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Statelessness in the Black Diaspora

Dr. Maya Rockeymoore Cummings

Transcript of 30th April, 2021 Speech at American Graduate School in Paris, Annual Student Conference: *Statelessness in International Relations: Causes, Consequences, and Covid-19* Virtual Event

Introduction:

It's an honor to have our closing speaker, Dr. Maya Rockeymoore Cummings with us. I've known Maya since my graduate student days. She's a very dear friend of mine and an inspiration over all these years. Her PhD dissertation was entitled "The African American political response to HIV and AIDS." She's founder and CEO of Global Policy Solutions, a Washington based consulting firm. She briefly ran for Governor of Maryland. Maya is, as some of you may know already, the widow of Congressman Elijah Cummings who fought his entire life, tooth and nail for issues concerning race and racism. He was a champion of civil rights, and I had the pleasure and honor of knowing him. One of my favorite quotes from Elijah (taken from the bible) is, **"I want justice, oceans of it. I want fairness, rivers of it. That's what I want. That's all I want."** **Maya, as the world and I know her, has dedicated her entire life, work & career to these causes they shared as a couple. Maya will talk about statelessness in the black diaspora!**

Maya Rockeymoore

I am so glad to be here today and to hear all of the great presentations from this morning. I congratulate all of the panelists and the early morning speaker Dr. Marcia Grant. I want to start by saying thank you to Dr. Ruchi Anand from the bottom of my heart. I should mention that we are dear friends from a long way back. She is a very dear friend and I think you are very lucky to have this intellectually brilliant leader in your midst. That being said, who am I? I'm the 4th generation from people held as slaves in the United States of America. My great grandparents were held in bondage as children and were released after the Civil War. My grandparents were the first generation not to be enslaved but they and my parents both lived in what we call the Jim Crow South here in the United States of America. "Jim Crow" was a period of time where the white power structure prevented people who had black skin from freely accessing public accommodations, like restaurants and stores, and forced them into separate and unequal facilities from birth to death. Because of this arrangement, I am the first generation in my family to attend integrated schools at the K-12 level; meaning that I attended school with children of all different racial and ethnic identities, including white kids.

I come to this discussion from a very personal perspective: I am descended from an oppressed people who were forced to leave their original homelands in sub-Saharan Africa to live and toil without pay but for the benefit of others in the United States. For a very long time my ancestors performed slave labor without the security of statehood. Through a series of events, which included a devastating Civil War and changes to the U.S. Constitution, they were able to acquire citizenship status. However, for most of contemporary U.S. history they have not enjoyed the full benefits and protections that citizenship is supposed to afford. On the contrary, they have suffered from systematic state-sponsored racism, violence, disenfranchisement, economic marginalization and segregation by income and race. This has resulted in blacks suffering the worst economic, health, political, and social outcomes of any group of Americans, save for Native Americans who have been similarly dispossessed even though

many belong to separate nation-states that rely on a series of treaties that require cooperation with the U.S. government. It is for this reason that I argue that, despite possessing formal status on paper, African Americans still suffer from a form of quasi-statelessness.

In search of answers and solutions to these injustices, I earned my PhD in Political Science with an emphasis in public policy. However, instead of going into academia I chose to move to Washington DC where I worked on Capitol Hill focusing on issues of public policy as it relates to race, ethnicity and gender. I then went to work in several think tanks always focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion. In one of those think tanks, I was responsible for leading an effort called African Globalism. Now you might say what is African Globalism? It was an initiative that we designed trying to link people of African descent in the diaspora together with people in sub-Saharan Africa for the purpose of sparking an economic, cultural, and political empowerment resurgence. As a result of this initiative, I was able to interact with and travel with people of African descent throughout the American diaspora. I learned a lot about their histories and current circumstances. Many don't realize that Brazil was often the first stop from sub-Saharan Africa on the transatlantic slave trade route. From there, the slavers came straight up the Americas through the Caribbean and then to the United States. So, all along that route, you have people of African descent living in different Latin American countries as well as in the Caribbean and U.S. Although there are nuances and differences, in every single country in which afro descendants live they are experiencing the same kinds of disenfranchising and oppressive dynamics, with most consistently at the bottom of every socioeconomic indicator in every state. And that is not by accident. It is actually, as you mentioned earlier, I think in several conversations, by design. And so, what is it about the nature of the state and the creation of the state and then the appearance that systematically and consistently uses diminution strategies targeting people of black skin? Of course, the transatlantic slave trade was commerce, but it also came with an anti-black ideology that incorrectly and inhumanely maintained that people who were of black skin were not human beings. Indeed, they were considered property to be owned by other human beings. In sum, capitalism and mercantilism drove their abduction and dispersal throughout the world but it is the failed ideology of anti-black racism that justified the buying and selling of human beings in the minds of the colonial powers. It was an amazing multi-centuries-long phenomenon and that continues to have consequences to this day.

I just want to say this - here in the United States of America we just had a transition in leadership going from Donald Trump to Joe Biden. Trump came into office with an agenda to revive white nationalism, another failed race-based ideology that prioritizes the desires, well-being, and socio-political and economic success of white people above—and often to the detriment of—all other groups. White nationalism has always been part and parcel of the experience here in the United States. As many of you probably know, the U.S. was created for and by white people. Although the words in the Declaration of Independence and certainly those in the U.S. Constitution generically talked about “all men” being equal and deserving of the same rights, the founding fathers of the U.S. literally meant all white men. As a result, African Americans, Native Americans, and women were all, by definition, outside of the social contract. Since that time, there have been a series of movements launched by the groups originally excluded, to demand their civil and human rights. For African Americans, it has been a long and hard-fought battle. After the civil war, the Congress passed the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth amendments of the U.S. Constitution known as the reconstruction amendments. The 13th Amendment abolished slavery and servitude of any kind, the 14th said that people who were formally held in bondage or as slaves could be considered citizens of the USA and the 15th amendment declared that voting rights would not be denied to people based on their previous servitude. So collectively,

these reconstruction amendments were intended to bring people of color, black Americans specifically outside of the shadows of being stateless by guaranteeing them certain rights. But these rights never actually came to pass in the way they were intended. Despite what was on paper, a series of political deals between white-controlled political factions, also known as the Democrat and Republican parties, that basically negotiated away the rights of African Americans. So right after slavery, there was this period of reconstruction where African Americans were able to access the right to vote. From that time until the late 1800s there were many African Americans in politics, many in commerce, and others doing various things across life. Blacks sought to be included in every aspect of society, but their efforts were shutdown particularly after the compromise of 1876 and then from 1890 through the early 1960s, there was a period of a retrenchment and that was called the Jim Crow period. This was the period that my parents grew up in.

Let me just share with you what they told me about their experiences. They lived in a completely segregated society. That wasn't so long ago. There are people still living today who had the same experiences. My parent's entire kindergarten through high school years were spent attending legally mandated separate and unequal schools. Instead of receiving new textbooks, they inherited used books that were passed down from the white kids attending school in better facilities across town. My parent's school a one-room schoolhouse and had to learn and with what they had. The white-run school district closed the school for the black kids when it was time to harvest the cotton so the black kids could go out and pick cotton and help earn a pittance of money for their families. A form of racial capitalism drove the local economy, including shutting down schools—essentially denying black children an education in the middle of the school year—so that black kids could serve the economic needs of white farmers. That, along with many other facts of life, was part and parcel of their experience. My parents often shared what it was like to sit in the segregated section of the movie theatre. If they wanted to watch a movie, they were forced to sit in the balcony. And they weren't allowed to use the bathroom or water fountain. This was a big deal for my mother who always had issues with her bladder. Whenever she had to go to the bathroom, she had to run down the stairs, leave the movie theater, run across the street, and go to the basement of the courthouse in order to use the blacks-only bathroom or drink out of the blacks-only water fountain!

My parents could not go into the front-doors of stores. If a store would allow African Americans in, they usually had a backdoor where blacks could enter but they weren't allowed to try on clothes, but they could purchase what they wanted. They also couldn't go into restaurants and certainly they couldn't sit down at lunch counters to eat a meal. That was the experience not just of my parents but my husband as well. My husband was 20 years older than me, so he was born into a Jim Crow Maryland which is considered the start of the Mason-Dixon line. Everything that my parents went through; my late husband also went through. Fast forward, in the mid-twentieth century there was a big fight for civil rights, with blacks seeking to make what was on paper the reality in ever day life. Despite the 15th Amendment, blacks won the right to vote with the Voting Rights Act of 1965, about 100 years after slavery was abolished. This Act really put meat around the bones of citizenship for African Americans by outlawing all forms of discrimination at the polls.

I was born in 1971 and am the first generation born after the civil rights era. So, my experiences have been very different. Because my father served in the US military, my siblings and I lived all around the country and even abroad. We went to school with white, Latino, Asian-American and Native American kids of all backgrounds. This experience gave us kids a taste of what it could be like to live in a truly multicultural democracy. So, we continue to fight for this right here in the United States.

There have been periods where African Americans made substantial gains along with other people of color in this country. Women have also made substantial gains with their revolution as well, but all are again facing a period of retrenchment as a result of the Donald Trump administration and the impact of COVID-19.

And the fear of some white Americans, who are afraid of what a truly multicultural future will look like for them. They worry about the privileges of white identity politics going away because it has benefitted them for so long. Just think about it: they have managed to rig an entire country to subsidize their lives and maintain their privileged status. There is a book, written recently by Isabel Wilkerson called 'Caste'. She doesn't just call the U.S. system racist; she also calls it a 'caste system' based on race and ethnicity where whites are at the top, various ethnic groups in the middle and blacks at the very bottom. Her argument has a lot of merit because we consistently see African Americans not just disenfranchised but also excluded and marginalized on every single indicator you can think of from education to healthcare to economic security and jobs. Sometimes you'll see the same hierarchy of outcomes with African Americans and Native Americans vying for last place at the very bottom of the socioeconomic index.

Interestingly enough, we now have a growing group of newly stateless people in the United States of America. Many of them are migrants or refugees coming in from Latin American countries whose governments have collapsed or whose agrarian systems have collapsed because of climate change and persecution related to gang violence and other things. All are looking for work and a better life. So, these Latin American residents from various countries are showing up at the US border. When they showed up under the Trump administration, many of them children with families, Trump decided that they were going to do all they could to prevent their entry or return. Trump argued that his administration was going to build a wall, shut down the border and not allow people to apply for asylum. Then they started a policy of separating children from their families. They separated these children and babies from their parents or relatives with no plan to reconnect them ever in life, meaning that they had no strategy in place to track and reconnect these children with their families which is a complete human rights violation and a complete travesty. This is where my late husband, Congressman Elijah Cummings, comes in. He was the chairman of the House Oversight and Reform Committee at the time the Trump administration was enforcing this egregious policy and it was Elijah's job to oversee what was happening and to call out and confront the Trump administration on anything that they were doing wrong. They were doing a whole lot wrong. At the time, we thought that the policy was terrible not just from a human rights violation perspective but also—both of us being the 4th generation from slavery—it reminded us of what they did to black people enslaved in the United States.

Back then they ripped families apart to sell babies and children, brothers and sisters, husbands, and wives to the highest bidder. They sent them several states away, breaking their families apart with no plan to ever reconnect them because they never perceived them as being 'human beings who had the capacity to love or grieve. And that is fundamentally that issue here. In order to justify its inhumanity, the psychology of white nationalism has to willfully formulate a huge blind spot that leaves targeted racial and ethnic groups "outside of the circle of human concern." There is no doubt that Donald Trump was a white nationalist. He hired white nationalists in his administration. Many of them were responsible for carrying out Trump's immigration policy. Because they didn't view people at the southern border as human beings, it was nothing for Trump administration officials to separate these

kids from their families even though they would never think such a thing would be acceptable for their own families or even for families who looked like them.

Dehumanizing policies were not just being implemented, but the mindset of dehumanization was also prevalent. So, Elijah fought tooth and nail, and there are videos that you can go online to watch of him confronting trump administration officials and screamed from the top of his lungs to say that the policies were wrong. Now let me tell you something else. You know around the same time, 2018 or so, Elijah and I bought a dog from a breeder because I wanted to have a hypoallergenic companion. So, we travelled to a nearby state to go pick up this dog. When we got there, the breeder gave us a packet of materials that included pictures of my dog and his parents, a complete description of my dog’s ancestral history, medical records complete with the date of all of his shots, and a short list of his possible disease vulnerabilities. It struck us that in the United States of America, we were treating dogs better than we were treating those kids at the US southern border and that was simply shameful.

So, in the United States of America we have two forms of statelessness. The first is comprised of those who are absolutely without any form of protection because they live in a country where they do not have citizenship or a pathway to citizenship. In the midst of a global pandemic, these people also don't have access to healthcare or any other amenities that would actually protect them. Theirs is a complete form of statelessness. The second is comprised of those groups of people—including African Americans and other people of color—who have the benefits of citizenship on paper, but their rights and humanity continue to be contested and threatened at every turn. Theirs is a form of quasi-statelessness.

Even though African Americans, other people of color and white people of goodwill managed to come together in the 2020 election to vote Donald Trump and the Republican Party in Congress out of power, we are now seeing a political backlash led by that same Republican party. They are replicating a playbook from the turn of the 20th century by passing state laws to restrict voting rights in such a way that it would have a disproportionately profound and negative impact on low-income groups and people of color, especially African Americans. Republicans have introduced more than 300 laws and policies in statehouses around the country to make it harder to vote. They don’t want to see what happened in 2020 happen again (meaning that people of color coming out in large numbers to vote and to vote against them). Their anti-democratic actions are focused on one thing: diluting or nullifying the power of minority voters.

Under Trump’s leadership, Republicans also tried to rig the U.S. Census count to amplify the power of white Republicans while diluting the power of people who are black, brown and Democrats. My late husband Elijah led another investigation about this matter. It turned out that Republicans knew that if they could diminish the power of black and brown communities with a bad count, they could diminish the power of the democratic party and enhance and amplify the power of white conservatives so that they could hold onto power. Because their positions are not popular, they don’t have the issues that are salient with the majority of the public, they have figured it out that cheating is the only way that they can maintain power.

The U.S. is also currently experiencing an ongoing human rights crisis happening on every street corner and every roadside across America. The world saw George Floyd killed by a rogue policeman in Minneapolis, MN. But Floyd was just one of many, primarily African American primarily men around the country, who have been summarily killed on street corners and roadsides by police.

George Floyd was not an anomaly, but the trial of his murderer was. Derek Chauvin, the police officer that killed George Floyd, was actually prosecuted—something that almost never happens in these cases—and convicted—a phenomenon so rare that similar situations can be counted on two hands. The reason why Derek Chauvin received the justice he was due under the U.S. criminal justice system is that the world was paying attention after the bystander video, and protests in the aftermath, of Floyd’s killing went global. Under typical circumstances, the police officer would have been protected by his union, then police department insiders would have colluded with the district attorney’s office who would then perhaps join together with medical examiner’s office to form a local protection racket. They would falsely claim to the public that they were conducting a thorough investigation and fair trial while they privately closed ranks to protect the system as is, including preserving the job of the police officer(s) who committed the crime. Although African Americans usually do not receive justice in cases like George Floyd, there is still a movement to point out the hypocrisy of the system in the hopes that one day fairness and justice will prevail.

So, where does the U.S go from here...? We are currently at a critical moment that I call the ‘zero moment’ This is the point at which we can either sink from the weight of our divisions as a nation or we can swim and work together to find a way forward towards that multicultural society that I discussed earlier. I believe that it is possible. I am heartened by the fact that the majority of Americans voters decided to oust Donald Trump. But it frightens me to see how close that election was. You had 74 million Americans backing a failed Presidency, a failed person, who was completely unfit for the job and who basically out about his intentions of reigning in the power, trying to reinforce the power of white Americans and who failed at handling the coronavirus. Donald Trump’s leadership style tended to be autocratic. He was not interested in the science. Except for criminal justice reform, which his son-in-law persuaded him to take on (to Trump’s reported regret), he was not interested in pursuing an equity agenda. Now we have President Joe Biden. We will see whether his Administration recognizes the power of a truly diverse democracy and uses its leverage to move our nation forward.

The fight for human rights continues. Those Latino American people who are here in the United States, living in the shadows are still mistreated and marginalized. It’s important to say that one of the first policies Joe Biden pushed was wholesale immigration reform here in the US. He’s also been seeking to address the issue at the southern border, and we’ll see where that goes. Those who are currently stateless here in the United States will need status to gain their rights. I believe it will happen. As far as the rest of us are concerned, we have to continue to fight for our rights, fight for humanity, demand equal treatment and equal justice under the law and that means that as African Americans and others, we can’t see ourselves as ‘singular’! I don’t know if you saw but Asian Americans have recently seen an increase in hate crimes across the country because of the anti-Asian language Donald Trump used to describe the coronavirus and link it to China. So far, their struggle has been seen as an Asian American experience to be fought by Asian Americans. But this is discrimination and it’s an experience shared by Muslims, by LGBTQ people, by Latinos, and yes by African American and Native Americans. We have to join together with white people of goodwill to launch what I call an “inclusion revolution” where we all decide that we’re not going to go backwards but instead march forward, together and hand in hand...toward an inclusive future. This will require resisting divide and conquer politics. It will require defeating all kinds of regressionist policies and politicians. The ultimate prize will be a future where all of our children no matter what color they are, no matter what their sexuality, no matter what their religion might be are included, are respected based on the common value of our common humanity. That is the future that I think is still ahead of us. It can be achieved but it has to be fought for.

Thank you.