Cape Town and the Drammeh Institute of New York, which demanded reparations and an apology from the Arab League for “Arab slavery and depredations in Africa.” This reparations initiative is underpinned by the view that the Arabs displaced the indigenous African populations of North Africa. Some of the reparations advocates hold all non-black North Africans—most often using the one-drop rule—to be “guilty,” while others direct their wrath at all those who self-identify as Arab, including dark-skinned northern Sudanese, but exculpate Berbers, who though “white” are also victims of Arab invaders.

How did Arabs transmute, almost overnight, from being seen by African-Americans as allies in the struggle against Western racism to a slave-trading “intruder race” occupying Africa? How did the pro-Arab pan-Africanism of Malcolm X lose out to the anti-Arab black nationalism of Asante, Williams and Soyinka? Some, like Sherman Jackson, have attributed this change to the “exploitative” relations between Arabs and African-Americans in urban America—and the anti-black bigotry of some Muslim immigrants. Malcolm X defended Middle Eastern immigrants from the bigotry charge thusly: “Now a lot of Arabs might like for you to think that they are white, but whenever you see them involved in the international picture, they are lined up with the dark world. They can come around here and pose as white. But when they get back, they’re not white.” But even this defense began to ring hollow, as many African-Americans began to feel not unjustifiably that Arab nationalism was turning its back on pan-Africanism and the “dark world.” Equally important in inflaming black nationalist rage are the supremacist strains of Arab nationalism and Islamism espoused by various North African states that openly speak of subjugating or civilizing non-Muslim and non-Arabic speaking groups. The militant Arab-Islamist nationalism of the Khartoum

regime, in particular, figures prominently in Afrocentrist and black nationalist thought, with many, like Chancellor Williams, arguing that the Sudanese civil war is merely a continuation of a centuries-old race war between invading Arabs and indigenous Africans. But how did the Sudanese civil war and its most recent permutation, the Darfur conflict, come to be so widely seen as pitting Arabs versus indigenous Africans?

## (Mis)Representing Sudan

The challenge in examining Sudan's long-running civil war is to understand how, unlike other African civil wars, the conflict came to be "racialized" and not "ethnicized." While popular representations of the Sudanese civil war as pitting the "Arab Muslim" north against "African Christian/animist" south may be simplistic, it is equally inaccurate to argue, as do many Arab apologists, that racial distinctions and prejudice were introduced by British colonialists. Historians have argued that by the sixteenth century, Muslims in the north were claiming Arab ancestry, and the labels one hears today—*'abd* or slave for southerners and Fallata for those of Western African origin—derive from the late eighteenth century when the kingdoms of Funj and Fur were raiding the south for slaves and northern Sudanese Muslims "invent[ed] derogatory ethnic and racial categories to refer to non-Muslim groups in the South." Centuries before the advent of the British, northern Muslims were claiming a superior Arab identity, asserting descent from either the Prophet Muhammad or other distinguished Arabian ancestors, and viewing the peoples of southern Sudan, the Upper Blue Nile and the Nuba mountains as "enslaveable" non-Arabs. These categories, explains one historian, "demarcated and racialized the people of the Sudan. Color in itself became quite irrelevant; many 'Arab' Sudanese were and are darker than some Southerners. But descent did and does matter; even conversion to Islam could not fully compensate for the absence of accepted Arab ancestry."<sup>33</sup>

British colonial policy built upon "the existence of these two invented opposing identities." The British administration carved up the Sudan into an "Arab North" and an "African South," and divided the peoples into three racial categories—"Arabs," "Sudanese" for ex-slaves and "Fallata," and in the 1930s, attempted to develop the south along "indigenous and African lines" through a return to "tribal" law and "indigenous languages."<sup>34</sup> The idea of an "indigenous south" juxtaposed to an Arab north was thus a British innovation that would have far-reaching political repercussions. In the parts of Africa where colonialists categorized a particular group as a race instead of an ethnicity, that group would be ideologically and "legally constructed" as non-indigenous, and via the "migration hypothesis," in effect deracinated and depicted as having originated else-

where.<sup>35</sup> When Sudan gained independence, the state builders in Khartoum embraced an Arab nationalism based on "a genealogy that stretched into the Islamic Arab past" and attempted to impose an Arab identity—and later Islamic law—not only on the north, but also on the southern territories. In consolidating the Sudanese state, the leadership would use a racial language that dated back to the seventeenth century, but they also adopted the racial categories and idea of "indigeneity" introduced by the British. Yet although many in the north self-identify as Arab and claim descent from noble Arabians who supposedly immigrated to Africa, that does not make them non-indigenous.

The Arab versus indigenous African dichotomy runs through most discussions of the Darfur conflict. Alex de Waal has argued that "the Arab-African dichotomy is historically and anthropologically bogus. But that doesn't make the distinction unreal, as long as the perpetrators subscribe to it." The perpetrators, in this case, the Darfurian Arabs who are attempting to exterminate the "indigenous" people of Darfur, "are 'Arabs' in the ancient sense of 'Bedouin,' meaning desert nomad.... Darfurian Arabs, too, are indigenous, black and African. In fact, there are no discernible racial or discernible religious differences between the two: all have lived there for centuries; all are Muslims."<sup>36</sup> Ethnic identities and categories have long been fluid in western Sudan, but have recently hardened around the political labels of Arabs and African. In the 1990s, in imitation of the southern Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and to gain political traction, leaders of the Darfurian separatist movement embraced the label "African" instead of the alternative "Muslim." An attempted alliance between Darfurian separatists and the SPLA failed, but as the SPLA continued to resist the Khartoum regime and "gained a high international standing, [Darfurian leaders] too learned to characterize their plight in the simplified terms that had proved so effective in winning foreign sympathy for the south: they were the 'African' victims of an 'Arab' regime."<sup>37</sup>

## Discordant Historiographies

The clash between Arab nationalism and African nationalism in Sudan has occurred less violently in a number of North African states. In fact, what has enraged black nationalist opinion in the US is not simply the Sudan war, but the wider Arab world's "conspiracy of silence" about the presence of racialism and slavery in the region, coupled with the arrogance of Arab nationalist and Islamist regimes and movements toward non-Arabs in North and sub-Saharan Africa. Many African and African-American observers note that Arab heads of state will spout a pan-African rhetoric while being deeply contemptuous of Africa. Nasser supported the civil rights movement and spoke passionately of continental solidarity, but also said: "We are in Africa... We will never in any circumstances relinquish our responsibility



**A soldier, right, in a military unit believed to form part of the janjaweed militia, chats with Sudanese policemen at the weekly animal market in Mistiria in North Darfur, Sudan, October 5, 2004.**

BEN CURTIS/AP

to support, with all our might, the spread of enlightenment and civilization to the remotest depths of the jungle.”<sup>38</sup> Likewise, Libyan strongman Muammar Qaddafi, another champion of Africa known for his grandiloquent appeals to black America, is the author of *The Green Book*, which holds that blacks have more children than other races because they “are sluggish in a climate that is always hot.” Qaddafi has attempted to annex northern Chad, arming groups along the Chadian and Sudanese borders in an effort to build an “Arab belt” across the Sahara. These supremacist attitudes permeate Arab intellectual circles. Egyptian historian Hilmi Shaarawi, arguably the Arab world’s most renowned Africanist, has tartly observed that most Arabic-language scholarship on Africa treats the continent as a “cultural vacuum,” a “continent without any culture and civilization” waiting to be fecundated by Islam and Arab culture.<sup>39</sup>

The conflict between Arab and African nationalism is also an ideological war of visions. While many sub-Saharan African regimes sought to celebrate their indigenous languages and cultures after independence, many North African regimes that joined the Arab League would embrace their own migration myth, retroactively tracing their populations’ national origin to Arabia (a claim that would provide am-

munition for black nationalists and others seeking to portray North Africans as settlers). Most North African states made Arabness (*uruba*) the official identity, Arabic the official language and suppressed—or even criminalized—the expression of indigenous, non-Arab languages and identities. The homogenizing historiography of the state builders is now coming under attack by self-described “indigenous” nationalist movements in the Sudan and the Maghrib. In Morocco, the Berberophone movement has successfully pressured the government to change history textbooks that claimed that the country’s entire population, Arabic- and Berber-speakers alike, originated in the Middle East.

Unaware of this conflict of historical and political visions, many African-Americans are galled by the Arab nationalist and Islamist disdain for non-Arab and pre-Islamic culture, in particular that Egypt’s pharaonic heritage does not figure more prominently in the country’s political discourse. African-Americans note that Egyptian intellectuals and officials often refuse to even engage with different Afro-diasporan groups drawn to ancient Egypt’s culture—even dismissing them as “pyramidiots.” In March 1989, for instance, a controversy arose over an exhibit about Ramses the Great at the Texas State Fairgrounds in Dallas. An urban group

called the Blacology Speaking Committee threatened to boycott the exhibit, alleging that the organizers had not placed sufficient emphasis on the blackness of Ramses II. Abdellatif Aboul-Ela, director of the cultural office of the Egyptian embassy in Washington, responded with an op-ed in the *Washington Post* which captured many Egyptians' attitudes toward race and Africa: "They should not... involve us in this racial problem that I thought was solved and buried a long time ago. We are not in any way related to the original black Africans of the Deep South. Egypt, of course, is a country in Africa, but this doesn't mean it belongs to Africa at large. This is an Egyptian heritage, not an African heritage.... We cannot say by any means we are black or white."<sup>40</sup> Groups across Africa and the African diaspora may also reject the labels "African" or "black" in favor of more local identities, but black nationalists see the refusal of North Africans to identify with pan-Africanism as particularly offensive because they are "sitting on" a glorious African heritage.

This background is crucial to understanding why Sudan emerged as a cause after September 11.

## Marketing Darfur

In December 1999, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright declared that, much as she deplored Sudan's suffering, "the human rights situation in Sudan is not marketable to the American people."<sup>41</sup> Less than three years later, on October 7, 2002, Congress passed the Sudan Peace Act by a vote of 359–8, condemning Sudan's human rights record and promising stepped-up US involvement in the peace process. The bill was praised as an "expression of unity" that brought together sundry political interests and leaders. "Republicans and democrats, blacks, whites, Hispanics and Asians, men and women," crowed radio personality and long-time Sudan activist, Joe "The Black Eagle" Madison, about the diversity of the lobbying effort. Rep. Charles Rangel (D-NY) joked that in his 30 years in Congress he had never before been on the same platform with Texan Republican Dick Arme.

As the Bush administration was attempting to broker an end to the war in the south, the Darfur crisis captured America's imagination. In April 2004, the US Holocaust Memorial Museum issued a "genocide alert" about Darfur—the first in the institution's history. At a Darfur Emergency Summit convened on July 14, 2004 by the American Jewish World Service and the Holocaust Museum, Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel stated, "Sudan has become today's world capital of human pain, suffering and agony." The American Jewish World Service subsequently helped establish the Save Darfur Coalition, comprising more than a hundred American organizations to lobby the US government and the United Nations. Also in July, Secretary of State Colin Powell, speaking before Congress, described the Darfur tragedy as "genocide." As the fall semester began, vigils took place on

college campuses across the country, as students attempted to start a Sudan divestment campaign similar to that waged against apartheid-era South Africa. "This is the most impressive and widespread coalition on an African crisis that we've seen since the anti-apartheid movement in the 1980s and early 1990s," said John Prendergast, a top Africa aide at the Clinton White House now with the Brussels-based International Crisis Group.<sup>42</sup>

Meanwhile, Khartoum's harboring of Osama bin Laden in 1996 made it central to the war on terrorism. The presence of oil, eyed by Europe and China, made Sudan increasingly relevant to a Bush administration looking for alternatives to Persian Gulf oil. To many Americans, moreover, the Sudanese civil war was part of the "clash of civilizations," with southern Sudan a "civilizational faultline" where Islam bloodily bordered a rival civilization and where it was crucial to contain the expanding Islamic threat. The conservative Christian lobby, working with Democrats and the Congressional Black Caucus, had helped push through the Sudan Peace Act. What surprised many observers was that Darfur suddenly became a domestic political issue threatening to undermine the administration's peace efforts. Darfur brought together Wiesel and Jimmy Carter, civil rights leaders, human rights activists, entertainers Dick Gregory and Danny Glover, conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats, retired Sen. Jesse Helms and Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield of Ben and Jerry's ice cream company. Referring to the "black/white-left/right" "coalition of conscience" for Darfur, evangelical leader Franklin Graham proudly said, "You have groups that don't agree politically, who have a totally different view of world events. Yet when it comes to Sudan, we are working together."<sup>43</sup>

Given that there were no Christian victims in Darfur to mobilize the Christian right, the Darfur campaign puzzled many Africa watchers. In August, the *Washington Post* observed: "[Darfur] is a tragedy of unimaginable proportions—except that with hardly a turn of the globe, other calamities easily can seize our imagination. For if there were an international misery index, Darfur would have lots of company." The piece contended that Darfur had become "one of the world's hot causes" because the refugee camps are accessible, there is a preexisting network of African-American and Christian activists and the Rwandan genocide had just turned ten. Two months later, the *Los Angeles Times* similarly inquired why the Ugandan civil war, just south of Sudan, which had displaced two million and resulted in the rape of tens of thousands of women, went "virtually unnoticed by the outside world." The article theorized that Darfur had won the "lottery of world attention" because it had resonated with an "unusual constellation of interests," namely evangelicals, African-Americans and Jewish American groups "brought in [by] charges of genocide, with their echoes of the Holocaust."

Many African observers were also perplexed by the American public's attention to Darfur. An editorial in the Kenyan daily *The Nation* stated that Darfur was attracting "undue attention" and overshadowing more important "problem areas."<sup>44</sup> After Congress passed a resolution terming the Darfur crisis a genocide, contradicting the African Union, the European Union and the UN, the respected weekly *Jeune Afrique* wondered how the main lobby group behind the bill, "the Congressional Black Caucus, came to be persuaded that Sudan was genocide perpetrated by 'whites' on blacks."<sup>45</sup> When Powell and UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan traveled to Darfur, flying over the tortured region of northern Uganda, one prominent African intellectual asked: "Why didn't [Annan] stop here [in Uganda]? And why not in Kigali? And Kinshasa? Should we not apply the same standards to the governments in Kampala and Kigali and elsewhere as we do to the government in Khartoum, even if Kampala and Kigali are America's allies in its global 'war on terror?'"<sup>46</sup> The Arab and Islamic press, suspicious of the attention the Darfur campaign,

have seen it as either the Bush administration's prelude to regime change in oil-rich Sudan or a public relations ploy to shift attention away from Palestine and Iraq.

But the Save Darfur campaign is better understood by looking at the post-September 11 domestic political scene.



An advertisement for skin bleaching cream adorns a shop in Cairo.

THOMAS HARTWELL

Unlike other hot spots across Africa, the Darfur tragedy reverberates deeply in the US because it is represented as a racial conflict between Arabs and indigenous Africans, because Sudan is where the "moral geographies"<sup>47</sup> of black, Jewish and Christian nationalists overlap and because the

Darfur crisis offers a unique opportunity to unite against the new post-Cold War enemy.

Cultural critic Stanley Crouch has skewered the African-American community's silence on the "unprecedented sexual holocaust" in Uganda, Sierra Leone and the Congo, and the "double standard for oppressive behavior" protesting loss of life in Africa only when the victimizers are "white."<sup>48</sup> Crouch may have added that, in recent years, a new trend has emerged, wherein violations committed by Africans who self-identify as Arab resonate profoundly in black America, because the perpetrators' "Arabness" is seen to cancel their "blackness," since they are claiming the identity of the slaveowner. By this reasoning, Sudan came to be seen as a racial conflict and the US refusal to act in Darfur was viewed as governed by a racist double standard. As comedian and veteran civil rights activist Dick Gregory told radio commentator Tavis Smiley on July 22, 2004, "If that was Arabs raping white women and killing white folks like that, [the Bush administration] would have shut that down the next day." African scholars and Africa-based activists have repeatedly warned their counterparts in the West that the Arab versus African binary does not capture the fluid situation in Darfur. But, for mobilization purposes, the Darfur campaigners insist on the bifurcation. As Samantha Power has argued, the more you "nuance" the discussion of Darfur, the less possible it is to "mainstream" the issue.

The Christian right's activism on Sudan has allowed many conservative leaders opposed to affirmative action and resistant to reparations for American slavery to appear good on race by shifting attention onto the Muslim world. As one conservative put it, "The United States find itself apologizing for slavery (at least when Bill Clinton visits Africa), handing out huge amounts of foreign aid (partly from a sense of guilt) and giving at least passing thought to financial reparations for the descendants of its own slaves. Yet when Muslim countries gather at international forums, they discuss none of this—and instead spend their time writing resolutions bashing Israel and the West. They appear to feel no remorse for the past, and no responsibility for the present."<sup>49</sup> Just as Israel led to a closing of ranks between the Christian right and Jewish groups, the latter willing to overlook the former's anti-Semitism, Sudan has brought together segments of the African-American community long at loggerheads with the Christian right.

More interestingly, the Darfur campaign and the Arab reparations initiative adumbrate a new rapprochement between segments of the African-American community and the Jewish American community. Many of the African-American advocates for Sudan, and not just black evangelicals, are strongly pro-Israel. Many in the Arab reparations movement are sympathetic to Israel, which they see as a check on Arab expansionism. As Arab reparations advocate B. J. Bankie declared, "Africa was saved from aggressive pan-Arabism by the Jewish settlement of

Palestine." Many of the Sudan and Arab reparations advocates deliberately use the language of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, speaking of "Arab settlers" and the "Arab occupation" of Sudan to highlight Arab hypocrisy. Those who have lamented the end of the black-Jewish amity forged during the civil rights era have maintained that it "takes a common threat to revive the relationship."<sup>50</sup> To many blacks and Jews, the perceived Arab-Islamic expansionism is that common threat.

## Reviving the Black-Jewish Alliance

American Jewish activism in Sudan did not begin with the explosion of state-sponsored killing in Darfur into the global consciousness. Charles Jacobs, founder of the American Anti-Slavery Group, has argued that Jews should be active in opposition to Sudanese slavery: "What can we former slaves do to help those in bondage today?"<sup>51</sup> Israel and Zionist organizations have long been interested in issues of race and ethnicity in the Arab world. Israel has a long record of training and arming groups in Kurdistan and southern Sudan "fighting for their freedom from [Arab] imperialism."<sup>52</sup> The Zionist concern for minorities in the Arab world is strategic: by focusing on how Arab states (mis)treat their minorities, pro-Israel scholars can shift the spotlight from Palestine, highlight Arab double standards, demonstrate how the subordinate status of minorities in the Middle East necessitated a Zionist project to lift Middle Eastern Jews "up from dhimmitude" and show how Israel protects minority rights better than any other state in the region.<sup>53</sup> Given the American Jewish community's silence over the Congo, Uganda and Sierra Leone, it seems the outrage over Darfur is as moral as it is political. "Now millions of African people face genocide and the UN's top priority is condemning the Israeli security fence that saves lives on both sides of the security barrier," stated Rep. Eliot Engel (D-NY).<sup>54</sup> Moreover, Jacobs is also the founder of the David Project, which monitors the teaching of Middle Eastern studies on American campuses and promotes a Sudan divestment campaign expressly to counter the Israel divestment campaign. As Jacobs put it, "Israelis are put to a test that is not applied to anyone else. You will not hear any murmur about the people of Sudan but...Israel is singled out in a way that is racist."<sup>55</sup>

Jewish activists' involvement in Sudan activism—like African-American leaders' support for Israel—is seen as a sign of "reciprocal respect" for each community's historical suffering, a linking of the Holocaust and slavery that can close the social distance between blacks and Jews in America. In 2001, in an effort to ameliorate black-Jewish relations, Rabbi Schmuley Boteach tried to organize a trip for Michael Jackson and Rev. Al Sharpton to Sudan that would help the King of Pop "reconnect to his people," and then a trip to Israel for the reverend to meet with Israeli victims

of terrorism. Although Jackson withdrew at the last minute and Sharpton angered trip organizers when he visited Yasser Arafat, many praised Sharpton's trip to Sudan and Israel. "If Sharpton returns to New York proclaiming the Arab-Israeli conflict to be nuanced and complex with justice somewhere in the middle, it will have a positive impact on race relations in the city," wrote one columnist. "On the fringe of black (and white) America are some, like Minister Louis Farrakhan, who are trying to sell a blame-the-Jews explanation of Islamic anti-Americanism. Personal witness by Sharpton that Israel isn't the devil—or even the sorcerer's apprentice—will make that kind of scapegoating harder."<sup>56</sup> More recently, Sen. Jon Corzine (D-NJ) flew to Darfur and then to Israel, with a symbolic trip to Yad Vashem, and likened the Darfur situation to the Shoah: "I think this ties together with the concerns I have about Darfur. I believe we must challenge the genocide there."

The cause of Sudan has become a way to ease what some have sardonically termed the "comparative victimology" plaguing African- and Jewish-Americans.<sup>57</sup> Relations between African-American and Jewish communities began deteriorating in the late 1960s, for reasons including conservative Jewish opposition to affirmative action and left-leaning African Americans' support for the Palestinian cause. As an angry Michael Lerner told Cornel West, "We have a genocidal slaughter of hundreds of thousands of people in Rwanda, and yet African-Americans have more to say about the undemocratic nature of Israel than they do about the oppression of blacks by blacks in Africa."<sup>58</sup> But many have argued that the main reason for the tensions was that the Holocaust, as a tragedy, had gradually come to overshadow slavery in American political discourse. According to a 1990 survey, a clear majority of Americans, when presented with a list of catastrophic events, said that the Holocaust "was the worst tragedy in history."<sup>59</sup> As one historian put it, the "[African-American] grievance was that in America, the group that was by a wide margin the most advantaged was using European crimes to trump American crimes against what was, by an equally wide margin, the least advantaged group."<sup>60</sup> Black criticism of this "hierarchy of victimization" goes back at least to 1979 when Rev. Jesse Jackson visited Yad Vashem and infuriated many when he described the Holocaust as "tragic but not necessarily unique." More recently, Randall Robinson, the former president of TransAfrica whose book *The Debt* launched the debate over reparations in the US, observed, "Slavery was and remains an American holocaust. It lasted 20 times as long as the Nazi holocaust. It killed at least ten times as many people." Yet while there is a Washington museum honoring the victims of the Nazi genocide and the Native Americans' tragedy, "nowhere on the Mall can anything be found—monumental, memorial or stone tablet—to commemorate the hundreds of millions of victims of the American Holocaust."<sup>61</sup>

In the same vein, the US government's refusal to partake in the reparations debate at the UN Conference on Racism in Durban, South Africa in 2001—only a few years after creating a presidential commission demanding that Swiss banks pay recompense to the victims of the Holocaust—incensed many African-Americans. "Slavery is more than 150 years in the past ... We have to turn now to the present and to the future," rejoined Condoleezza Rice, then George W. Bush's national security adviser. "I think reparations, given the fact that there is plenty of blame to go around for slavery, plenty of blame to go around among African and Arab states and plenty of blame to go around among Western states, we are better to look forward and not point fingers backward."<sup>62</sup>

Since a number of Jewish American figures have argued that the Atlantic slave trade and Native American tragedy did not constitute genocides akin to the Holocaust,<sup>63</sup> many in the African-American community were exhilarated by the Holocaust Museum's labeling of Darfur as a genocide and the support that conservative Jewish groups were lending to the Save Darfur campaign. They hoped that Jewish support would confer much-needed legitimacy on the reparations initiative and on the claim that the Atlantic slave trade did constitute "a crime against humanity," helping African-Americans to inch up the "victimization scale" and, subsequently, the country's racial hierarchy. Jewish progressives have long argued that Jews are uniquely qualified to help African-Americans in their reparations initiative because of their "less guilt-ridden history vis-à-vis black oppression,"<sup>64</sup> and many reparations advocates now see the Darfur campaign as a chance to bring Jewish conservatives on board. One journalist talking to Joe Madison, president of the Sudan Campaign, made exactly this point: "Do you see that if we can get past this Darfur and Sudan issue in a positive way that the Jewish political establishment would lock arms with you on the issue of reparations for black America?"<sup>65</sup>

The Darfur and Sudan campaigns have their critics within black America. Jesse Jackson has been harshly criticized for refusing to take part in Jacobs' anti-slavery campaign, which he has called "anti-Arab," and material published by Jackson's Rainbow Coalition avoids the Arab/African dichotomy when referring to Darfur. Bill Fletcher of TransAfrica, the black advocacy group that led the sanctions campaign against South Africa, strongly protests that binary: "The Arabs in Africa are African.... They are African. And it is important to understand the important role that North African Arabs and Berbers played in supporting continental independence."<sup>66</sup> Others have quipped that the US is only able to reckon with slavery when it is in the Islamic world. Yet despite the critiques and calls for nuance, the Darfur campaign is gaining momentum, propelled by powerful nationalist forces and the racial flux unleashed by September 11.

## Trading Places

*9/11 was a nigger-ass wakeup call. White folks were so concerned with the land niggers, they forgot about the sand niggers.*

—Comedian Paul Mooney on ABC's *Nightline*,  
September 30, 2002

*When I heard that Osama destroyed the World Trade Center because he was tired of having the white man humiliate him in his country for the last ten years, I said, "Please! We've been humiliated by the white man for 400 years, and you never see a black man crash a Cadillac into a chicken stand!"*

—Rickey Smiley on BET's *Club Comic View*

Many black humorists have been joking about their post-September 11 "racial reprieve." Shortly after the attacks, the African-American strip *Boondocks* featured a hilarious vignette where the ten-year old protagonist, Huey Freeman, announces that "the annual *Newsweek* 'Most Hated Ethnic Group' poll showed that black Americans went from first to third most hated among white Americans this month—the biggest jump in history." But while many have noted that a shift has taken place in the American racial hierarchy, few can pinpoint who moved where.

Conservatives have been warning of a new peril facing America—what some have termed the "Latino tsunami." Samuel Huntington, who famously argued that America faces an external Islamic threat, now admonishes the literati to watch the internal "Hispanic challenge."<sup>67</sup> Others have linked the two threats, cautioning that Latino immigration could balkanize America into a "Euro-Anglo nation" and a "Latino nation" during a time of war, and that a non-integrated Latino underclass could become sympathetic to the Islamic world. "It is probably too much to predict that there will be widespread fear of Latino terrorism in the Euro-Anglo nation, although young Latinos in the United States may learn something from their [Arab] counterparts in Europe," wrote one scholar.<sup>68</sup> Others have cautioned that while Latino evangelical Christians strongly support Israel, there are troubling levels of anti-Semitism among new immigrants.<sup>69</sup> Many may be more sympathetic to the Palestinians than to Israel, which has led Jewish organizations to woo Latino leaders and voters, for instance organizing trips to Israel through programs such as Israel Project Interchange.

One way the government has sought to integrate Latino immigrants is through the military. The Pentagon's recent recruitment drive targeting the Latino "recruiting market aims to boost Latino numbers in the military from roughly 10 percent to 22 percent."<sup>70</sup> Some conservatives have argued that an interventionist foreign policy provides minorities with an excellent opportunity for upward mobility. "It's just possible," wrote Niall Ferguson, "that African-Americans will turn out to be the Celts of the American empire,

driven overseas by comparatively poor opportunities at home. Indeed, if the occupation of Iraq is to be run by the military, then it can hardly fail to create career opportunities for the growing number of African-American officers in the army."<sup>71</sup> The presence of tens of thousands of Latino and African-American troops in Iraq has not been well-received in the Arab world, however, and seems, in some cases, only to have stirred up a vicious nativism. One Iraqi insurgent profiled by *The Guardian* said that some rebels deliberately target black soldiers: "To have Negroes occupying us is a particular humiliation.... Sometimes we aborted a mission because there were no Negroes."<sup>72</sup> The Iraq war and the Darfur campaign, with the prominent roles of Powell, Rice and Annan, have led to charges of "African-American imperialism" and much racist talk.

Despite protests over their targeting for military recruitment, Latinos remain strongly pro-war. The suspicion that Latino immigration could undercut the US national interest may have led Latino voters to be hawkish on the Middle East. According to a Zogby poll done shortly after Powell's February 5, 2003 presentation to the UN, 62 percent of whites and 60 percent of Latinos, but only 23 percent of blacks, supported the invasion of Iraq. In November 2004, President Bush was able to win five heavily Latino battleground states—Florida, Arizona, Colorado, Nevada and New Mexico—in part because Latino voters have conservative stances on abortion, religion and same-sex marriage,<sup>73</sup> but also, increasingly, on the Middle East and the war on terrorism. "As a general rule, Puerto Ricans tend to sympathize with Palestinians, because of the colonialism of the island, the camaraderie of an occupied people and because Puerto Ricans have long been stigmatized for links to terrorism," explains Howard Jordan, who teaches Latino studies at Hostos Community College in the Bronx, in an interview for this article. "Recall that four Puerto Ricans and Nelson Mandela were on the State Department's terrorist list. Dominicans are similar because of the 1965 American invasion of the Dominican Republic. But Mexicans, and more recent arrivals from Central and South America, tend to be more pro-war, more Republican and more conservative on the Middle East. That's their American credential.... That's how they show their patriotism, and prevent the animosity of the US government. Richard Pryor used to joke that 'nigger' was the first word an immigrant would learn to fit in. Now the word is 'Islamic terrorist.'"

When the US Census Bureau announced on January 21, 2003 that Latinos, numbering 39 million, had surpassed African-Americans as the largest minority group in the US, leaders of other groups wondered aloud what that development meant for them. Some Jewish leaders worry about the risk rising anti-Semitism. African-Americans have expressed anxiety over how the growing Latino presence could "destabilize" the historic "black-white dialogue on race," jeopardizing hard-won political concessions as Latinos

press for the recognition of their “long history of suffering at the hands of America.”<sup>74</sup> Some Latino intellectuals have already called for a museum on the Mall “in honor of the many, many undocumented immigrants from south of the border and from Cuba who have died anonymously.”<sup>75</sup>

Despite the historic enslavement and continued marginalization of Afro-Latinos across Latin America, the Latino is rarely seen as guilty in black America. In fact, according to one Latino scholar, what distinguishes the Latino immigrants from their European counterparts is that the “African-Americans cannot hold Latinos responsible for their historical social, economic or political conditions. The [Latino] psyche is devoid of guilt.... They come to the table with a clear conscience.”<sup>76</sup> Given the competition for jobs and economic resources, the growing conservatism of Mexican-American voters and the growing tendency of Hispanic immigrants, once naturalized, to identify as white,<sup>77</sup> black-Latino relations could deteriorate and the Latino might very well emerge as “guilty” for past crimes against blacks. In the meantime, however, a variety of grievances are being “externalized” onto the Arab world. Blacks may not be as pro-war as Latinos, but polls after September 11 showed African-Americans overwhelmingly supporting measures to profile and track Arab- and Muslim-Americans.<sup>78</sup> In the Latino community, one hears a litany of accusations regarding *los Arabes*, notably that immigration reform has not been undertaken because of Arab terrorists trying to “pass” for Mexican and enter the US via Mexico. After the Madrid bombings, which sent shock waves through the Spanish-speaking world, one is also hearing, especially from Hispanic evangelicals, warnings about Moorish invaders and how the “Orient” had tainted Hispanic civilization in Islamic Spain, introducing a mentality of machismo, racial intolerance and despotism that is still afflicting Latin America.

Another factor that has led many Latinos and African-Americans to evince hawkish attitudes towards the Middle East involves what one Hispanic scholar described as the “tragic American inability to discern racial combinations.” Given the widespread angst about al-Qaeda sleeper cells, and given that Arab-Americans make up less than 1 percent of the population, much mainstream anxiety is displaced onto other minorities who look Arab. As African-American novelist Ishmael Reed recounts, “Within two weeks after the World Trade Center and Pentagon bombings, my youngest daughter Tennessee was called a dirty Arab twice. An elderly white woman made such a scene on a San Francisco bus that my daughter got off.”<sup>79</sup> The mistaking of non-Arab minorities for Arabs has led to the “double profiling” of Latinos and African-Americans. One African-American legal scholar describes how her NYU-attending son, who can “phenotypically pass for Arab,” goes to the airport dressed “in the popular ghetto-styled baggy pants,” wearing corn rows and intentionally speaking in “an Ebonics dialect” to “ensure that he is not racially profiled as an Arab. Of course,

when he lands in New York, his failure to be able to hail a cab indicates he is clearly seen as a black—too risky to pick up.”<sup>80</sup> This “double profiling,” what some have called “DWB plus FWA” (“Driving While Black” and “Flying While Arab”) has angered many African-Americans mistaken for Arab. The idea of the Arab as “basically white” and “guilty” has since September 11 come to coexist uneasily with the realization that many Arabs are “black,” and that many African-Americans can be mistaken for Arab. Every time the media flashes images of dark-skinned Arabs, whether of the janjaweed militia in Sudan or “twentieth hijacker” Zacarias Moussaoui, conventional views of Sudan and the Arabs are jolted.

Comedian Drew Carey has joked that “Arabs in America should just say they’re Mexican and they’ll be fine,” but Hispanic intellectuals who have reflected on the “Arab-Latino resemblance” find it no laughing matter. Sociologist Ramon Grosfoguel, who studies how different “looks” and identities are racialized in the West, notes that in France he is often harassed and prevented from entering different venues because he is mistaken for Algerian (“*le look beur*”), but when he tells his harassers that he is Puerto Rican, he is allowed to enter. In the US, by contrast, when waylaid by a gang of anti-Latino white supremacists, he said he was Algerian and the confused youths let him go.<sup>81</sup> After September 11, however, few Latinos would try the same ruse. When the Pentagon began targeting Latinos for higher recruitment in the military, conspiracy theories abounded that Hispanics were being sent to Iraq because they can pass for Arab. As one blogger put it, “The enemy is brown. We need brown troops. [Hispanics] blend in better.” While some Latinos and African-Americans may embrace a position of pro-Arab solidarity, others try to signal that they are not Arab or Muslim, most often by vociferously adopting anti-Arab positions.

The “looking Arab” phenomenon is further complicated by the fact that, since September 11, many Arab- and Muslim-Americans are trying to “pass” for black or Hispanic. “After September 11, shave your head, grow a goatee, that’s it—you’re Dominican,” said one Yemeni grocer in Harlem.<sup>82</sup> The sudden interest of Arab-Americans, who have long dissociated themselves from minorities, in racial politics and black and Latino identity has annoyed more than a few observers. “Arabs and black Americans have had a quiet disdain for each other...and it has been brewing unabated for a decade or better,” commented one African-American writer. “Why did whites have to come for you, before you sought my friendship, before you realized you were from Africa after all? Why did you wait until you were the new American nigger to become mine?”<sup>83</sup> The racial baptism of post-September 11 discrimination seems to be pushing many Arab- and Muslim-Americans toward black America. A recent study of black-Arab relations in New York and Detroit shows that Arabs and Muslims who had expe-

rienced racial harassment—either in the form of verbal insults or physical attacks—showed higher levels of trust in their African-American neighbors than those who had not experienced racial harassment, and the survey showed an overall sharp increase from pre-September 11 trust levels.<sup>84</sup> The fact that Arabs today are drifting toward black America and “passing” for black or Hispanic, in contrast to yesteryear when African-Americans were converting to Islam and donning robes and turbans in an effort to pass for Arab, is a clear sign that a shift has taken place in the American racial hierarchy.

## “Conspiracy of Silence”

Bernard Lewis has lamented the “remarkable dearth of scholarly work” on race and slavery in the Muslim world, noting that the subject remains a “highly sensitive topic, the mere mention of which is often seen as a sign of hostile intentions.”<sup>85</sup> Decades after Lewis first broached the subject, wariness on the part of Muslims and Arabs remains entirely justified. Most Western scholars, journalists and activists who approach the subject of race in the Arab-Muslim world impose Western—most often American—racial categories, speaking glibly of “white” Arab masters and “black” slaves, “settlers” dominating indigenous Africans and “Arab culpability.” Slavery in the Arab world, especially in North Africa, requires a different analytical language than in the New World. The one-drop rule cannot help distinguish the descendants of slaves from the descendants of slave-owners, because, unlike in the West, in the Arab world people of European as well as Turkic and sub-Saharan stock were enslaved. While many Arab states, like Egypt, are indeed “pigmentocracies,” many of Egypt’s political elites are descendants of the Turkic Mamluk slave dynasty. Does their slave descent, which many black nationalists deem crucial to African identity, render them bonafide Africans, free of racial guilt? In addition, despite the North African regimes’ insistence on the primacy of Arab identity, the northern tier of the African continent is home to an extraordinary ethnic, linguistic and phenotypical diversity, and one cannot treat North Africa as geographically distinct and detached from a racially unified, indigenous Black Africa.

Furthermore, most of those who address the subject of race in the Arab world—starting with Lewis himself—have a political axe to grind. They seek to use race as an ideological weapon to counter African-American claims that Islam is better on race than the West, or to shift attention from Palestine to Arab oppression of some minority. Many in the Arab world believe that if the victimizers in Sudan—the Khartoum regime and its proxy janjaweed militia—did not self-identify as Arab, Darfur would hardly be an issue. Many also wonder why the moral indignation behind the Sudan campaign in the United States rarely stirs on behalf of Palestine, why the same voices so eager to term

the Darfur tragedy a “genocide” would be quite loath to use the term to describe the forced removal of Palestinians in 1948. When *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof wrote that “Israeli brutality” in the Palestinian territories “is small potatoes by Arab standards,” that two million people had died in the Sudanese civil war “with barely anyone [in the Arab world] noticing,” and that, after all, Sharon is the “Middle Eastern leader who gives his Arab citizens the greatest political freedom,” he confirmed suspicions that his writing on Darfur was intended, in large part, to highlight the “hypocrisy” of Arab rage over Israeli policy.<sup>86</sup>

American discussions of race and ethnicity in the Arab world also tend to mirror the parochialism of American identity politics. Thus, African-Americans will write movingly of whomever they adjudge as black and indigenous, evangelicals will defend Coptic rights and the “Gay International” will agitate for homosexuals in Egypt, always casting these communities as victims of the Arab Muslim majority and possible allies of the West, but rarely placing their very real oppression in the larger context of Arab countries where the entire population, including the “Arab Muslim majority,” chafes under dictatorial rule. Such a selective concern for minorities by different American interests is seen as self-interested, divisive and all too reminiscent of European colonial powers’ coopting of minorities and Western Zionists’ efforts to “rescue” the Jews of the Arab world.

Arab leaders have certainly used Palestine as an ideological weapon to stifle talk of minority rights, ethnic pluralism and slavery in Sudan and downplay the Darfur disaster. When asked about Darfur, the Sudanese foreign minister shrugged, “Aren’t more children dying daily in Palestine?”<sup>87</sup> In Arab and Muslim eyes, the issues of Palestine and Sudan are not political equivalents. Historic Palestine is soaked with a nationalist and theological significance that Sudan is simply not imbued with. Most importantly, discussion of racism, ethnic pluralism and the Sudanese civil war has long been taboo, considered divisive and even treasonous as “the Arab nation” faces “the Zionist threat.” Not only is talk of racism suppressed in individual states, but discussion of human rights violations in other Arab states is also smothered.

But things are changing. With the rise of independent media, the forbidden subjects of race and racism in the Arab world are being raised. Al-Jazeera’s critical coverage of the Darfur crisis led to the arrest and conviction of its Khartoum bureau chief, Islam Salih, for “disseminating false news.” Calling on the Arab League to act, the *Daily Star* of Beirut opined, “Darfur. The name is becoming synonymous worldwide with shame and outrage, and it is a purely homegrown calamity. There is not an outside hand to conveniently blame.” Recently, Egyptian pro-democracy activist Saadeddin Ibrahim denounced the “racist tendencies of the Arabs” noting that Arab silence in face of killings of non-Arabs by Arabs was “a cowardly and hidden racism.”<sup>88</sup> Similarly, Gamal Nkrumah has written forcefully against

color prejudice (“shadism”) in the Arab world, as symbolized by the penchant for hair dyeing and skin bleaching creams.<sup>89</sup> Arab scholars are also increasingly challenging the age-old claptrap about Muslim colorblindness and the benignity of Oriental slavery, and questioning national myths of origin. Hilmi Shaarawi recently called for a new “Afro-Arab cultural dialogue,” warning that the more Arab intellectuals rebuff the overtures of African intellectuals, the more the latter will gravitate toward theories of Arabs as slavers and destroyers of African civilization.

The discourses of Palestine and the Holocaust are linked. Political developments since World War II have turned both tragedies into causes on both sides of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, in the Arab world and America respectively, and the discourses of both causes are all too often based on reciprocal denigration. Arab nationalists will thus deny the Holocaust because it is seen as the justification for the conquest of Palestine, so that in rejecting the Shoah they think they are undermining the Zionist case—a non sequitur if there ever was one. Similarly, Holocaust consciousness in the US is often predicated on the denial of the Palestinian tragedy. Both discourses also rest on the downplaying of other tragedies and injustices: “Palestine” has long been used by Arab and Muslim ruling elites to justify or gloss over the oppression or killing of different populations, while Holocaust consciousness in the US, according to many African-Americans and Native Americans, has sidelined the Native American genocide and the Atlantic slave trade. The growing political influence of African-Americans following the civil rights movement has translated into increasing demands that American slavery be recognized as a crime against humanity and given its pride of place in American history. To evade a head-on collision with different domestic political actors who think slavery is a painful and divisive issue, and to avoid being seen as trivializing the Holocaust, segments of the African-American community have discovered that the discourse on slavery and African-American suffering can receive a tremendous boost if externalized onto the Arab world. So to the “Arab maladies” of misogyny, terrorism and authoritarianism, one can now add racism.

Since September 11, Arabs thus find themselves linked to and caught between the American discourses on slavery and the Holocaust, two tragedies that took place in the West but have somehow been projected onto the “Orient.” Jewish nationalists’ decades-old portrayal of Arab nationalists as Nazi-like and wanting to annihilate Israel dovetails with black nationalists’ portrayal of Arabs as invaders and genocidal slavers. Despite common diasporan and scriptural roots, the discourses of Zionism and black nationalism in America have evolved largely separately over the past decades, but the two worldviews seem to have merged following September 11, making common cause with evangelical Christians over the Middle East.

The myriad moral and cultural connections that different communities in the West have with North Africa and the Middle East are fascinating, if not endearing, but when they begin to make irredentist or redemptive demands, as with the reparations campaign, such movements must be countered with the truth that slavery and genocide (like misogyny, terrorism and authoritarianism) are not unique to the Arab world. But presently any effort to remind African-Americans that slavery existed and exists in various parts of Africa, not just in the Sudan, is as impolitic as mentioning that there were other genocides besides the Holocaust. This state of affairs was made possible by the Arab world’s long-standing refusal to discuss the issues of race, ethnic difference and Afro-Arab identity. ■

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