

1961**Lam'i al-Muti'i, 'The Tragedy of the Negros in America' (Excerpts)****Citation:**

"Lam'i al-Muti'i, 'The Tragedy of the Negros in America' (Excerpts)", 1961, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Lam'i al-Muti'i, Mas'at al-zunuj fi Amrikā (The Tragedy of the Negros in America), series Kutub siyasiyya (Political Books) #298 (Cairo: Dār al-qawmiyya li-l-tibā'a wa-l-nashr, c. 1961), 5-6, 26, 28-29, 33, 34. Contributed, translated, and annotated by Cyrus Schayegh.

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Summary:

For decades, African Americans' still unfinished fights for equality were in varied organizational and ideological ways intertwined with decolonization struggles abroad and linked to the question of US power in the world; an early analysis of this history was Penny von Eschen's *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957* (1997).

The case of Arab Americans somewhat differed. As Salim Yacub's *Imperfect Strangers: Americans, Arabs, and U.S.-Middle East Relations in the 1970s* (2016) has argued, they fully developed political demands about U.S.-Arab relations only after the 1967 Six-Day-War, in groups like the Association of Arab American University Graduates; previously founded bodies like the Organisation of Arab Students became political in the later 1960s, too. Earlier, such demands were quieter, except lobbying for Arab Palestine in the 1940s. Yet earlier, it was Arab migrants' acceptance within the US racial order that required political (and especially legal and social) activity, as Sarah Gualtieri's *Between Arab and White: Race and Ethnicity in the Early Syrian American Diaspora* (2009) has shown—and this activity manifested a wish to be counted as white more than solidarity with African Americans. Again different was the case of nationalist Arabs living in the early postcolonial Arab world. As Alex Lubin's *Geographies of Liberation: The Making of an Afro-Arab Political Imaginary* (2014) shows, they saw African American struggles and decolonization struggles as linked, like many African Americans, Asians, Africans, and Latin Americans who were critical of the United States and its role in the postwar world.

The text printed here is a case in point. It is a series of excerpts, in English translation, from an Arabic-language book written around 1961 by Lam'i al-Muti'i (1927-2003), an Egyptian author, translator, and travel writer. He also published texts on African decolonization movements, e.g. in Rhodesia, in the same Cairo publishing house and series as this book. Here, he did not talk about "African Americans," a term that became

popular in the 1980s. Rather, he spoke of zunuj fi Amrikā, zunuj (sg.: zanj or zinj) being Arabic for Negroes as per the Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic. In the below translation, I use the term Negroes (in America—fi Amrikā) in order to distinguish zunuj from ifriqi (African) in al-Muti'i's book, and because many African Americans used the term at the time al-Muti'i wrote his book, though some, like Malcolm X, already objected to its use, associating it with oppression.

Original Language:

Arabic

Contents:

Translation - English

[...]

Sadness descended over the masses of Negroes (*zunuj*) in America, when the news reached them from the African continent that the leader Patrice Lumumba (1925-1961, in 1960 the first prime minister of the Democratic Republic of Congo after independence from Belgium) had been assassinated.

Their breath stopped for a while when they learned that Lumumba's heart had stopped beating.

The Negro women cried just as the Congolese women. And the blood in the veins of America's Negroes boiled, and their masses hurried to where a group of people debated the Congo issue. They rushed straight to the [UN] Security Council with a precise demand: to condemn all those who had Lumumba's blood on their hands.

And America's Negroes grieved for Lumumba not only because he was a leader or a national leader or a noble fighter ... but also because he was a son of their color. they cried for one of the heroes brought forth by the much-slandered "African" continent.

Africa, which had a civilization before the Negroes' executioners [even] had arrived in the New World ... it had far-flung empires. when they [the executioners] were still living the Middle Ages. Africa, seventy million of whose inhabitants were kidnapped, of whom only 14 million reached the shores of the New World. Africa is the origin of those Negroes, and of Lumumba.

And the executioners conspired against the Negroes and Lumumba and killed the Negroes year after year. and they killed Lumumba in a matter of hours. and the Negroes cried. and grieved. and hit the streets to express their demands. which they know from back when their feet touched the ground of the New World. they know that their enemy. is Lumumba's enemy. Africa's enemy. Asia's enemy. Latin America's enemy. the enemy of all colored people (*al-shu'ub al-mulawwana*).

This it is Western imperialism, which kidnapped seventy million ancestors of [today's] Negroes from Africa.

[...]

[T]he tragedy that America's Negroes live is not [just] contemporary, and not the outcome of this century, but goes back to the ancestors of the white after their arrival in Americas, and to the ancestors of the black after they were torn away from their African mother land.

[...]

Let's move a bit along this bloody journey from Africa to America, and let's [see] how Americans themselves describe the slavery journey from Africa to America for us.

[Footnote 1: see the US magazine *Life*, 1 October 1958.] The magazine *Life* has dedicated an entire issue [to this theme], comprising an unflinching study of this issue, from which emerged that slave traders raided up to 12 miles into the African interior, then hunted men and women and divided them into groups. The pliant men and women, who did not resist, were tied to each other by a rope, while those who seemed to be resisting in some way, their necks were jammed into a large wooden plank.

The Americans played an outstanding role in the slave trade: in the year 1720 there were about 200 American ships engaged in the slave trade. And this number is also from *Life* magazine. This trade formed the backbone of America's external trade, as a ship earned more than \$35,000 per journey. And America's appetite for Negroes grew with the expansion of cotton production, which requires much cheap labor.

[...]

We do not deny that during the conflict between the north and the south [of the United States], humanist thought underwent a revolution, and now defended the slave's freedom. and we do not deny that some whites were devoted to the thought of Negro liberation. Neither do we deny that many Negroes in that period, trusting that position, sided with the north and rebelled against the south. and many escaped to the north.

For all these reasons, the Republicans won the Civil War, and the Northerners took hold of the federal government. and after all this. it became clear that humanist calls are one thing. and the lust to enslave the Negroes another thing. and it turned out that the Negroes' position is one thing and the Northerners' lust to exploit them in

[their] industries another.

It became clear to the Negroes that the slogans about equality that had crept into their mind was the most perfidious deceit. there is not wage equality with white [Americans].

[...]

The new Nazism

When Hitler proclaimed the theory of the supremacy of one race over another, and when he talked about the inferiority of some races, all forces that believe in humanity rose up against him. They condemned racial discrimination because it is the most reactionary movement, throwing humanity back into the age of slavery.

Although the entire world condemned this theory, and although the world is moving in the direction of honoring all people, and although the forces of good and peace that believe that every human has the same rights and duties—despite all this, Nazi cries are ringing out again, just uglier, and in a place that was not supposed to be pulled in that direction.

Racist discrimination has returned in the United States, not only to put down the Negroes' cause, but also to raise hysterical, mad cries about the dominance of the white race and the degeneration of the black race!

It would be an error to believe that the persecution of the Negroes is limited to them. Rather, it extends to all colored people in the United States, and is linked to the theory that the human races are divided.