

Trump's Dark Geographical Imagination

Written by Robert A. Saunders

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ROBERT A. SAUNDERS, JAN 18 2018

In the context of debate over his country's immigration policy, the dark corners of U.S. President Donald Trump's geographical understanding have been forced into the light, with swift and troubling ramifications for American foreign policy in Africa. In a bipartisan meeting of prominent politicians, Trump reportedly referred to the whole of Africa (as well as the Caribbean nation of Haiti, which – incidentally – was the first free black nation in the Western hemisphere) as 'shithole' or 'shithouse' countries (the exact wording of the quote is currently in dispute, a fact which some of the president's defenders have used to decry widespread condemnation of the chief executive's scatological language). Putting aside the 'hole' vs. 'house' dispute, Trump's policy position is clear: he wants more immigrants from 'countries like Norway' and seeks to bar immigration from the world second-largest and most populous continent. While there has been endless palaver about Trump's incorrigible racism and a return to the pre-1965 quota system that favoured immigrants from northern Europe (effectively banning people from the developing world), less has been said how Trump imagines Africa.

If we can say one thing about Trump it is that he is rather simple-minded. The Norway comment attests to this, given that he met with the Norwegian prime minister Erna Solberg the day before the now-infamous outburst during the immigration summit. Put simply, Norway was on and in the front of his mind, while Africa, Haiti, and other places were confined to its darker corners. So when Democratic lawmakers brought up protections on immigration from these places, Trump was forced to access what scholars refer to as 'geographical imagination'. In its essence, this is an individual's way of thinking about places and people based on their accumulation and synthesis of images, stories, and life experiences. For many of us (and especially those without stamps in their passports), this means an imperfect understanding based on jokes we have heard, what we have read in comic books or novels, seen on television or film, and learned from the news.

Like the travel writers, journalists and museum curators of yesteryear, contemporary producers of popular culture have not been particularly kind to Africa, continuing to project what David Campbell and Marcus Power call a 'scopic regime' of the continent that accentuates exotic natural attributes (animals, jungles, etc.), violence (civil wars, child soldiers, etc.), and extreme poverty (starving women and children). Far from sloughing off the jaundiced gestalt conjured by Joseph Conrad in his imperial novella *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Western media continues to labour under a blinkered view of Africa, one which artificially keeps alive the notion of it as the 'Dark Continent'.

From telecoms company AT&T's infamous use of a monkey on a phone in Africa (when all the callers on the world's other continents were humans) in a 1993 publication to H&M's more recent controversy over its advertisement featuring a black child wearing a green, hooded sweatshirt bearing the slogan 'Coolest monkey in the jungle' (other jungle-themed hoodies were modelled by white children and did not make references to simians), corporations have regularly stumbled into thickets of casual racism due to pervasive – some would argue ubiquitous – false seeings of Africa and Africans. Coincidentally, the H&M debacle has overlapped Trump's geopolitical affront, showing that Africans will no longer be silent with regards to their continent's representation by Westerners. For its part, H&M was forced to shut seventeen of its stores in South Africa for security reasons when the Economic Freedom Fighters, a revolutionary group that took offence to the ad, rallied its supporters resulting in multiple protests. While economic implications are likely to come, the Trump administration faced an immediate diplomatic backlash. The African Union issued a strongly-worded rebuke to and a demand for an apology from the president, while Trump saw a number of his ambassadors summoned to account for the vulgar depictions of the continent.

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Here in the U.S., the pundit class continues to chatter on about whether or not this most recent example of bigoted opprobrium will hurt or help Trump with his so-called 'base', a hodgepodge of Republicans, independents, and white, working-class Democrats who are purportedly 'fed up' with globalization, immigration, and the 'browning of America'. While Trump's discursive discharge certainly reflects the blooming 'white identity crisis' that fuelled his campaign, it also elucidates the West's problematic geopolitical imaginaries of Africa. With its burgeoning national economies, deep natural resource base, and key role in global security, sub-Saharan Africa should be a realm that Washington pays careful attention to (Beijing certainly does). Instead, it appears that the White House would rather fall back on hoary representations of the continent gleaned from Tarzan novels, Disney movies, and other (poisoned) fruits of Western imagination and news reporting. Sadly, in a country where much of the population still tend to regard 'Africa' as a country (rather than a continent or a world region), there is little hope for change in the near term.

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Dr. Robert A. Saunders is a Professor in the Department of History, Politics and Geography at Farmingdale State College-SUNY. He is the author of four books, including *Popular Geopolitics and Nation Branding in the Post-Soviet Realm* (Routledge, 2017). His research explores the changing nature of national, religious, and political identity in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.