THE BLACKNESS OF BLACK: Africa in the World Today[1]

By Prof. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o

We are celebrating Africa Day today in the context of over sixty years of Africa's independence going back to that of Morocco, Libya, Sudan and Ghana, all in the late fifties to the present. No matter how we look at it, Africa has come along way from the days of near continental bondage to Europe. If the independence of Ghana is the more memorable in terms of its impact, it was because, on the continent, it was the first identifiably, unmistakably and unambiguously black nation to wrest independence from Europe. I say on the continent because, in the world, Haiti had fought and gained their independence from France in 18th century. Haitians were all of Africa descent. Ghana's was unique also because Kwame Nkrumah linked the independence of Ghana to that of the rest of the continent saying that Ghana's uhuru was incomplete as long as the rest of the continent was not free. In Nkrumah's eyes the continent could not live with one part free and the other enslaved, a stance reminiscent of Abraham Lincoln statement, in the American civil war, that the nation could not endure half free and half enslaved. No leader of the already independent nation including Liberia or the never colonized Ethiopia, had ever linked the destiny of their country to that of the continent. Nyerere's similar stand came later. Nkrumah and Nyerere assumed the integrity of the continent and took

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responsibility for Africa as a whole, a vision already assumed in ANC's anthem, Nkosi Sikelele Africa, whose lyrics and melody became the nearest thing to an African anthem. The vision rejects the European division of an Africa North and South of Sahara, a fiction that has intellectual ancestry in Hegel who in his 19th century lectures on the philosophy of history assigned Sahara as the dividing line between what he called Africa proper, that's the South , and what he called European or Mediterranean Africa, the North, including Egypt. Skin color had something to do with the Hegelian historical fiction, North Africans being lighter skinned than the darker Southerners.

But Nkrumah had other concerns: the fate of people of African descent, the Diasporic Africa, in the tradition of Marcus Garvey whose motto in organizing the first truly Pan African movement, was Africa for the Africans, at home and abroad. Other Pan-Africanists from Edward Blyden, CL R James to Malcolm X always saw the true respect for people of color all over the world as tied to the dignity accorded Africa. History is full of the links that bind us, to use the Duboisian phrase. There's the shared history of slavery; Jim Crowism in the USA and colonialism on the continent parallel each other, both covering the same historical period. The voting rights act of 1964 for African-Americans came in the same decade that many countries in Africa became independent. Pan Africanism as a concept and vision was first dreamt up in Diaspora with Marcus Garvey, W E B Dubois, George Padmore et al, but, when transported to Africa, it became the driving ideological force for anti-colonial struggles. In turn, Africa's drive for independence impacted civil rights movement, both culminating in the right to vote. So the position of the

continent on the power map of the world does impact the people of African descent everywhere.

A comparison with China is apt: the West, British in particular once fought opium wars to force China to become drunken with the drug. Who would dare do an equivalent today? The West has moved from anxiety over yellow menace to an anxiety from yellow envy: even Americans admit that their economy is indebted to China. Mandarin is one of the languages most sought after in American colleges and the Chinese people everywhere are accorded respect. The root of this respect is China's position as a world power. Can we say the same thing for Africa?

A quick inventory shows that Africa is the only continent outside Australia not represented in the Security Council of the United Nations. Africa is the only continent where two countries, South Africa and Libya, have voluntarily given up a nuclear program. Africa is thus the only continent that has earned the moral authority to call for nuclear disarmament and non proliferation surely not those with thousands of weapons of mass death. You would think that this would win applause and respect. Instead uranium from Africa helps the west build nuclear weapons. Africa has been used twice for nuclear tests, once by France for sure in the Algerian desert, and the other allegedly by Israel on Edward Island. When Nato powers recently attacked and bombed Libya to submission, they were completely oblivious of the feelings and opinions of African Union. It's not a question of what one thinks of Kadafi: it's the blatant almost arrogant disregard of the opinion of AU, that stood out, in the unfolding drama enacted under the fig leaf cover of a United

nations resolution, a situation not too dissimilar to the killing of Lumumba in the 1960s. Would this have happened if Africa had a united muscle to flex?

Coincident or not, the loudest drum beats for war came from France, Britain, both with a colonial and slave past, which means that their attitude to Africa is colored by their experience of the past master servant relationship to the continent.

True or not, there were allegations that black Libyans or demonstratably black Africans, were slaughtered with Nato looking the other way. A black skin was often mentioned as the indentifying mark of a mercenary.

If we want to know the standing of Africa in the world today, we don't even have to go to the question of a seat in the security council or the more dramatic acts of military intervention or corporate vulturism, what in my novel, *Wizard of the Crow,* I have described as Corpolonialism. We just have to look at the attitudes towards blackness in Africa and the world today. But while others may bear the blame for this; Africa is also culpable in the negative standing of blackness in the world.

I first came across the statement that the problem of the twentieth century was that of the colorline in a citation by Peter Abrahams, the South African writer, who had worked closely with other Pan-Africanists of the forties and fifties of the last century. I grew up with the phrase color bar ringing in my ears because Jomo Kenyatta, then a leader of anti-colonial resistance, and Pan-Africanist associate of W E B Dubois, used to bring up the phrase in every political gathering. Kenya was a white settler colony, which meant hundreds of white settlers lording it over

thousands of black natives. *The Souls of Black Folk,* came out in 1930s and Abrahams and Kenyatta more likely than not took the line or it's variation from the book. The line was actually preceded by the claim that the publication "may show the strange meaning of being black here in the dawning of the twentieth century."

The color black has had different symbolic significance for different cultures; the revered Hindu god Krishna is black; and the black Madonna is equally revered in Catholic worship. Black may symbolize academic success and scholarship for black gowned students and clergy; potency for some sports groups; evil, for some others, and darkness for the explorers and missionaries of the European Enlightenment. Black in Britain is used to refer to immigrants from the commonwealth positively as political strategy,

Black as a reference to the body is often used interchangeably with African, but various shades of color from very light to very dark, characterize the continent, and I prefer to think of the African in the more inclusive Thambo Mbekian sense. But in the universality of its presence and its unequal power relations with the white, the black body cuts across continents. The three Abrahamite religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam have singled out as cursed by God, the black body, not the color black.

The Dubois line then was in reference to the black body and in that sense and despite all the political advances made by African peoples and those of Africa descent since Dubois wrote these words in the preface to *Souls of Black Folk,* the lines do not belong to the 20th century alone, that it still behooves us to look at the

strange meaning of being black in the 21st Century. Contemporary history would not let us forget the politics of color in the human struggles today.

I want to talk about blackness from my perspective and experience as a writer. My first ever personal presence at a specifically black writers conference was at Makerere University College Kampala Uganda way back in 1962. Organized by Ezekiel Mphahlele, it was attended by the leading African writers of the day that included a big contingent of South African black writers in exile, Bloke Modisane, Lewis Nkosi; and Arthur Mamaine. The works of Alex la Guma and Dennis Brutus both under house arrest in the apartheid State dominated the conference proceedings. But the presence of Arthur Drayton from the Caribbean, and Langston Hughes and Saunders Redding, from the USA, gave the gathering a Pan-African dimension. In some ways it was reminiscent of the Black Writers Congress in Paris in 1956 and Rome in 1959 where, with writers like Richard Wright, Frantz Fanon in attendance, questions of blackness or negritude colored every aspect of the discussion. The Makerere gathering had the uniqueness of being held on the continent and at the high noon of the decolonization process.

I was a student, a beginner writer, the species often labeled promising, and I hoped to absorb all the wisdom exuding from those with books to their credit. The majority of writers that I had read and studied were white European. I liked some loathed others, inspired by some, revolted by others, [2] but in the same way that they were European writers, I wanted to be an African, a black writer, in the tradition of

[2] See my memoir, *In the House of the Interpreter,* Pantheon, September 2012

those who met in Rome and Paris. I was startled when in the debates that followed, some writers said they didn't want the label African. They were writers, period. Later, after publishing my first novel, *Weep not child,* I would find myself having to respond to the question or its various shadings: do you see yourself as an African writer or just a writer? When I came to see how African writing was often critiqued as lesser than or "good enough considering," or that it was anthropology not literature, I begun to understand why some people would want to disclaim the label black or African, their way of clamoring to be judged by the same aesthetic criteria as any other writers.

I am aware that no writer sits down to see whether every word, sentence or image they put down is black enough; or to consciously erase the memory of experience that shaped the writer so that he or she can write like a writer. But there are moments when I want to stand on roof tops, tear off my clothes, and proclaim I am black writer, holding a banner with the words: I write primarily in an African language, Gĩkũyũ; what of my fiction you now read in English is largely translation from the Gĩkũyũ original. There are other moments when, even if I wanted to be just a writer, no drama of tearing off clothes and holding banner aloft, I am reminded of the fact of blackness: my blackness as a black writer.

For me, the two moments came together in 2006 when Pantheon released the American edition of my novel, *Wizard of the Crow*. Some critics have called it a global epic. It was my book of exile, migration, for one cannot write about global capital without also exploring its essential feature: its mobility across national

boundaries, smashing state barriers, demanding its own democratic right to go in and out of any country, consume the resources therein at the expense of the environment and social stability, but demanding that labor not move unless capital needs or forces it to move. Don't call; we shall call. If labor, on its own terms, tries to follow capital, it finds barriers erected, walls that are guarded by armed might. Stay in your allotted national enclave. We shall come to you or you come to us when we need you here rather than there.

I was very proud of the release of *Wizard of the Crow*. I had spent almost ten years writing it in Gĩkũyũ and eventually translating it into English. On a book tour that Random House arranged for me, I would always point to the fact of translation. It was, if you like my way of refusing to shout from a rooftop that I was an African writer, because what else could I be if I was writing in an African language? Gĩkũyũ is one of many Kenyan African languages and to my knowledge I have never come across an European writer who wrote in Gĩkũyũ, and if there were, that would set in motion a very interesting debate whether he or she was an African writer, Gĩkũyũ, in his case, call him Afro-phonic, maybe, but the question has not yet arisen.

On 10th November 2006, the book tour took me to San Francisco, a pent house guest, courtesy of Random House, at Vitale Hotel. It was the hour between breakfast and lunch when I took a newspaper at the reception and sat at the terrace of the Hotel's restaurant enjoying the view of Embarcadero, the harbor-front. I raised my head to find a suited gentleman who I assumed to be the manager addressing me: This is for hotel guests. I was about to explain that I was a guest

when it crossed my mind to ask: how do you know that I am not a guest? As if to say it was not necessary to prove the obvious, he did not respond to the question, but continued reiterating the same fact, but with an increasingly peremptory tone. The tension rose. Curious I asked him: You have not even sought to know if I am staying at the hotel? This seemed to rile him even more: it was not necessary. The place was for guests of the hotel. I had to leave. By now I was determined not to offer any proof or explain that I was a guest, occupant of one of the most expensive suite in the hotel. Not that he was asking for proof or explanation. Let's go at the reception, was all I said. He strode ahead of me, furious, determined, I following, curious. When he saw the horror on the face of the hotel manager, he was all abject and sorry.

Let me say for the record that the CEO of Joie de Vivre Hospitality, the parent company owner of the Hotel, published public apology, 450 dollars worth of space, and in negotiations with Priority Africa Net work, agreed to conduct a diversity reeducation of his employees. He called me at my place in Irvine, South California, to apologize. In addition, he paid five thousand dollars to a grass root organization for anti-racist activism in the Bay area. Why then am I telling this story on the occasion of celebration of Africa Day? A time which seems a far cry from the colonial days of my birth and upbringing?

I was born and came of age in colonial Kenya where everything was contested in terms of black and white. Even the memory of place was a battlefield. To the English settlers, Kenya was white highlands: to Africans, it was a black people's country. I have been hit, humiliated, sneered at, denied service. I have

described some of these incidents in a memoir, my second memoir, *In the House of the Interpreter*, to be released this September. My experience growing up in a colonial settler society had taught me to sense the racist type by their gait, their gesture, their word, their sneer or tone of voice.

The San Franciscan gentleman never came across as an obvious racist, the fire breathing nigger calling type, seeking any opportunity to hurl an insult, the kind that assumes that every black person collects food at dumpsites, or foodstamps in the case of USA. He was totally different from a white guy in New Jersey who once found my wife and I waiting in line to use an ATM cash machine, and who demanded he go ahead of us because we were cashing a welfare cheque. Mark you my wife was then senior social worker in the New jersey state administration and I was Eric Maria Remarque professor of Languages and Professor of Comparative Literature and Performance Studies at New York University. We were Kenyans anyway but our blackness made him assume we were recipients of monetary handouts from government. An undercover police officer happened to be there and stopped what was turning out to be an ugly confrontation. Unlike the New Jersian, the Franciscan gentleman did not once utter a word or make a gesture that was overtly racist.

But he had something far deeper and more frightening than overt racism: certainty, a certainty arising from a profile of blackness embedded somewhere in his mental makeup, an absolute certainty that in no way shape or form could I have been a guest. Even when I gave him an opening to re-examine his assumption, he would not go there. He would not entertain any doubt, the little voice of maybe, that

often cautions humans from acting with the uncritical instinct of a beast of prey. Later that evening in another hotel into which I had moved, I thought more about the absolute certainty: I found myself trembling. It dawned on me that if the man had a gun, he probably would have shot me with the same certainty and would no doubt have proclaimed to the world afterwards, that he was not a racist, even citing, as evidence, a couple of black friends.

Angela Davis, to whom I talked about the incident, was later to ask her audience at New Orleans where she had gone to advocate for prisoners in the aftermath of Katrina hurricane disaster, to think about the meaning and implications of that kind of certainty. For her, the self certainty, was a way in which racism expressed itself. There need not be anything specific about the race of a person, she argued, it's just, I know you should not be here.

Now, the man didn't say "you're black." He didn't say, you know, black people don't belong here. He was just certain the he could look at this man and tell that this man didn't belong there. Just like the cops who shot Sean Bell could look at this young brother and his friends in the club and he could tell that they dealt in drugs, they were criminals, that they deserved to be shot.

The Sean Bell shooting incident took place in New York, Novemebr 25, 2006. A joint team of plains clothes and undercover NYPD officers shot a total of fifty times at three men as they came from a Bachelor party at a night club, on the eve of Bell tying the knot. Sean Bell, died on the morning of his wedding day.

On Februray 5, 1999, a team of New York cops gunned down Amadou Diallo, an unarmed twenty two year old, from Guinea, a few yards from his apartment. He was coming home and from all accounts, there was not even a confrontation. But the accused were certain that the victims had a gun. He didn't. The cops saw gun where one did not exist.

The other is incident involved the Harvard don, Professor Skip Gates. On July 16, 2009, he was trying to get into his house, when some body called the cops on him. The officers arrested him inside his own house. The officer in charge was certain that he was confronting a burglar. His certainty made him see a burglar where there was none. We can assume that if Skip Gates had resisted arrest, he might have been shot dead inside his own house, the officer, certain that he was gunning down a burglar.

The pattern in the three cases is incredibly similar. Each of the victims was returning home: none was armed. And yet the cases elicited excess of violence the kind unleashed by someone who thinks he is in imminent danger. In all the cases, the officer swore that they were not driven by racism and yet all of them seemed so certain of what they thought they saw that they rained bullets on the suspect and in the case of Skip, arrested him inside his own house, even after he had identified himself as the world re-knowned Harvard professor. And in all the cases, the question of dress and gait arose and, except the case of Skip Gates, there were attempts to link the victims to some sort of drugs.

And lastly the case of Zimmermann and Trayvon Martin. Zimmerman was captain of a neighborhood watch in Florida. On February 26, this year, Zimmerman saw an African-American youth, Trayvon walking in the street and shot him dead. As it

turned out Martin was returning home, in the area. The words that stood out in Zimmerman's call to the police prior to the killing, at least the ones I saw on television, was that Martin was walking. And now he is looking at me. Three sentences. He is walking. He is looking. He is wearing a hoodie. A prominent tv show host was later to attribute the killing to the hoodie Martin was wearing and advised black and Latino youth not to wear them. Among other interesting tidbits was the fact that dead was tested of drugs on the spot; the perpetrator was not tested of any drugs. I don't know the details, like everybody else in the USA, I am depending on press reports. But I could not help asking myself: was it the same self-certainty that made George Zimmerman pull the trigger on Trayvon Martin?

The question was rooted in my own experience with the Vitale Hotel incident. Except for the tragedy, the blame it on the victim explanation, was eerily the same. Despite the apology from the owner of hotel Vitale, a person purporting to work for the restaurant, posted a defence of the Franciscan gentleman in the internet, alleging that I had not been denied service on account of race but rather because crack addicts and prostitutes had the habit of disturbing people who were paying good money. I was reeking of odor, adorned dreadlocks, and wore filthy clothes. Familiar? Dress. Walking or sitting. Looking. Any of this to justify an act prompted by a profile firmly set in one's mind. I don't wear dreadlocks, was not even seeking service, wore reasonably decent dashiki, so somebody saw dreadlocks and what images they conjure up in the head, where there were none.

The fact is Martin could have been any black person anywhere. It does not matter if fresh from the continent or having an ancestry that goes back to the experience of slave

and colonial plantation, or from Stockholm to receive the Nobel Prize in literature or a visiting African head of state taking a stroll in a quiet neighborhood. That self-certainty can condemn any one to early death. In that sense race would seem to trump class. The certainty is based on a negative profile of blackness taken so much for granted as normal that it no longer creates a doubt.

But the self-certainty that black is negative is not confined to white perception of black. I once took a Japanese lady, a family friend, to TM machine to get some money in Newark. I was standing right behind her when a black lady walked past me and nudged the Japanese lady to be mindful about me. It could have been an act of female solidarity but I often wondered if she could have been so sure about my evil intentions had I been another color.

The perception and self-perception of blackness as negative is spread and intensified in the images of the everyday: in the West, TV clips to illustrate famine, violent crimes, and ethnic warfare, tend to draw from dark faces. In commercials, TV dramas, in the cinema, one hardly ever sees a really dark person portraying beauty and positivity. A concession to blackness stops at various shades of light skin.

No wonder this results in a knee jerk rejection of the African body. Afro-American comedian, Chris Rock, made a documentary, Hair, in which goes about trying to sell various types of hair. It is very telling. Whereas European and Asian type hair has numerous black clients African hair does not attract a single buyer. In Africa, Europe and America, skin lightening technology and services, is a huge industry. In short, a multibillion industry in the world is built around the erasure of blackness; and its biggest clients are the affluent black middleclass in Africa and the world.

But the negativity manifests itself in other ways. It's a national day. An African leader addresses the nation. For the sake of the British and American ambassadors on the dais, he makes the entire speech in English or French. After the formal delivery, he will then address wananchi in Kiswahili or any other lingua franca. He thinks it funny when he now resorts to verbal abuse. In other words he associates European languages with formality, dignity, serious discourse on the state of the nation, and African languages with coarse speech, abuse and ridicule. In Kenya recently parliament voted to ban the use of African languages in all public places. Those seeking services from their state, even the rural farmer, were supposed to bring along interpreters. It's not yet the law only because the government has not signed it.

This negative perception and self-perception has roots in the history of enslavement and colonization. The real battleground of the colonial process was the body. The body, black, white, brown, is the site of production and knowledge. So the first enslavement and colonization is of the body as that which acts on the natural environment to produce usables for human needs, or wealth. In the auction block, the prime heath of the black body was advertised to emphasize that the merchandise was ready to be put into production line.

Africa as a whole has gone through three major stages of the enslaved body as producer: the plantation, colonial and today debt slavery. They are separate but also part of each other. The Atlantic slave trade and plantation slavery ran from 16th tot 19th century: so we are talking about three hundred year of free labor. The colonial, a period during which the body and the land were cheap resources, ended in the sixties and seventies of the last century. Today, Africa gives to the West more money in interest and

debt servicing than it actually receives in loans. Africa has always been and continues to be the main donor to the West. Africa is the creditor continent: Europe, the debtor continent. But why is this reality obscured by the fiction of the opposite? Because of the colonization of the body as a field of knowledge.

The body, white, brown or Black, is a school, a model of being. A child begins by learning its body, arms, legs, hair, skin. In fact the entire human society is a projection of the structure and functioning of the human body, into the world. The entire technology of motion, from the skateboard to the spaceship is a projection of the leg. The entire machine tools from the stone tools to the most complicated robotology is the hand. The eye is the model for everything from simple lenses to the telescopes in space. The ear is the model for the technologies of listening. The computer tries to replicate and enhance the brain in terms of memory and transmission: the computer will now send and recall information and images with almost the same speed and real time that we imagine and recall them. The tongue and the mouth are the model of the technology of organized sounds. Even the organization of society is modeled on the body, particularly its division of a person into head and the body. The head is the site of reason, the body below the head, site of emotion, and unreason. The head rules the body. It owns, or rather, it's the site of articulation of ownership, my this, my that. The head says that everything of the body including itself belongs to it. Those who rule, be they a race, a class or a gender, see themselves as the head ruling over the body. Even religions are a projection of the same division with God as the Head and human society as the body.

The colonization of the body as the site of production was integral to its colonization as a site of knowledge and vice versa. As a source of knowledge, it was

ridiculed, starved, brutalized. The colonized body was alienated from itself as a source and producer of knowledge. I have written elsewhere how the European domination of the globe went hand in hand with renaming the social and physical geography of the places and peoples it dominated. The landscape became dotted with European names, replacing the previous memory of place where it did not erase it altogether. The same was true of the body: the European naming system replaced the African.

The very body of the African was defined by European identity of being: Beatrice, Desmond, James. In plantation slavery they did not even bother with individual naming: every slave in a plantation carried the name of the owner. Of course it is not any one thing but it is out of all those aspects taken together that a pattern of negativity towards Africa and people associated with Africa, emerges. Europe and the European image of the world is normalized as the standard, and the others deviations from the standard. That's bad enough.

But Africa and African peoples do not have the luxury of complaining and appealing to the moral conscience of those that gain from them. By claiming that God is on their side, the slave master is able to still his conscience: he does not lose sleep thinking about the cries of those that work for him. In fact, armed with his self-proclaimed special relationship with God, he is more likely than not, to accuse those who try to get out of the slave condition, of sinning against God and civilization. If religious persuasion fails to work, those who gain from others woes will even marshal the resources of science, medicine, psychiatry, and reason to justify the negativity and the actions that flow from that negativity. In history,

running away from slavery was regarded a crime punishable with death even. Or else a mental illness that often called for surgical operation.

I am not being facetious. In 1851 a certain doctor, Samuel Cartwright read a learned paper to the medical association Louisiana, on the mental illness that caused slaves to flee captivity. He gave it the grandiloquent name of Drapetomania[3]. The malady was a consequence of too much familiarity between slaves and masters. During the civil rights era in America, many African-Americans were diagnosed with schizophrenia for entertaining civil rights ideas. In Kenya, a world reknowned Psychiatrist J C Carothers diagnosed Mau Mau Guerrilla fighter as possessed with forest mentality. He brought his medical science to bear on the methods of torture to cure the Mau Mau of the jungle mentality and return them safely and submissively to civilization. It suits the West fine when a people, persuaded by science, religion or force of repletion of negative images, internalize the master's view of them as a foundation of their theory and practice of being.

The biggest sin, then, is not that certain groups of white people, and even the West as a whole, may have a negative view of blackness embedded in their psyche, the real sin is that the black bourgeoisie in Africa and the world should contribute to that negativity and even embrace it by becoming participants or shareholders in a multibillion industry built on black negativity. If it was a case of a few social foibles here and there, it would not matter, but in a post-colonial situation, the internalized negative view of the black body can have fatal consequences. In Africa today, sixty

[3] I am indebted to Mumbi Ngugi for drawing my attention to the term.

years after independence, there still persists a systematic disregard of African lives by their own state, a continuity of the colonial. Thus colonial regimes mowed down thousands and the perpetrators went to cocktail parties afterword; but the same continues to day. By and large, the foundation of the military and police force in Africa was a complete disregard of the African body. This force that also fought against African people's struggles, was inherited from the colonial era intact. The colonizer engineered ethnic divide. Today the bourgeoisie does the same, to the level of violence, even. And quite frankly, the viciousness with which some black people treat their fallen black "enemies" is nothing short of self hatred. The sole and essential function of the colonial state was to facilitate the flow of wealth from Africa (the colonized) to Europe, (the colonizer). Today quite a number of African states play the same role; steal from Africa to European banks. It is said that Mobutu of Zaire had more money in Swiss banks than the Zairean treasury; that if he had lent the money to Zaire, the country, would not have had to borrow. But since the money in Swiss banks was Not kept idle in a vault, it is likely that Europe lent Zaire, the same money that he had stolen from his nation. His actions arose out of a deep seated distrust of his own people and nation and Congo Kinshasa is still paying for the man's kleptomania.

Africa has to review the roots of the current imbalance of power: it started in the colonization of the body. Africa has to reclaim the black body with all its blackness as the starting point in our plunge into and negotiations with the world. We have to rediscover and reclaim the sense of the sacred in the black body. At the seven Pan African Congress in Kampala in the eighties of the last century, I raised this question of the sacred. I

wanted us to work on a Pan-African scale, for a political situation where the death of a single African person raises horror and concern in the body politic as a whole. Today the opposite is the case: a white person missing raises more anxiety among African governments than hundreds of missing blacks. We have to take the initiative to fight and right the roots of such differential knee jerk reactions.

But this would be impossible without also looking at the structures of economic and political inequalities at the base of our social being. I have always said that progress and development should be measured from the standpoint of those at the bottom of the mountain and not those at the top. The person at the top has a very different view than the one at the bottom. The tragedy is that though those at the top of the mountain have climbed on the backs of millions at the bottom, they seem and act as if it was their unique genius that put them there. The images we have of each other, the images of self, the images we have of the world and history can often blind us not into seeing that reality.

One corrective thing we can do: the African middleclass must give up the looting mentality inherited from the colonial era. The political mercenary must give way to the political visionary. This would mean jettisoning that view of progress that sees stability as lying solely in a glossy middleclass. Ours has to be a continuous return and re-connection with the creative base of our being, the working people of Africa. It's this that gave Africa the power and the strength to fight against the armed might of colonial empires: it's what will enable Africa to liberate and revolutionize its being. It's the condition of the regular person that should be the gauge of what progress we have made not that of the pampered middleclass.

Most important Africa must rediscover and reconnect with Kwame Nkrumah's dreams of a politically and economically united Africa, rooted in the working people of Africa. If we brought together the might of our African and global presence, there's nothing that could stop Africa being an equal player in the globe. Its only such an Africa that can contribute to the world and receive from the world on terms of equal exchange and mutual respect. The world begins at home. And home begins inside the castle of one's skin.