

'SWEET DREAMS AND BEAUTIFUL NIGHTMARES'

WHY SECURITY IS A BLACK AND BROWN ISSUE

ARTICLE BY
SIANA BANGURA

The psychosis is at 110 per cent

Looking to increase disproportionately

At unfathomable increments

As we keep a very close eye on the news

I remind myself that I have to watch my back

As if life isn't hard enough

EXTRACT OF 'SWEET DREAMS AND BEAUTIFUL NIGHTMARES', FROM ELEPHANT

I wrote these words in January 2015, when broken pencils filled my social media feed, accompanied by proclamations of “Je Suis Charlie”. Even I, for a moment, felt that I was Charlie, because despite wearing the skin of the ‘Other’, the very Other we were all Charlie in reaction to, in that moment I was first and foremost a journalist in the West, sitting in my newsroom with my colleagues as horrors unfolded 344 kilometres away from us in Paris. Over the next few days, weeks, and even months, I took in and read endless think pieces about the massacre, denouncing the attackers and more often than not absolving the magazine’s editors of any criticism levied at them in the wake of their deaths – freedom of speech was absolute. Torn, I turned to poetry. Black Lesbian Womanist, writer, poet, and activist Audre Lorde said in her seminal work *Sister Outsider*:

“Poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams towards survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into tangible action.”

Lorde's work focused on notions of identity, belonging, and Otherness. Just as Black Feminists and Womanists of her time and before, she highlighted the need for intersectional analysis of the human experience. At the same time that we were Charlie in January 2015, we were not 2000 Nigerians massacred in the town of Baga, in the North-Eastern state of Borno; we were not the twenty-odd Maiduguri victims; and we certainly were not 132 unarmed school-children in Peshawar, Pakistan, a month earlier; or even 147 slain university students in Garissa, Kenya, in April 2015. We were none of the aforementioned because the aforementioned are society's Other.

The Other must exist so that there can be an opposite of it – those who 'belong'. Those who belong can be related to, empathised with, and understood. We can make sense of their humanity because it is supposedly like our own. The Other is a threat to what we understand and accept in Western society.

Security to contain the 'threat' of the Other and surveillance of those who don't belong have come to be considered two of the most important matters of our time – arenas in which intersectional politics are played out most clearly. Why? Because the question of security in the first place and of who poses a threat is not a neutral one.

As Nitisha Barnoia, editor-in-chief of the *Berkeley Political Review*, noted on January 24th 2015:

"With the rise of terrorism across the globe, militant Islamic groups like ISIS, Boko Haram, and Al-Qaeda are beginning to conduct attacks and commit atrocities one after the other, often at the same time. Understanding the global threat that terrorism poses requires paying attention to and addressing each of these attacks – and yet media coverage and political attention has historically focused on those in the West, despite the disproportionately lower death toll they bring. This skewed coverage is concerning not only because it seems to imply a disregard for non-Western lives, but also because it incentivises world leaders to address only those issues which attract widespread public – and by extension, Western – outcry... Paris, Baga, and Peshawar may be separated by culture, geography, and language, but they are also united by a common enemy..."

Barnoia poses the question: why did the world ignore Baga and Peshawar and choose to only focus on Paris, despite all three places falling victim to terrorism at similar times?

The answer is that the victims of Baga and Peshawar were Black and Brown.

Black and Brown bodies have historically been positioned as the aggressor and never the victim; the threat and never the threatened. The sickening narrative surrounding the modern-day global refugee crisis is a terrifying example of this. Polarising those who belong

against those who do not allow for hateful voices to call immigrants and refugees “cockroaches” in national newspapers with audiences of millions of people, under the guise of freedom of speech. Reducing human beings in desperate need – often a result of warfare curated and facilitated by the West – to “swarms” and “hoards” living in “jungles” in Calais is a dehumanising practice we’ve come to be familiar with. These efforts to desensitise the public make it easier for the powers that be to refuse safety to thousands of refugee orphans, and countless Black and Brown people fleeing conflict and destruction. Creating a divide between those who belong and those who are Othered justifies the scapegoating of victims, and distracts us from holding to account those who are truly responsible for the world’s atrocities and injustices.

Anxiety levels are now at 96.5 per cent, Houston

And I think we have a problem

I can't take it anymore

*Father and brother are in the bathroom
shaving their beards and all their facial hair*

*Mother has decided she can't wear her hijab
anymore*

Not today

Not for a while

And we are all apologetic

Even though it's not our fault

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The obsession with framing Blackness and Brownness as threatening has very real consequences for those racialised as Black and Brown. In Britain, we are disproportionately represented in the poorest housing, the worst schools, mental health institutions, and overcrowded prisons. According to a report by Inquest, since 1990, over 1500 people have died in, or following, police custody or contact in the UK. A report by the Institute of Race Relations shows that of this number, roughly a third were Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) individuals. Research from 2012 conducted by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) found that British police were up to 28 times more likely to stop and search black people than white people. Black neighbourhoods in Britain have historic tensions with police forces because of over-policing and excessive force used against black bodies. Young black children are taught from an early age, more often than not, that at some point, an officer will stop and search them, regardless of how ‘respectable’ they may appear.

This ‘them versus us’ framing can be traced back hundreds of years, but in more recent living memory, sixteen years ago, one particular moment changed the West’s relationship with the Other. Prior to 9/11, few of us had heard of Al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, or ISIS. The US deported half the number of people it deports today and its surveillance state was a fraction of the size it is today. America’s War on Terror – certainly prompted by the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001 – resulted in a dramatic change in the West’s attitudes and concerns around surveillance and vigilance.

The U.S. War on Terror has manifested itself as a *de facto* reality for Brown and Black people within and outside of the USA as well as a *de jure* lived experience. In Britain, the British government’s badly flawed and counterproductive ‘Prevent’ policy has trampled on the basic rights of young Muslims. Following a nine-month examination of the strategy, the Open Society Justice Initiative recommended a major government re-think, particularly in regards to the use of ‘Prevent’ in schools and

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in the NHS. The NGO uncovered several cases in which information was apparently gathered from Muslim primary school children without their parents' consent. They also found examples of 'Prevent' being used to bypass official disciplinary processes, such as during the attempted dismissal of a school dinner lady, and in the case of a 17-year-old who was referred to the police by his college authorities because he had become more religious. 'Prevent' policies have also led to the cancellation of university conferences on Islamophobia.

Particularly startling is the surveillance of children and its potentially devastating consequences – as demonstrated by the distressing example of the Lancashire primary school boy who wrote that he lived in a 'terrorist house', instead of a 'terraced house', leading to his family being reported to the police. For every one of these stories that hits mainstream media, countless others go unreported. In this way, 'Prevent' policies have contributed to the intensifying of pre-existing suspicions of Muslim students as well as potentially planting new seeds of suspicion and paranoia where they did not exist before.

During an interview with poet, activist, playwright, and musician Benjamin Zephaniah, for my upcoming documentary, *1500 And Counting*, we discussed the surveillance of Black and Brown people in Britain, particularly those known for being outspoken about police brutality, corruption, and institutional racism. He said that policies like 'Prevent' encourage communities to turn against each other, in the same way that house slaves policed the slaves toiling in the cotton fields. During my most recent visit to the family of Sheku Bayoh, a British-Sierra Leonean man killed by Scottish police in May 2015 – his death being the reason why I embarked upon producing my documentary – his family spoke of the intimidation they endured in the aftermath of the death of their loved one. They were under surveillance, treated with suspicion and contempt despite being the victims. In the 2016 film, *Generation Revolution*, a documentation of Black and Brown activism in London at the height of Black Lives

Matter UK protests and uprisings, one of the main protagonists of the film, Joshua Virasami, spoke of the heavy surveillance he and his family were under because of his numerous clashes with the police as a result of direct action carried out as part of the work of anti-racist groups such as The London Black Revs and Black Dissidents. The activism of young brave Black and Brown revolutionaries against police brutality in the UK, institutional racism, and the ongoing mistreatment of Black and Brown people in every sphere from housing to healthcare to education, is rewarded with violence and constant fear of being locked up.

But the pushback is real and raw and Black and Brown millennials have used social media as a means to move from the margins to the centre in expert ways, amplifying their otherwise silenced voices and taking up space. This gaining of visibility has also meant an increase in perceptions of the Other as a threat. It's no surprise that one of Trump's first moves as president is to call for a registry of Muslim people, which would include their social media activity. It's also no surprise that the Trump administration has vowed to "crack down" on Black Lives Matter protestors. What started as an online movement is now a global modern-day civil rights struggle, resonating everywhere from South Africa to Kenya to Brazil, and of course the UK.

In a world where Trump is president, Britain is marching towards Brexit, Marine Le Pen is on course to become France's new president, and fascism is mainstream and normalised once again, where do we go from here? Just as Lorde spoke of poetry being a necessary tool of dissent, she also concluded that: "Black and Third World people are expected to educate white people as to our humanity. Women are expected to educate men. Lesbians and gay men are expected to educate the heterosexual world. The oppressors maintain their position and evade their responsibility for their own actions. There is a constant drain of energy which might be better used in redefining ourselves and devising realistic scenarios for altering the present and constructing the future."

To refine ourselves, devise realistic scenarios for altering the present and constructing the future, we must also redefine what it means to be the Other. Security is not a neutral issue when the world is constructed on the dichotomy of whiteness as the default for all humanity and Blackness and Brownness as deviant and dangerous, as disposable bodies worthy only of suspicion instead of the fullest humanity.



SIANA BANGURA

is a writer, poet, performer and activist hailing from South London. She is the founder and editor of Black British Intersectional Feminist platform *No Fly on the WALL*. She is the producer of *1500 And Counting*, a documentary investigating police brutality in the UK and deaths in custody, and the author of *Elephant*, a collection of poetry focusing on race and gender.
@sianaarrgh || www.sianabangura.com