

Tokens of Populism, and black history as popcorn fetish

'Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes,' trs: 'I fear the Greeks even when they bear gifts,'

Virgil's *Aeneid* Book 2 19 BCE

The *Aeneid* was written by the Roman writer Virgil as propaganda for the Julio-Claudian dynasty, to hone its legitimacy and avow its divine origins. It placated a general equestrian conceit that all Romans were by association the sons of the heroic Aeneas. Inevitably, the *Aeneid* contains its own xenophobic rants against Greeks, who are labelled as devious-cunning manipulators, bent on civilisation's destruction. Nevertheless, Virgil's work also reveals universal truisms about politics and its capacity to manipulate events. Virgil shows us how the public can be seduced by a political show that 'amazes the eye' and 'dulls the senses.' It is a seduction that is reductive. The trumping (no pun intended) of public sentiment by 'gifts', tricks, that are manicured; can obscure the twisted fingers of tyranny grasping at demagoguery. The warning is that the 'gifts' given to the Trojans seduced them into destruction. Virgil warns us if we do not wish to suffer the same fate, to temper our credulity, or be destroyed by our naivety.

At the time of writing this article Donald J Trump has been in the office of President of the United States of America for thirty-seven days, twenty-one hours and forty-two minutes. In that time he has attempted to impose travel bans on people coming to the USA from seven majority Muslim countries. This includes people fleeing persecution, visiting loved ones, or even those invited to the most prestigious and exclusive party in town – the Oscars. When this ban was introduced, it resulted in families being divided, and children being deported. The present American Government has revoked legislation that President Obama had enacted that gave a glimmer of hope for those labelled as 'illegal immigrants.' The result is that many people who had lived in America for a generation and had thought themselves 'free' – overnight became 'criminals.' Historians of America's past will say this approach was reminiscent of how enslaved Africans were given the illusion of freedom by one American administration, only to have the realities of slavery imposed on them by another. The present American Government, however, feels that it is electorally empowered to pursue this path – perhaps it is. And perhaps, others around world such as Marine Le Pen in France, and Geert Wilders in Holland will grasp this sophistry, to spread fear and loathing, and xenophobic-despair across the whole northern hemisphere.

The President of the USA and his administration in their thirty-seven days have upheld the rallying cry to build a 'great wall' across the Mexican border. A wall however, is not just a wall. It is sign of separation between them and us. It is within the context of American politics an extreme act that reminds us of the most retrograde activities of colonial protectionism. But we are told to abhor extremism, yet we give comfort to this same terrorism by destroying even the illusion of freedom in the west. We give comfort to terrorism too by promoting the use of colloquialisms such as 'Islamic terrorism,' which allows those that practise violence, to gain an emotional ownership of an entire religion of more than one billion followers. Extremism comes in all forms, commentators have been alarmed as the President appointed extremists of the right, political hacks and financial 'yes' men – some of them are 'even' women; to

senior positions inside the white house administration, and across the American Government. The President has praised extremist politicians from around the world such as Nigel Farage and stated that leaders such as Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong-un were 'strong leaders.'

The Klu Klux Klan are this Government's most avid American supporters, as are Alt Right and Breitbart, UKIP in Britain and the Front National in France. The rest of the world waits to see whether the President will continue to favour only their supporters and members of the American press that act sympathetically or sycophantically; and malign the rest of the world as purveyors of 'fake news.' We wonder if the American Government's claim that there is a worldwide conspiracy to conceal terrorist attacks is still a bitter pill we are being trolled into swallowing. Ironically, at the same time, the same administration has been proven to elevate rumours to 'breaking news.' Nevertheless, the world still hopes for a warm handshake that does not control and intimidate, for a smile that lives out the true meaning of its 'Ivy league chops' and an administration that really includes 'smart people.' Perhaps we hope that we have not fallen into the abyss of the 1930's, through the back door of populism. We wait for any comment less divisive, less strident, less ill-informed or vacillating. We wonder if the President can be more presidential. Or if this is actually what it means to be presidential! George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, et al, in other words: restricted electoral enfranchisement, elitist minority governments, cronyism and slave owning? Some argue, why wait for 'gifts?' They are crumbs from the master's table. It is clear they say, that we should 'fear' this administration, and international populism, as much as the Trojans should have feared the Greeks, even when they bear gifts.

So when the President shakes hands with African-Americans, that is any African-American, it is front page news. The acolytes become for a moment Jesse Owen like in prominence: Kanye West, Jim Brown, Ben Carson, Martin Luther King III, and TV host Steve Harvey. In this regard that we see the President's visit on 21 February to the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. It is unfortunate that many of the people that watched events unfold at the Museum, would have discovered for the first time that there was a National Museum for African-American history. A great opportunity to inform was lost.

The Museum was opened on 24 September 2016, after more than a hundred years of political wrangling. The actual building was thirteen years in the making and was designed by the internationally famous British-Ghanaian architect Sir David Adjaye OBE. Surely this last titbit was worthy of an editorial footnote, if not a comment: 'British-Ghanaian architect designs the National Museum, for African-American Culture.'? Since the Museum opened last year it has attracted over 1 million visitors and it is therefore already a very popular international resource.

The Museum has over 37,000 individual pieces of international interest on display. Of the items that took the author's interest include: the remains of the slave ship the 'São José Paquete Africa,' which sank on 27 December 1794, 212 of the 550 people of African descent died. The remains of this ship therefore act as a memorial to those that died, not just in 1794, but through the Maafa, that killed hundreds of millions of people of African descent. The Museum also includes artefacts that relate to the resistance of slavery including over eight artefacts pertaining to Toussaint L'Ouverture. One of these is a letter, written and signed by L' Ouverture, on 25 November, 1801. L'Ouverture was writing to Tobias

L'Ouverture, an American agent responsible for trade between the USA and Haiti. This letter is very significant as it is one of the few surviving epistles written by 'the liberator of Haiti:' L'Ouverture. This is a man that the American politician Wendell Phillips referred to as 'one of the most remarkable men of the last generation.' L'Ouverture became famous for roundly defeating the combined European forces that were ranged against him, that included the French and British. His 'Black army' established what was later to become a republic, and then a sovereign state with its own African Emperor. The Haitian revolution is often regarded as offering an international desistance to the rhetorical lie that Africans were 'all happy slaves.' Professor Jacob Carruthers and CLR James have argued that the Haitian Revolution more than any other single event including the American Civil War helped to bring about the end to the legitimisation of the transatlantic trade. L'Ouverture's letter is therefore extremely significant as it was written by a man who had won a nation by championing the notion of freedom.

The Museum also contains artefacts and memorabilia from a host of more recent historical icons that include African-American sports and film stars and entertainers. This includes the Rock and Roll star Chuck Berry's Cadillac, the 'Godfather of Soul' James Brown's jump suit, and the boxing legend and civil rights activist Muhammad Ali's boxing gloves. Rarely would these artefacts or Black history get front page coverage. And despite an opportunity for the media to do so this time, they decided that the real story of the 21 February was not theirs. Instead of a chance to promote an alternative vision of the world that challenges the European and Euro-American hegemony of Manifest destiny or 'Folk' history. We are left with populism, the 'hail fellow well met' blandness of 'we must fight bigotry, intolerance and hatred in all of its very ugly forms,' and that slavery was 'not good' (attributed to the President). The media could have contextualised the visit of the President to offer different perspectives on history. After all, February is Black history month! In Britain, it is in October. It is only one month when: Harriet Tubman, L'Ouverture and Frederick Douglass (apparently he is alive in Brooklyn), gets an advocate. Modern populism needs no more advocates, but Marcus Mosiah Garvey may need a pardon. Now some may say that to only have a month for this history, which is really world history, is the real tokenism – but that is quite another matter.

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- Dr Onyeka Nubia's most recent work includes [Young Othello](#) and [Blackamoors Africans in Tudor England: Their Presence, Status and Origins](#) the latter is available in paperback.