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Contextualizing Racial Epistemologies,
Imagining Social Justice*

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Editorial

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*Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women's and Gender
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**RACE, RESISTANCE, REASON:
CONTEXTUALING RACIAL EPISTEMOLOGIES,
IMAGINING SOCIAL JUSTICE ¹**

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African American sociologist W.E.B. DuBois's famous dictum, "The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line," continues to challenge the 21st Century. With the election of a bi-racial president in the United States, some pundits had even thought to put DuBois's prescient call to rest by suggesting that the United States had entered a postracial era. Undoubtedly, the "color-line" continues to haunt us not only in the U.S. but also globally, as we witness the disparate socio-economic impact of climatic change, resource wars and ideological contestations, brutally impacting the Global South's poor, especially women and girls. Communities of color within the Global North feel the effects of racist, capitalist, and heteronormative oppression, even within well-intentioned social justice movements. For instance, Indigenous activists responded to the Occupy Wall Street movement with Un-occupy!, reminding white activists that occupation is a fighting word fraught with colonial, genocidal histories across the Americas and the world over. Likewise, Alicia Garza, a Queer Black woman organizer and special projects director for the National Domestic Workers Alliance, initiated the rallying cry "Black Lives Matter" on social media by after the 13 July 2012 acquittal of George Zimmerman on charges of killing an unarmed Black teenager Trayvon Martin. Garza along with her friends Opal Tometi and Patrisse Cullors created "#Black Lives Matter" as a gesture of solidarity among

Black and Queer people. It took off with the enduring protests in a Midwestern town (Ferguson, Missouri) after another unarmed Black teenager Michael Brown was shot to death by white police officer Darrel Wilson in August 2014. In April 2015, *Times Magazine* put “Black Lives Matter.” on the cover of its magazine thus noting the birth of an important social justice movement, which continues to resonate with people of color across the United States. Furthermore, “Black Girls Lives Matter”, too, and a recent report highlights Black cis and trans girls’ criminalization and the school-to-prison pipeline (<http://thefeministwire.com/2015/02/black-girls-matter-an-interview-with-kimberle-crenshaw-and-luke-harris/>). Yet, these movements have also been coopted as noted by Seth Asumah in this issue.

Clearly, matters of racial justice in the criminal “injustice” system have been taken up by prison activists and persistent racist criminalization in an era of draconian drug laws and mass incarceration has been the subject of critical criminology and human rights scholarship. Worldwide, people on the move face further criminalization for having the wrong citizenship—failing to entitle them to conflict-free border crossings. They flee civil war, U.S. and allied drone attacks, economic immiseration, and sectarian violence. The U.S. has already tried to secure its southern border with a massive wall, and Europe’s own securitization apparatus Frontex is working with its own version of humanitarian aid on the one hand and bombing suspected traffickers’ boats on the other (cf. Alexander Lehmann’s cartoon *Liebe Afrikaner/dear Africans*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V1eZ8llgbfs>). Death, diseases, and other tragedies of distant Africans or other poor peoples from the Global South remain a remote concern. Millions marched under the solidarity banner of “Je suis Charlie” to protest the attack on a French newspaper staff, which even brought world leaders to Paris on 11 January 2015. Yet, on the same day of the attacks in Paris, on 7 January 2015, Boko Haram murdered “countless” Nigerians, and news of this atrocity was relegated to the margins in mainstream Northern media. Similarly, the day-long

systematic slaughter of mostly Christian students at Garissa University, Kenya elicited no massive protests in Northern cities in 2 April 2015. Do these silences signify “compassion fatigue” or are cosmopolitan grieving and solidarity expressions focused on white lives? “#Black Lives Matter” enters into collective unconscious as a PanAfrican expression of moral outrage.

Contributors to this special issue engage with the topic of racial epistemologies from a variety of perspectives and disciplines utilizing the methods of discourse analysis and ethnographic studies. Several essays probe silences within academia. This discomfort with critical introspection is understandable, as academic journals and tenure-and-promotion committees look askance at autoethnobiographies and critiques of racist academic policies and practices. Thus, being a “feminist killjoy” (the subject of Sarah Ahmed’s book reviewed in this issue) comes at a personal cost. And yet, paradoxically, there is no dearth of knowledge production on texts about racism, at least in the U.S. context. Academics are quick to make assessments about political topics outlined above. Within the first year of President Obama in office, academic treatises heralding the end of racial politics appeared.

Seth N. Asumah’s contribution on the Obama presidency shows us that the post-racial era was one prophetic hope not to be fulfilled during his eight years in office. Asumah highlights Obama’s reticent approach in dealing with racial injustices. Taking a historical view, Asumah notes that race and immigration topics tend to elicit moral panic responses within all segments of American society. Drawing on critical race theory and feminist analysis of heteropatriarchy and intersectional theory of oppression, he interrogates the Obama administration’s response to social issues and the reemergence of heteropatriarchal hegemony. By contrast, perhaps, Mechthild Nagel’s essay focuses on non-elite actors and collective resistance to state violence. She focuses on shared histories of struggle of U.S. Black activists Angela Y. Davis and Assata Shakur; the latter continues to be a person of interest to the Obama Presidency due to her asylum status in Cuba. The state labeled both as “outlaws” for resisting racist, imperialist state

violence. It remains to be seen whether the state will be successful in recapturing the “outlaw” now that diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba have resumed. The Board of Trustees at the University of California Santa Cruz questioned Davis’s own professorship and status as a radical, Queer woman of color, exemplifying how the academy functions as an extension of the state in policing its unruly subjects.

Two articles in this special issue specifically address how the academy reproduces matrices of oppression. Shana Almeida’s on “Race-based Epistemologies” and Gabriela A. Veronelli’s on “The Coloniality of Language” give us important contestations into western hegemonic knowledge productions. Almeida’s analysis focuses on the complicity of the white racial framing of the academy: scholars and policy analysts invested in furthering the white paradigm instrumentalizing people of color in and outside the academy, by delegitimizing their theorizing as mere experiences and discrediting their knowledge production as being incapable of intertwining theory with a politics of location. Using the insights of critical race theory and feminist standpoint analysis, Almeida charges that white elite scholars continue to legitimate their own colonial knowledge production through studying “the other” and further othering “the other” by silencing them. Veronelli explores this process in her article on colonial monolinguing engendered by the Modernity/Coloniality-Decoloniality collective project. Veronelli discusses the epistemological violence emerging from Europe since the invention of “race” in the 16th century which systematically dehumanized colonized peoples. Part and parcel of the dehumanization is the inability of the subaltern to engage as communicative agents with those “owning” the colonizing language. Decoloniality then means to a) critique the modernity/coloniality epistemic framework and b) go beyond it.

Epistemic violence of a different kind also occurs in the mainstream victimology discourse of women and girls who engage in sex work and those who resist interpersonal violence. Susan Dewey and Rhett Epler as well as Tiantian Zheng’s ethnographic

studies highlight the tremendous resiliencies of women, whether they are facing challenges on the streets as U.S. sex workers or whether they are experiencing intimate partner violence coupled with the state's indifference in China. Both articles give us an exploration of typologies of complex identities. Dewey and Epler draw on Dewey's five-year long project involving interviews with over 100 women of color and white women based in Denver, Colorado. The research focuses on the women's portrayal of men with whom they work or share material resources, which sharply contrasts with popular cultural and some academic representations of exploitation by violent "pimps." Honoring a decolonial framework, Dewey and Epler describe the representation and women's self-representation in their own words, rather than in a detached scholarly fashion that might cast doubt on, say, a self-portrayal as tough and independent. Thus, their work goes against the grain of popular renditions of the racialized term "pimp" and pimp control of women's bodies and resources.

Tiantian Zheng's article is based on her novel research methodology that involved participation in chat rooms organized by Chinese women who have experienced intimate partner violence. Zheng notes the continued relevance of Confucian heteropatriarchal ideology, which, just as U.S. American ideology, draws legitimation from a public-private spheres split. Thus, spousal/partner violence, reported by women, tends to be ignored by the state. Again, drawing on critical race theory, Zheng shows the diverse ways that women strategize and carry out acts of resistance. Contrary to popular racialized stereotypes, Chinese women actively resist oppression and educate others in ways to further empowerment and social justice. Clearly, both articles show that women refuse to be typecast as victims and reveal instead their power as communicative agents.

John Aerni-Flessner's ethnographic study gives us a portrait of a resilient Southern African woman, Maleseka Kena, who recounts her experiences in the struggle against apartheid. Drawing on oral histories and archival sources, he seeks to understand her politics of location, the meaning of border crossings,

citizenship and belonging in a region that resisted the South African apartheid regime. He interviews the elder anti-apartheid activist in her home in a village in Southern Lesotho. Kena relayed that her home in a border community served as a sanctuary for political refugees while her husband participated in underground (and banned) organizations and spent time in jail for his political activities. Aerni-Flessner notes that the traditional role of a homemaker provided some protection from the state's scrutiny of Kena's own subversive anti-state resistance activities.

Malia Womick's essay brings us to gender activism in the era post the U.N.'s Beijing women's conference. Focusing on a specific case study, she notes that a valuable method to alleviate gender inequality may involve rallying for a city ordinance based on human rights norms. However, this strategy is problematic because it relies on essentializing women and ignoring diversity and intersectional approaches. When Article 11.2.c was implemented into San Francisco's city departments, not only did this ordinance fail to address *structural* gender equality issues, it also made invisible race and class identities. The policy of gender mainstreaming thus shows again the cooptation of radical demands. Before adopting the gender equality ordinance, San Francisco city officials had discussions on the International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) but ended up ignoring the importance of addressing racist inequalities in its human rights ordinance. Womick's cautionary tale echoes Shana Almeida's critical intervention regarding the Toronto's own exploration of an urgent matter, namely, addressing its "unwelcoming culture" towards people of color. Yet, like San Francisco, Toronto officials end up squashing any expectations towards addressing equality and equity.

Recent events in Ferguson and Baltimore demonstrate that countries in the Global North can no longer ignore the systemic impact of racial framing of social realities. SUNY Cortland's Center for Gender and Intercultural Studies contributed to this dialogue by hosting a conference on "Race, Resistance and Reason" in October 2012, and several papers presented at that conference

are featured in this special issue. As part of its mission as a social justice journal committed to anti-racist work, this special issue of *Wagadu* explores the global manifestations of structural inequalities and resistance to them at both the individual and community levels.

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