

Beyond Trump's Wall: Reflections from an African Migrant in a U.S.A Prison

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Abstract

Since 2017, a rising number of Cameroonians fleeing political persecution have come to the US via its border with Mexico. This paper takes an autoethnographic approach to reflect on questions of anti-Blackness and the US border regime through the personal experience of a Cameroonian man. The first part contextualizes conditions that have fueled the forced migration of Cameroonians in recent years. This is followed by an introspective account of how the US immigration system disproportionately targets African and Black immigrants for detention and deportation. Concluding remarks point to a politics of resistance that emerges out of the shared bonds of oppression and solidarity forged among African immigrants, particularly Cameroonians.

Keywords: Cameroon, Cameroonian, forced migration, anti-blackness, African immigrants, Black immigrants, US Immigration System, immigration detention, deportation

Introduction

It is often said that the taste of the pudding is in the eating. I am a refugee from Cameroon, now incarcerated in an immigrant prison in the United States of America. I make up part of the 25% of the world's prison population incarcerated in American prisons (WPR 2021). Like most migrants from the African continent crossing into the US from Mexico, I had surrendered myself to the custom and border patrol agents to request asylum, which I knew to be the right thing to do as required by law. While I was allowed entry, they immediately handcuffed me and threw me

into an overcrowded, freezing, windowless holding cell. I had come to the United States in fear for my life, and somehow was turned into a criminal to be feared.

I am doing time, but I do not know for what crime or for how much time. I have been in here for more than two years and counting. When I say “in here” I really mean “in custody” because I have not actually been staying in the same place. I have been shuffled between five Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) facilities, from Texas to Alabama, and every transfer has had me traveling in shackles and chains. I cannot help but recall the days of slavery, especially since I am in the deep south, which not only has the highest concentration of immigrant prisons but also of the detained African and Black migrant population. Louisiana has twelve ICE facilities, which in October 2019 held 8,000 detained migrants out of a total of 51,000 nationally (Merchant 2019). These facilities, many of which have been only recently converted from old state prisons and local jails, are located in far flung areas, making accessibility difficult to lawyers, and other forms of support. Also reminiscent of slavery is how the US immigration detention system has been designed and operated, in the service of profit, by which migrant bodies are viewed as exchangeable commodities. Just as the slave masters made huge sums of money from the buying and the selling of slaves, the owners of immigrant prisons are making huge profits extracted from our bodies (Sheets 2018; DWN 2021), the bed space we occupy, the phone calls we make, and the overpriced commissary items we buy, like soap and rice (just so that we don’t starve).

But I have gotten ahead of myself. Allow me to express my appreciation for the opportunity to contribute to this special themed issue of *Ìrìnkèrindò: A Journal of African Migration*. I heard about the Call for Papers from Anne-Marie, my friend and co-author, who told me about the interest in hearing from voices beyond academia, particularly from people who can speak directly

to the African and Black migrant experience at the US-Mexico border. I thought it wise to make hay while the sun shines. If seeing is believing then I, Giscard Nkenglefac, am well positioned to present facts based on first-hand experience, and in turn provide my personal reflections on deeply problematic and pressing issues that have been long-lasting, kept secret and neglected. As an attempt to connect the personal to larger historical-geographical realities, the article can be said to contribute an autoethnographic approach (Spry 2001; Ellis and Bochner 2003; Denzin 2013). While the paper is based on my personal experience, it is nevertheless very much the product of a close collaboration between Anne-Marie and me. This is important to clarify given the use of singular first-person pronouns throughout the text. By situating myself and my experience as a Cameroonian refugee seeking asylum in the United States in relation to fellow migrants and within larger socio-historical and spatial relations, I hope to illuminate the various ways in which the US border regime (Walia 2021) operates through the criminalization, incarceration, and dehumanization of Black African migrants.

This is indeed a much-needed conversation, and hopefully it will help to both develop understanding and strengthen movements in solidarity with people in this situation. It is of particular importance to understand that the people in power who are subjecting African and Black migrants to miserable conditions are the same who created the problems that forced them to migrate in the first place. So long as the Western imperial rulers do not take responsibility for righting their wrongs of the past and present, the African migrants you see today at the US-Mexico border, you will see again. With that in mind I want to start by asking: What do you know about African migration to the United States? And in what ways, are you prepared to use your knowledge not only to understand the world, but also to change it?

Let us go back to the beginning. While it is well known that the so-called colonial masters

came to Africa and looted our ancestors, do you know that the first Africans to voluntarily migrate to the Americas and Europe did so in search of their loved ones and their missing family members? Some were fortunate to find their lost loved ones, most were not. Though I cannot prove the accuracy of this information, as I am merely recalling stories told by my grandmother, it can hardly be disputed that from that point on the destabilization of African societies by the West was set in motion. Of particular importance to note, however, is that while the recent family separation crisis arising out of draconian immigration policies rightfully triggered a loud public outcry (*The Guardian* 2018), with some proclaiming that this is not the America they know and love, it should be remembered that separating families has been foundational to the creation and development of the United States.

Do you know that before colonization there was significant peace in Africa? When the colonizers came into the picture their divide and rule tactics gave way to seemingly endless and brutal civil wars and so-called tribal conflicts. They came as missionaries with a left-handed gift, and with the right hand they held a gun at our backs. They presented us with the Bible and a foreign religion, which they themselves did not practice as intended (Davidson, 1984). As if that was not enough, do you know they began, and why they continue, shipping weapons and guns to the African continent, that ever since, have sowed deepening and increasing instability and violence? And now they pretend to be mediators, trying to solve the problems they created, but deep down, they know they are making profit from the instability they have caused. A human being cannot kill another by looting him, but with a gun, anything is possible. This has come to make me wonder how goods like guns have freedom of movement, while human beings do not, even while these goods come to be turned against them. Yet again, the system is working as intended.

And do you know that the African continent is so rich with natural wealth that most countries of the Western world depend entirely on these products from African countries, ranging from petroleum, rubber, iron, gold, diamonds, cobalt, timber, cocoa, palm oil, coffee, and many more? Or that the Western world uses these products to manufacture most of its exported goods? The irony is that after extracting more and more wealth from African countries for almost nothing, they then turn to sell us their finished products at an exponentially higher price. You surely know about Congo-Kinshasa (Democratic Republic of Congo). It is said that this country is the wealthiest in the world in natural resources, with untapped mineral deposits valued at US\$24 trillion according to some estimates (DFID 2020). And yet it is also one of the poorest countries in the world – the top ten of which all hail from the African continent. Remember these facts the next time you hear about Africans migrating to the West in search of economic opportunities.

But it is not just the looting of African wealth and impoverishment of the people that is the problem. As if that were not enough, the entire corrupt political edifice that was set up by the colonial masters, and its beneficiaries, along with the mining companies and white settlers, have been, and continue to aid and abet brutal dictators willing to do the West's bidding. Do you know that on the eve of Congo's struggle for independence, Patrice Lumumba called on people to stand up against the Belgians and their schemes to undermine democratization and decolonization? Or that Lumumba was assassinated in a U.S.A. sponsored plot (Nzongola-Ntalaja 2014)? Remember that the next time you hear Western leaders fuel stereotypes about the so-called Dark Continent and smugly declare that all that is needed in Africa is transparent and democratic governance (EP 2020), while they very well know what produced the "Wretched of the Earth" (Fanon [1961] 2007).

And while Africa is typically presented as if it was one country, and not a continent of 55 countries with tremendous geographic, political, economic, social, and cultural diversity, do you know that Africans suffer political persecution because of their diversity in political ideas, socio-cultural identities, religious beliefs, and sexual orientations? This threatens their lives and for these reasons, some had to leave everything and adhere to Matthew 10:23: “when they persecute you in one place you flee to another.” Remember that the next time you come across another headline about Africans fleeing poverty. Our realities are more complex than you know.

Let us look at Eritrea and the Eritreans who have come to the United States for protection. Do you know where Eritrea is? And what is going on there? With a strong and powerful dictatorial president, the country has just one political party, the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ). Do you know that there have been no elections there since the country’s independence from Ethiopia in 1993? (Zere 2017) Or that the Eritrean government has surveillance in place at the border where armed forces are instructed to shoot to kill any one of its citizens trying to flee by crossing into Ethiopia and Sudan? (DOS 2017) Do you know that an unknown number of persons keep disappearing? Disappeared persons include those detained for political reasons, religious beliefs, journalists, individuals suspected of evading national service and militia duties (HRCE 2020). I have met and talked to more than twenty Eritreans in detention. They explained to me that in Eritrea, military service is mandatory for all students, irrespective of age and gender, after completing their 12th grade. They told me that some students try to evade it by intentionally failing their courses, but the dictatorial regime has caught on and implemented new rules – you are automatically conscripted into the military if you fail a course twice (HRW 2019). While these practices are not news to the West, they choose to turn a blind eye and keep up with their lucrative arms deals.

This brings me to my home country Cameroon. Do you know what's going on there? There are two major conflicts that have been unravelling for several years now. One of them involves US led counterterrorism operations against Boko Haram, mainly in the northern part of the country. In fact, the US has a military base in Garoua next to the Cameroonian Air Force base (Trafford and Turse 2017). The so-called war on terror has fed directly into the other major conflict known as the “Anglophone crisis,” such that civilians opposing government oppression are labelled as terrorists. This is happening in what was known as “Southern Cameroons,” made up of territory that was colonized by the British.

In fact, there never would have been an “Anglophone crisis” in Cameroon had the British granted full independence to its former colony (Anyangwe 2018). Indeed, Britain has an extensive legacy of putting in place conditions for lasting political strife and turmoil as a departing gift – think of Palestine, India, Pakistan, and Hong Kong to name but a few other examples. In the case of Cameroon, Britain handed its territory over to France. Before any of this, Germany colonized the territory making up what is now Cameroon in 1884, ruling over this foreign land until 1916. After Germany's defeat in World War I, the League of Nations (and later the United Nations) entrusted four-fifths of the country to France, and the rest to Britain, as mandate territories, to be governed for the purpose of preparing the territory for self-government, while promoting the political, economic, social, and educational development of the population (Deltombe 2016). In reality, Britain and France found ways to circumvent the terms of the agreements and pursue their own agendas, specifically to suppress the rising tide of anti-colonial movements across their respective colonies. France revealed the extent to which it had absolutely no regard for the value of African lives, as it undertook a brutal counterinsurgency military campaign to stop Cameroon from affirming its sovereign rights, causing tremendous human suffering and destruction, with up

to 400,000 people killed according to some estimates (Owono 2012; Deltombe 2016).

Once France conceded under international pressure that it could no longer hold on to its colonies, they devised schemes that allowed them to groom and handpick future “leaders” of an “independent” Cameroon, ensuring that ultimately nothing would change. Despite the depth of France’s morally and politically corrupt and depraved actions to preserve its control and authority over Cameroon, the UN accepted the French plan of “independence as colonization” in March 1959 (Deltombe 2016), and so too did Washington and London.

The French-controlled transition to “independence” paved the way for the unification of Cameroon, and the eventual loss of autonomy for English-speaking Cameroonians of the former British territories. To date, Anglophone populations of the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon are treated as second-class citizens, and have suffered from, and resisted decades-long social, political, economic, and cultural marginalization. Their struggles intensified since the French-backed dictatorship of close-to forty years decided to activate an aggressive assimilation project (Mougoué 2017; Ngong 2020).

The trigger that set off the fuse can be traced to the unmitigated state-sanctioned violence used to crush peaceful protests led by Anglophone lawyers and teachers in 2016. France and other Western powers have not only turned a blind eye to the atrocities committed, but they have also reaffirmed their friendly relations and allegiances with the Cameroonian dictatorship (Terretta and Chétima 2018). In the meantime, over 4,000 people have been killed, hundreds of villages have been burned to the ground, and nearly a million people have been displaced, as families seek refuge in the surrounding forest, and flee to neighboring countries and the rest of the world (Craig 2021; OCHA 2021). Faced with a situation of such violent conflict with the government of your country, what else can one do other than to flee?

The role played by the United States in enabling France to maintain and gain power and control over an “independent” Cameroon is still very much seen today. Despite the extensively documented human rights abuse and violations committed by the Cameroonian dictatorship, the US has consistently and increasingly worked closely with, and even substantially strengthened the Cameroonian military over the last decade. It has provided hundreds of millions of dollars in military aid to Cameroon, and sent hundreds of US military personnel, assisted in training the Cameroonian military, and most especially sold weapons to Cameroon (Turse 2018). In 2015, the US supplied the Cameroonian military with six ScanEagle surveillance drones, worth over \$9.3 million dollars (Trafford and Turse 2017). Such are the “strategic interests” of the US in supporting Cameroonian and other foreign military forces, including those known for committing forced disappearances, extra-judicial killings, torture, and imprisonment, just so US foreign policy objectives would be achieved.

I hope to have provoked some reflection and shed light on some of the circumstances under which Africans of different countries are forced to migrate and flee for their lives. The Western world to which they run for protection and safety has been complicit in causing and perpetuating the harm and danger that people are running away from. However, instead of being granted safe passage and refuge, they are treated like “marauding” hordes (Perraudin 2015), invaders, and criminals. Before even reaching the borders of Western countries, African migrants pass through immeasurable trials and tremendous suffering on their way. Those who take the road to Europe are faced with life and death situations on the high seas. Many of them never arrive at their final destinations. Many do not ever complete their trip. Not too long ago some African migrants crossing the Mediterranean enroute to Europe called for rescue teams from Italy and Spain, but no one came and they finally all died – over 200 people – as their boat gradually sank (NYT 2016).

Even Before getting on board, African migrants face difficult-to-impossible situations as some get kidnapped and enslaved in Libya and Morocco. Despite all the grueling hardship, sometimes they still don't get to their final destinations. Sometimes after failing to reach European shores, some migrants change course, heading to other destinations. One Cameroonian I met in detention had tried getting to Europe but became so exasperated that he decided to try his luck by coming to the United States instead. He had been enslaved in Libya and forced to work odd jobs to earn enough money to pay for his freedom. After giving up on Europe, he chose the US, a trip that is no less perilous. Migrants hover between life and death as they trek across ten or more countries by air, bus, boat, and foot, while confronting all manner of danger (Drost 2020), including the ever-present threat of being captured and detained by immigration and border authorities, all acting in service of their national security, and probably also obeying orders from the US, to prevent migrants from successfully entering its territory.

Surviving the Panama-Colombia jungle, or the Darien Gap, is certainly one of the greatest ordeals that migrants must endure. We climb up mountains into valleys, often navigating through uneven and slippery terrain, we brace turbulent waters in unseaworthy inflatable boats, we sleep in mud, we are hungry and thirsty, and resort to drinking rainwater. We see bodies of our Black brothers on the way, who likely drowned in the river or were murdered, without forgetting the diverse population of wild animals, such as poisonous snakes and insects, that have also contributed to the demise of some. We also face down drug dealers and armed robbers that control these parts who steal from migrants, rape girls and women, and even kill those who resist them. Many of us have lost our belongings, including official documents due to such confrontations. This ends up being weaponized. The loss of stolen or lost documents is often used against us, as US immigration officers accuse us of not telling the truth and of hiding our IDs and passports. So

it goes that after one might have finally made it to the US border, and sees light at the end of the tunnel, one soon realizes that the nightmare has only just begun.

On May 9, 2018, I finally reached the US border station in Laredo, Texas. I felt tremendous relief. I needed to be absolutely sure that I was in the United States. After the officer confirmed my location, I declared, “I need protection. My life is in danger”. At that moment, I believed that the seemingly endless traumatic ordeal that defined my life over the last two years or so was finally coming to an end (Washington 2020a). My relief proved to be extremely short-lived. Never had I imagined that asking for asylum in the United States would land me in prison. I did what the law required. I had not tried to smuggle myself into the country. I thought that this country was based on the rule of law, which is what persuaded me to seek asylum in the US in the first place. I even read in the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Detainee Handbook on page 5:

[Y]ou have the right to ask for asylum to stay in the U.S. if you were (or are afraid that you will be) persecuted in your native country or a country where you last lived because of your race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group” (ICE 2017).

But now we migrants seeking refuge from well-founded fear of persecution have suddenly become criminals in trying to save our lives. What I have come to realize is that regardless of the letter of the law, it can be manipulated and abused at will. A president with a rabid determination to pursue a xenophobic racist agenda does not help matters. It is ironic that the world and I have long looked up to the United States as the defender of liberty and human rights. Most people who cross US borders as refugees know now that is not true. The moment you present yourself at the immigration border in the US, a preliminary screening interview is

conducted to assess the credibility of your fear of persecution in your country. If you pass, you are hopeful until you realize how much the odds are stacked against you, particularly if you're African.

Drawing on my personal experience and that of others, including evidence gathered in the law library, I have concluded that the US immigration system repeatedly demonstrates a strong bias against Africans. How else can I explain the fact that African asylum seekers with solid cases are systematically denied asylum? The immigration authorities ask questions that regardless of how good your answers, they are never acceptable. So it goes, that African migrants have been deported, even when making credible claims during the initial screening process. I can provide names of those I met in detention who have been deported to various African countries, and died there, let alone those who upon repatriation, have been arrested and locked up by the very governments they told US immigration were after their lives.

Curiously, there is another side to this that makes it seem that the US is determined to keep us here, that is: as long as we are locked up. They go to great lengths to ensure that. Before I elaborate, let me ask you: If I swing my hand in a colony of flies and happen to catch one, is the fly dead or alive? If you answer that the fly is dead, I will open my palm and it will fly away. But if you answer that the fly is alive, I will then squeeze my hand so that the fly dies. Either way, you lose. This is exactly how ICE has been manipulating migrants from the African continent. On the one hand, when you lose your case and are issued a final order of removal, U.S. law says if you cooperate with ICE to obtain your travel documents and they don't deport you after three months, they will release you. Then the requisite period was changed to six months, and subsequently to nine months. Even after nine months, I know African migrants who are still here with me. They have neither been deported nor are they released. In other cases, if

you do not cooperate with ICE and insist that your life is in danger and keep fighting your case, they will capitalize on your refusal to sign your deportation papers and hold you in custody. Either way, as I said, you lose. If you sign, you are in trouble, and if you do not, you are still in trouble.

I cannot stress enough how much the US immigration system is stacked against Africans. If you are not yet convinced, let me tell you about the overtly racist discrimination that African migrants face through the bond system. All the African migrants I have met followed the law by entering the US through an official port of entry, they do not smuggle themselves across the border. And yet I have observed that those who scaled the walls or crossed the river are given bond hearings after being caught trying to escape the authorities. In contrast, we from the African continent are either denied access to a bond hearing in a blanket manner, or when we are “lucky,” we must pay very exorbitant bonds – as much as \$50,000 and more (Washington 2019). This is really just another way of denying us bond, since the authorities very well know that we do not have access to that kind of money. How many people do, really?

Over time, I have counted around two thousand migrants from Central America and Asia (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, China) that I became aware of who were released on parole or bond, ranging from a minimum of \$1,000 to a maximum of \$25,000. I distinctly remember that at the Pine Prairie Ice Processing Center, a detention center in Louisiana, there were 250 Central Americans and Asians who had come and nearly all of them were bonded out. Even though the system tells us that we qualify for parole, I have yet to see an African get released on parole in the more than two years that I have now been in custody. As a matter of fact, the Southern Poverty Law Center has fought alongside us on the issue of parole here in Louisiana, filing a lawsuit in 2019 against ICE’s consistent failure to uphold the Department of Homeland Security (DHS)

Parole Directive of 2009, which states that parole must be granted to arriving aliens having a credible fear of persecution or torture (SPLC 2020). Evidently that law does not apply here in Louisiana. In other words, ICE is flouting the law! Despite winning a lawsuit, no one that I know of from Africa has yet to be released on parole, even after multiple parole applications, mine included. So far, with the help of my lawyer and support letters from my sponsor, friends, and community, I have applied three times for parole – and nothing!

Even amid the coronavirus outbreak and the humanitarian parole that has been offered as preventive response, no African migrant from my present facility has been released. In fact, ICE is currently gambling with our lives, as several African migrants have tested positive. Evidence has repeatedly shown that ICE is unable to handle even common illnesses and contagious diseases, which have been documented to spread aggressively in its detention facilities, and the risks are exponentially higher with Covid-19. While scientists and health experts have proven that social distancing and wearing masks could help stop the spread of the coronavirus, it is practically impossible for those of us in ICE custody to protect ourselves. Presently, as I write here in LaSalle Correctional Center, we do not see social distancing but rather social piling, as we are currently over 90 “inmates” piled up in one dorm. This is one more instance of how we are punished simply for having the audacity to seek safety. No one cares about us or our wellbeing. It is unbelievable, especially at a moment like this.

This is supposedly a country based on the rule of law and respect for human rights, which does not hesitate, when convenient, to accuse other nations of human rights abuses and keeping concentration camps. Why do you look at the speck in your brother’s eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? Hypocrite, first remove the plank in your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s. This hypocrisy was once again on full

display when Trump sanctioned China over the repression of Uighurs held in Chinese concentration camps (Zengerle 2020). Who could have guessed that the president who imposed a Muslim ban as soon as he took office would now come to the defense of a minority Muslim population? The farce must go on...

African asylum seekers in the United States are really in deep trouble. This was made painfully obvious during the court hearing when I presented my asylum case before the immigration judge. Although the judge was supposed to serve as the referee between the ICE prosecutor and myself, she actually took central stage, and did most of the questioning. She asked me more than two hundred questions, trying to make me fail. All her attempts to make me fail did not work, so she had to lie. In her decision, she made false statements and claimed I said things that I did not say. She also capitalized on the fact that my support documents were submitted late. I filed my documents three days past the filing deadline, which was still four days before my hearing. And then she rescheduled the hearing to three weeks later, in order to accommodate a DHS request for an extension. They wanted to send my SCNC¹ membership card for forensic examination. In other words, there was ample time for the judge to accept my documents after I submitted them for review. Apart from the obvious double standards applied, what was perhaps most troubling and frustrating was how the judge so offhandedly dismissed and ignored the inherent difficulty of securing critical supporting evidence while being locked up. Her actions revealed to me the callous rigidity of the US asylum process that appears utterly incapable or unwilling to see migrants as human beings, whose survival depend on them escaping horrific situations, which in turn make it practically impossible to gather evidence from behind bars. At the time when I was preparing for my hearing, the civil strife in Cameroon had reached a crescendo. I was struggling to reach my family to ask them to get documents I needed because

they were on the run and hiding in the forest. This was another moment when I saw how African asylum seekers were being set up to fail, with arbitrary court deadlines being used as a cover.

The way I see it is that while the immigration authorities hold AK 47s, we do not even have sticks to fight the system but are grasping at straws. How can we win in such circumstances? Africa is faraway. To even get someone in crisis with the ability and courage to scramble to gather and send documents and evidence needed is daunting, and if you are so “fortunate,” the mail comes too late. I am locked up, basically in chains with no money or resources. I am completely limited by the system that nevertheless still wants me to operate like someone who is free. The truth of course is that the system is in fact working as intended.

After losing your case in immigration court, the next stage in the life of a migrant in detention is typically more time in detention, especially if you are African. Regardless of whether you choose to appeal your case or accept your deportation, chances are that you will stay trapped for a long while. As I explained above, getting out on parole or bond is unlikely, and again especially if you are African. There is however the possibility of being released through what the DHS (Department of Homeland Security) calls a custody review. They claim to check and review our documents to evaluate whether we are eligible for release or not. The custody review is always carried out without our presence and normally followed by a notification that says: “We have conducted a custody review and decided that we will keep you in custody.” For the past two years that I have been in detention, I have probably seen over one thousand custody reviews all carrying the same copy and paste result. Tellingly I have observed that while African migrants might have had four or five custody reviews and still not be released, others have typically been released the first or second time.

Another way in which the US immigration system works against African migrants is at

the level of the federal courts of appeal (or Circuit Courts). Majority of migrants in detention I know of who fight their cases right up to the level of the Circuit Courts are African. Migrants from Central America who decide to level an appeal on their case at the BIA (Board of Immigration Appeals), after they have been denied in immigration court, usually do not go on further. Some say that they prefer to go back to their country for they can come back and try again anytime they wish. Migrants from Asia come and get bonded out, as I mentioned above. In fact, I can say without fear that majority of migrants in the US that got bonded out are from the Asian continent, so they hardly do detention. But for African migrants the situation is starkly different. They are not only subjected to indefinite detention, but they can also be deported at ICE's discretion, even those with cases pending in Circuit Courts, and sometimes even at the level of the BIA. I have seen or heard of many such instances, including fellow Cameroonians who were set to be put on flights from New York to Cameroon, despite having cases on appeal, only to be brought back into custody due to coronavirus border closures. The same has happened to asylum seekers I know from Guinea, and Ghana, except they did end up getting deported.

So, what of life in detention? African migrants face still more trouble. For one thing, we must bear the guards' ("correctional officers" as they are officially called) constant roll-out of racist verbal assaults. On many occasions I have been called "black monkey." Having reached my limit one day, I stood up to one female officer's racist abuse and insults, only to be consequently threatened by other officers who automatically accused me of being at fault. And while everyone incessantly complains about the food as being either insufficient, rotten, expired, or tasteless, or all of the above (see Figure 1), it is to the Africans that the officers turn to strike back, they insist that we should be grateful for what they are feeding us, as it is more than what we could get in our "shithole" countries.



Figure 1. Food tray at Etowah County Detention Center in Gadsden, AL.

Perhaps the biggest nightmare African migrants suffer in detention must be in the health department. Here there is no question that ICE keeps gambling with our lives. For example, it frequently happens that when a nurse takes your blood pressure, and finds it to be too high, she will take it again and again until she gets an acceptable reading – she might do this up to eight times, so as not to confirm that they are incapable of handling our health problems. The same goes for when they conduct temperature checks. If you have a high temperature, they continue to gamble with your life until a good temperature reading is obtained, asking you to remove your sweatshirt and even all your clothes if necessary. And for all those who take medicine (usually Ibuprofen) and complain that it is not helping them, they are told to buy medicine from the commissary. Finally, when your condition gets worse and you need to be transported to a hospital out of the facility, irrespective of your condition, you are handcuffed traveling to the hospital. As if that is not enough, once at the hospital, you are chained to the bed. I wonder sometimes about the professionalism of doctors, here in the US, who find it normal to treat patients who are in chains.

Conclusion

One of the advantages of being locked up in immigrant prison for such a long time is that I have come to know the multiple ways through which anti-Black racism is reproduced and enacted in the US immigration system through the racially disparate and targeted treatment of African asylum seekers (Ndugga-Kabuye et al. 2018). To be clear, the cruelty and inhumanity of the US detention and deportation machine (approach) affect all who become entangled in it, but it's always worse for African and Black migrants. I have experienced and seen it repeatedly.

In the first place, to America, I am Black and apparently, asking for asylum as a Black person is anathema. What occurs to me is that I never actually knew racism until I got to the U.S. Compounding this, of course, is how the logic of white supremacy central to the European colonization of Africa persists in the present through the consolidation and extension of imperialist and capitalist forces and relations. It is for this reason that it was important at the outset to reflect on the global dynamics that fuel African displacements and migrations, particularly to highlight two key points. First, the conditions that are causing Africans to flee their homelands are not of their making but a result of Western influence and interventions. Decolonization in Africa has not only been superficial, but it also created opportunities for the West to embrace African allies, whose insatiable desire to mimic the colonizers make them ideal accomplices in subordinating the needs of the masses to the god of profit. The words spoken by Ghana's first president, Kwame Nkrumah, in 1965, are still relevant today: "the soil continue[s] to enrich, not Africans predominantly, but groups and individuals who operate to Africa's impoverishment" (quoted in Olukoshi et al. 2020). Second, there is a cycle of violence that too often remains hidden in discussions about African migration, which has to do with how Africans who migrate to the West end up confronting the same crushing forces they were up against in their home countries. We are

running for our lives from lethal state apparatus, created and bolstered by generous Western (mainly US) funding and expertise that ultimately benefit a multibillion-dollar military industry. If or when we finally reach the US/Mexico border, we find ourselves in the hands of the US carceral state, which seemingly takes pleasure in gambling with our lives, designed as it is to extract revenue and profit from the devaluation and commodification of black bodies (Martin 2020). The struggles that we thus face at home and abroad, and specifically in the United States, are linked by the way each state operates as a site of violence within the capitalist-colonial system. To take a cue from the tragic police murder of George Floyd, African and Black people have been for too long moving everywhere in chains with the knees of white supremacists on their necks.

What I have come to know is that no matter how hard the system tries, African migrants refuse to be broken down. Our resistance and resilience are another testament to the genuine fear that we have about going back to our home countries. We find power and strength in living our truth, in knowing what we know to be right, and in the solidarity and shared possibilities we develop with migrants we meet from all over the world. At the same time, there is nevertheless a unique bond between African and Black migrants. This bond is deeper still among fellow Cameroonians with whom we share intimate knowledge, memories, and experiences, not just of our common struggles against the same oppressive regime or from the treacherous journey we all survived, but especially of our ways of being and living that we left behind, and the sense of home that we find from being together.

One moment that stands out for me is when I was transferred to Etowah County Jail in Gadsden, Alabama, and met three Cameroonian brothers who rescued me during a particularly difficult period. As I had nothing to boast of as far as commissary money was concerned, they collectively made sure I had something to eat because it was impossible to cope with the meager

quantities of food that was fed to us. One day they welcomed me with fufu, which I had not eaten since leaving home. I was shocked and thrilled and wondered how on earth they made it. We discussed politics and shared stories of protests back home. The best part though, was the music we made together. We created beats and sang popular songs from Cameroon and across the African continent, covering a range of styles, from Afrobeats to Zouk, to Soul Makossa. It was never long before we started dancing, as we tried to upstage one another, showing off our best moves. Our fun and laughter were infectious, and others started to join us, and eagerly anticipated our next music session. There was one officer that was so confused and irritated with the level of joy in us, that he eventually stopped people from convening in our cell. His reaction and actions crystallized for me what is meant by Black joy as resistance (McKittrick 2015), an idea I encountered recently from reading about the uprisings unfolding across the country. On that note allow me to say that I watched the Black Lives Matter movement take flight from inside these prison walls with mixed feelings. While it is certainly hopeful and inspiring, I also find it troubling in what it reveals. It shows the extent to which Black people in this country have been pushed and pushed against a wall and forced to go back further and further, until there is just no more space – until they literally cannot breathe. The protests are a way of pushing back. There is a sense of urgency because at stake is nothing less than the right to live, simply to be treated equally like other human beings. This is not something that should be so hard. I must admit that all of what I have gone through and am still going through in immigrant prison, and what I am seeing in the streets, has prompted me to ask: what is this country that I am fighting to enter, and for which I almost lost my life? I find myself in a dilemma: I fear going back to my country, and I am also scared of living here. But after coming this far, I am here and still fighting.

I hope that my reflections and experience will serve to support the efforts in pushing and

deepening conversations about African and Black migrants crossing into the US from Mexico. Insofar as African migrants at the US/Mexican border have been largely rendered invisible and erased from immigration discussions and debates, it is not much better when they come to be seen as either hapless victims or dangerous invaders. Whether deliberate or not, such reductive, patronizing, and objectifying representations feed into anti-black, anti-immigrant, white nationalist rhetoric and policies to further fortify and securitize the borders. In other words, those denouncing the hysteria and hatred unleashed by the likes of Trump are doing so from a moral high ground, which alone is laudable and desperately needed in these times, but quite honestly it is not enough. Opening doors to African migrants cannot be reduced to a question of morality. Rather, it is an obligation in recognition of the benefits accrued to the West that derive from its role in creating – and exacerbating through false solutions – the conditions and problems that have forced us to leave behind our beloved families, our friends, our communities, our livelihoods, our ways of life.

Above all, African migration must be rendered visible in ways that reflect the humanity, power, and lived reality of migrants in all their complexity, and become part of a broader project of finding unity in struggle and coming together in the fight to build a new and better world.



Figure 2. Screenshot of Giscard at the Prairieland Detention Facility in Texas, during a video call with Anne-Marie on October 10, 2020, three days before ICE deported

him to Cameroon.

On October 13, 2020, the US deported 57 Cameroonians and 28 Congolese men and women on a charter flight departing from Dallas, Texas (Washington 2020b). I was among them – even though my case was (and still is) pending in the Fifth Circuit Court. As I stated above, African migrants are “removable” in the eyes of the US government, with or without pending cases. While the specter of deportation occupies a constant and haunting presence for all of us in detention, I suppose that a level of complacency had settled over me, as I never quite imagined that I would one day become my own living proof of the capriciousness of the system, at least not at this point. Just as I declared at the very outset of this article, I can quite confidently reaffirm that the taste of the pudding is in the eating: Here I am back to ground zero, to the very place from which I had fled for my life.

My grandmother used to tell me that depression is real. Yes, it really is. The more than eighteen hours spent up in the air tied up in a chain looped around my waist and linked to my shackled hands and feet, combined with the more than two years I spent behind bars all for nothing, keep triggering painful nightmares that are driving me crazy. I cannot even bear to talk about what happened to me on arrival in Cameroon or of the new levels of fear of persecution and danger that we all face. ICE handed over our national ID cards, driver’s licenses, birth certificates, passports, etc. to the Cameroonian authorities. To date, they have them in their possession, and none of us who were deported from the US have any form of personal identification. In a country where it is a punishable offence to be found in public space without identification, and the police and military conduct ID raids as a regular practice, especially in Anglophone majority areas, we are at risk as soon as we walk out the door. And so, like the rest of us, I am once again among the “undocumented,” but this time in the country of my birth. Everything that I feared has already

happened to me, so, the truth is that I fear nothing now. Let me finally conclude by asking: What do you actually call someone who is undocumented in their own country?

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Giscard Nkenglefac is from Muyuka, Cameroon. He has faced political persecution for his active involvement in the struggle for the autonomy and self-determination of Cameroon's Anglophone regions. In 2018, he fled to the United States to request asylum. After more than two years of languishing in immigrant prisons, he was deported back to Cameroon. He is currently living in hiding. Giscard has previously written about his experience for *The Nation* as part of its Migrant Voices series.

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