

OPINION



Nana-Ama Danquah

Author and travel writer



MOLINA/THE NEW YORK TIMES SYNDICATE

No room for African apathy towards Trumpismo

I'm not sure what the stages of grief are but on that first night, as the votes were being counted and it appeared the results would favour the election of Donald Trump as United States president, I resorted to alcohol, copious amounts of alcohol. The following day, I woke to news that David Duke, a former grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, had called the win a great victory for "our people". He also tweeted: "Make no mistake about it, our people have played a HUGE role in electing Trump!"

I woke to reports of an alarming number of hate crimes happening throughout the country, even in traditionally liberal areas: swastikas painted in parks and on the walls of university campuses; racial epithets and messages like #whitesonly, #whiteamerica and "Go back to Africa now" painted on student lockers and bathroom doors in middle

and grade schools. In the dorm elevator of one college was a black doll with a noose around its neck. Kindergarten-age kids were being taunted that they'd soon be deported with their families. Klan members dressed in full costume marched through a North Carolina town.

This is not the America I have always known, the America to which I'd immigrated with my parents in 1973. But it is an America that I am aware once existed. I recognise the outbursts of white supremacy, the hate and bigotry, from the grainy black-and-white films that were shown during my elementary-school history classes.

That's how I first watched Martin Luther King Jr. deliver his "I Have a Dream" speech, the audio from the rickety projector cracking and snapping, ●●●

**VAD
VERT
TS
ING**

●●● somehow adding to its gravitas. King seemed ethereal as he spoke of his hopes and desires: “We cannot walk alone. And as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall always march ahead. We cannot turn back.”

I woke understanding that the era of dreams was over. America had decided to turn back.

The day that Donald Trump was officially declared the United States president-elect, 9 November, is the anniversary of Kristallnacht. This did not at all feel coincidental; it rather felt like a message, a harbinger being delivered by history. Kristallnacht, the “Night of Broken Glass”, refers to the pogrom in 1938 when Nazi stormtroopers and German civilians vandalised the homes and business of Jews.

Synagogues were set on fire; schools, cemeteries and hospitals were destroyed. The streets of Germany were lined with shards of glass. Thousands of Jews were killed, expelled or sent off to concentration camps. That pogrom, which marks the descent into the most murderous stage of fascism, was especially traumatic because the perpetrators had once been neighbours, customers, and even friends of their victims.

It’s the sort of betrayal that makes you question everything you thought you knew about your life and the people in it. Which of my friends, you wonder, which of the people with whom I have smiled, shared a coffee or a taxi cab? Which of the people in my life had been keeping these feelings hidden just below the surface? These questions now keep me awake at night.

Many of my friends were surprised to learn how many close relatives of theirs voted for Donald Trump. One told me: “Dad is not a racist, but he just feels the races need to be ‘returned to their rightful places.’”

From the age of six, I grew up in Washington DC, a predominantly black town that was jokingly referred to as ‘Chocolate City’. That was my rightful place. Gentrification has now transformed it into a predominantly white city. The weekend after Trump’s election, a white nationalist group held a convention in DC to celebrate their rise.

Richard Spencer, who coined the term ‘alt-right’, a sanitised moniker for the white nationalist movement, delivered a speech in which he said: “To be white is to be a striver, a crusader, an explorer and a conqueror [...]. We don’t exploit other groups. We don’t gain anything from their presence. They need us and not the other way around [...]. America was until this past generation a white country, designed for ourselves and our posterity. It is our creation. It is our inheritance, and it belongs to us.”

So what does it all mean to African immigrants like me who were brought to America as children? What does it mean to African immigrants who braved perilous waters, crossed borders by foot, suffered the indignity of placing aside their advanced degrees to do menial jobs, played by all the rules and succeeded against all odds? That is

the American dream, is it not? To start with nothing, to work hard and create something awesome; that dream is what attracted people of all nationalities to come and help build one of the greatest and freest nations ever.

So what do we do now that the era of dreams is over? The eyes of the world are watching. Some people are applauding and hoping to replicate the same results in their own country. Far-right populist parties in Europe are gaining strength. The *Front National* in France, the Eurosceptic *Freiheitlichen Partei Österreichs* in Austria, the *Partij voor de Vrijheid* in the Netherlands and *Alternative für Deutschland* in Germany all hope to pull off Donald Trump’s feat. Of course, with its Brexit vote buoyed by a populist and nationalist campaign, the United Kingdom Independence Party already has. And Prime Minister Viktor Orbán of the *Fidesz* party is now consolidating one of Europe’s most xenophobic and Islamophobic regimes.

The rest of us are watching, and we are not willing to surrender our countries so easily. The truth is that the majority of Americans did not vote for Donald Trump. Hillary Clinton received nearly two million more votes than Trump. She is the first candidate to win the popular vote by such a large margin but not win the presidency, which is decided through the electoral college, an outdated system of weighting votes.

When seen from that perspective, things don’t

So many of us born after a certain time have taken our freedoms for granted

look nearly as grim. Even so, the way ahead will still be challenging. We will have to roll up our sleeves and fight for every right we want to keep.

Perhaps this wave of American and European populism, the ugliness and divisiveness that it brings with it, can serve as a lesson for Africans – a reminder. So many of us born after a certain time have taken our freedoms for granted, freedoms for which people sacrificed and died.

We live in a world in which there is no room for apathy. If we do not claim our space – if we do not fight for the policies, ideals and freedoms that matter to us – then nobody else will. We will simply lose them.

Whether on African soil or in the diaspora, we have never lost sight of ourselves as dreamers and believers. Now, more than ever, we need to also make ourselves people of action, and of civic engagement.

“The day will come when history will speak. But it will not be the history which will be taught in Brussels, Paris, Washington or the United Nations. Africa will write its own history and in both north and south it will be a history of glory and dignity.”
– Patrice Lumumba, the assassinated first prime minister of the Democratic Republic of Congo. ●