

Tanya Domi:

Hi this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to the Thought Project, recorded at the graduate center of the city University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world.

Tanya Domi:

Today's guest is Nathalie Etoke an associate professor of Francophone and Africana studies at the graduate center CUNY. She specializes in literature and cinema of Francophone Sub-Saharan Africa, black French studies, queer studies in Africa and the Caribbean, as well as Africana existential thought. Her research examines the ongoing struggles for social justice and freedom, for people of African descent around the world. Accounting for the consequences of racial slavery, colonialism and sexual violence that took place during long durations of imperialism since 1492. Professor Etoke's articles have appeared in numerous journals among them include, French Politics and Culture, Nouvelles Etude Francophone, Presence Francophone, the International Journal of Francophone Studies and the Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy. A filmmaker as well in 2011, she directed Afro Diasporic French Identities, a documentary on blackness, identity and citizenship in contemporary France.

Tanya Domi:

She is the author of three books writing the "Woman's Body in Francophone Sub-Saharan Literature", "Melancholia. Africana, the Indispensable Overcoming of the Black Condition", which won the Franz Fanon Prize from the Caribbean Philosophical Association. And her most recent book, "Shades of Black" was published in April 2021 by Seagull Books. She is currently working on a book project titled, Black Existential Freedom, which will be published in June 2022 by Rowman & Littlefield. You recently appeared on CBS news discussing why the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement in America triggered international activism, and a response about racism that exists around the world, well beyond America. And as I listened to your comments, I was really struck by the case of France in which you stated its historical oppression of African peoples did include enslavement. And we can also point to the Republic of Haiti in the Caribbean, which has tragically reappeared in the news recently, that these acts all took place outside of France itself. Yet racism is quite present in contemporary France. What are your thoughts?

Nathalie Etoke:

Yes. Usually in the United States, we have a specific understanding of racism because of the history of this country. I've been lucky or blessed, I don't know it's my existence. Sometimes it looks very random to me, but I've lived in several spaces. So, I was born in France, but I was raised in Cameroon, Africa. And I moved back to France to go to college, and I ended up in the US to go to graduate school. So, when I look at the question of race, my outlook is at the intersections of those three spaces. So to go back to your initial question, everything happened on the main soil here, and everybody's pretty much an immigrant except the native Americans. We know that African-Americans were kidnapped and sold and came here involuntarily. Whereas in France, you have France located in Europe, the European continent, and you have the French colonial empire that was all over the world. But in the French imagination or the French consciousness, slavery is not as present compared to the United States.

Nathalie Etoke:

Immigration happened a long time ago, but now you have the question of number. You have second and third generation French people whose parents or ancestors either came from the French Caribbean, or from Central Africa [crosstalk 00:05:00] or West Africa, et cetera. But the average French person does not necessarily connect the history of immigration with the question of colonization. That's where we have a major understanding and the lack of language, really to bridge that gap. I don't know if it's lack of language of the French idea of universalism also because we do not believe in risk per se, in identity politics. That is the reason why they're very afraid of what they call [foreign language 00:05:31], the Americanization of French society, the question of woke-ness, and all this language that activists are using now, there in the context of Black Lives Matter. So the Death of George Floyd just created this moment where, there was this global awakening that France could not escape. Those issues have been around for quite some time.

Tanya Domi:

Of course. Very interesting, when you stated these French expression of the Americanization of identity. It's really interesting because I've had these conversations with some European friends. And when I start talking about our politics and I talk about the mechanics of our politics, because I have some history in it, about how we target voters. African-Americans versus Latino versus the gay community, the LGBT community, how do you target these voters and motivate them to get them to come out and vote for your party? And when I start talking like that, they look at me like I'm from outer space and they go, "What do you mean?" And I say, "Well, everybody here in Southeastern Europe, everybody's white."

Tanya Domi:

The difference there is, are you Muslim? Or are you Catholic? Or are you Croat? Or you Serb? It's not about race, it's actually about ethnicity and religion. And so it doesn't occur to you and they really kind of freak out about it. And speaking of your work, your work deeply addresses identity construction of blackness, race, women, and queer lives with an overlay of colonialism. And clearly as you described your own experience, we always seem to research our own lives. It's so interesting. What are your thoughts about that? You clearly have done a lot of work in identity formation, and I just find that interesting.

Nathalie Etoke:

Well, let's say that I lived two different lives. I was trained in modern French literature, so-

Tanya Domi:

Yes. So you're in the humanities, so you're...

Nathalie Etoke:

And what people will call here today, the dead white male, so the white [Canon 00:07:57]. But to tell you the truth, when I was an undergraduate student in Lille in France, I just loved literature. I didn't think that I was reading white males or white females. So in that context, honestly, identity was not really a main concern of mine. I was aware of racism when I moved back to France, but in many ways-

Tanya Domi:

That wasn't in your consciousness at that point.

Nathalie Etoke:

... that wasn't in my consciousness in terms of my identity. So fast forward, I moved to the US and I'm exposed to the black radical tradition, the black intellectual tradition. When I read those authors to me, it's not necessarily about race. It's about black existentialism. What does it mean to be a human being in a society that demonizes you? And it's more about an existential journey than an identity.

Nathalie Etoke:

So I will not necessarily describe my work in terms of identity, although it's true that to me, it's like a shortcut to address complexity. At the end of the day it's about how you go through this life. And when I think about my work on LGBTQI plus issues, in Sub-Saharan Africa, it's not necessarily about identities. How do those individuals navigate the social, political, historical and religious boundaries? Because to me they're not object they're human. So I always centered the question under human and how we navigate all those spaces, and how we try to find our common humanity.

Nathalie Etoke:

Because I think my concern with the word identity these days is that it really creates... History gives us identity that we do not choose, or also random luck, your race so wherever you were born, your social class, you did not choose those things. But then at the end of the day, there are ways in which you try to be free. You rebelled against those boxes and you tried to define yourself in your own term, but you live in a society. And I always tell my students that there's a difference between identity and the process of identification.

Tanya Domi:

That's a really important distinction.

Nathalie Etoke:

I don't confuse the two. That's the reason why, to be black in France and to be black in the US are two different experiences. Not necessarily because of blackness, but because of the cultural and political context. So that's why-

Tanya Domi:

And historical context as, well right?

Nathalie Etoke:

Yes.

Tanya Domi:

Indeed. You actually directed a film, a documentary film on Afro Diaspora French identities in existence about, how African French citizens are marginalized and treated as if they are not, or cannot truly be French. Or for example, the political compact as expressed in the motto, Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité has really been denied to African Francophone, French [crosstalk 00:11:02].

Nathalie Etoke:

Yes. And we can even go further back because you also have the descendant of slaves, people from the French Caribbean. Martinique, Guadeloupe et cetera. And this constant idea of who gets to be French, because you can be an immigrant from Poland or Italy, second generation, but because of your skin color, you blend in. Whereas people from Martinique and Guadeloupe [crosstalk 00:11:34] who've been French for many centuries, they always stand out. And that's where in the context of France, although they have a hard time discussing race and racism, the live experience of racialized individuals, challenges that motto. Because you always have this inability to blend in, where does it come from? From the white gaze, the way you're being looked at. So you can think of yourself as French. Actually, in France, you have a lot of Black people, or some black people who do not necessarily care about race the way we understand it in America, they just want to be French and they consider themselves to be French.

Nathalie Etoke:

They become black because they're made to feel black, or because somebody reminds them of the fact that they're black. And also, you have the whole immigration experience and the class situation, when you live in what we call the Banlieue. In French Banlieue means suburb but not the American understanding of suburb, it's not necessarily the fancy neighborhood, that's one of the understanding. But the other one is, could be the projects, where you have all kinds of population, what I call the [foreign language 00:12:43]. And in France, you have this overlapping of class and race. So sometimes, or most of the time French people are more comfortable talking about class, instead of talking about race.

Tanya Domi:

Yes. Class is a very powerful tool in French society. I know about the schools, about how you get into Sciences Po, or you don't get in. There's sort of like [crosstalk 00:13:11].

Nathalie Etoke:

Although they changed the process of... What's the name of the director of Sciences Po who actually was found dead in his hotel room here in New York.

Tanya Domi:

That's right [crosstalk 00:13:20] in New York.

Nathalie Etoke:

Yes. I-

Tanya Domi:

It was in New York. And by the way, Natalie, it just so happens that my teacher at Columbia, he was scheduled to come and speak at Columbia that day and did not show up.

Nathalie Etoke:

Amazing.

Tanya Domi:

I remember this event quite distinctly.

Nathalie Etoke:

I can't remember his name right now. Oh, Richard Descoings, that's his name.

Tanya Domi:

Very interesting.

Nathalie Etoke:

He started as kind of, I will not call it affirmative action, per se. He decided to target specific students who are coming from the [crosstalk 00:13:58].

Tanya Domi:

That's right. I do recall that now too. Thank you for reminding our audience here.

Nathalie Etoke:

But then the problem was, you were supposed to take an exam. That's how Sciences Po works and all those big schools. And those students do not take the exam that all the other students are supposed to be taking. So, it created a certain kind of uproar. I'm not aware of what's happening there now, but I know that they have specific students that come from those areas. And it creates a situation right there already where, you have people who take the exams and people who don't.

Tanya Domi:

Of course. And so just in this context of this conversation, I'm thinking also of Kimberle Crenshaw, who did coin the expression Intersectionality. It's like, we are all these things in one body, and we can't split our body up. And so, I want to ask you, isn't navigating this world, like in France and in the United States. Navigating this world can be emotionally depleting and frustrating, if not heartbreaking at times, is it not?

Nathalie Etoke:

Well, I guess it is. But I think because of my upbringing, I think I give it to my parents. We always had to get things done [crosstalk 00:15:25] and it be emotionally draining, I understand that. But at the same time, I feel that I'm very blessed to be able to do the work that I do and the opportunities that were given to me and I can, not be the spokesperson, I don't like that phrase. But I can explore the lived experience of continental and diaspora Africans to my work. And try to bring to fore the humanity that is continuously denied to them but in complex terms.

Nathalie Etoke:

So, my baby sister sometimes asked me, "How do you work on those things? I couldn't." So, I'm not dismissing the point that you're making, because she's just like, "It's too much. This makes me upset. I can't deal with this, and this is what you do?" So, I get that part. But at the same time, I feel that it's a privilege to be able to do this type of work. And I love what I do. And I value the live experience of people, African descendants. And I'm in a position to explore it through different lenses.

Tanya Domi:

Of course. And I'm not suggesting that we think about it all the time. If we were conscious about it all the time, it would drive you mad. I agree with you. Because I do similar work in in different scholarly area and yes, I have that privilege too. So, I fully appreciate [crosstalk 00:16:54].

Nathalie Etoke:

But I can tell you what saddens me at times in this country, it's when I meet students of color, who have not been given the opportunity to be at their best, that I will tell you can bring me down at times. Because this world is highly competitive, and when you do not acquire certain skills at a very young age, it's very hard to catch up. I'm not going to say that it's impossible to catch up, but it's very hard to catch up. And I see students sometimes who are just overwhelmed. It's not their fault. It's maybe the public schools they went to, the teachers they had. I don't want to say that this society sets you up for failure when you're poor, but I can see the struggle trying to work full time, going to school, trying to...

Nathalie Etoke:

And that is what can at times, not bring me down, but sadden me, because I'm just thinking, [crosstalk 00:18:02] then people talk about meritocracy. Meritocracy, what do you mean by that? This whole idea of working hard and, this American ethos about working hard, meritocracy and people failing because they don't work hard enough. That saddens me and sometimes makes me angry, because I know a lot of people work really hard and they still can't make it.

Tanya Domi:

Right. I understand, I hear you completely. You are finalizing a book chapter about the dehumanization of LGBTQI plus people in Uganda and in South Africa. And what does your book chapter address in these two different countries, in the oppression of queer bodies in Uganda and South Africa? And I have some intimate knowledge of Uganda from my work in gay activism. Scott Lively went to a Uganda in 2007 and held a conference that exposing quote unquote, the truth about homosexuality and the homosexual agenda.

Tanya Domi:

And one month later, the Ugandan parliament adopted the death penalty and other criminal measures to be applied to queer Ugandans. And South Africa is exceptional as the first country to include it in its constitution of prohibition and discrimination against LGBT people. I'm not sure about [inaudible 00:19:32] but sexual orientation was the phrase, correct? So, there is struggle always that it persists in Uganda to this day. South Africa has some distinct issues around oppression of lesbians that comes to mind, corrective [inaudible 00:19:50] quote unquote. What does your chapter get into here? I can't wait to read it.

Nathalie Etoke:

Yes. So, an international organization basically threatened Uganda. It was a financial cut and not getting financial aid, et cetera. So, Museveni had to give that up, not because he wanted to, but it was a matter of access to resources. But my concern is mostly about this question of the human and dehumanization. I start with this idea that, when you think about the black body in the context of slavery and colonization, that body has been dehumanized. And I establish a parallel with queer bodies in those spaces, and how we got stuck with the sodomy laws that came out of the colonization process. I always remind my students that African people never sat down to write those laws, they were implemented during colonization. And add to that, the question of Christianity. And I won't tell the story of the

Uganda massacre. But I'm looking at the ways in which religious discourse contributes to the dehumanization of queer bodies in Uganda.

Nathalie Etoke:

And I also look at the ways in which the far right, and the evangelicals are somehow looking towards Africa to promote state homophobia because they quote unquote, lost the cultural war here. So, they frame this narrative according to which the future of the world would be in places like Uganda, God chose Uganda. But then at the same time, what really strikes me is not necessarily what the far right and the evangelicals are doing, I look at the question of homophobia in the context of the failure of the post-colonial state. Because in the context of Uganda what really struck me is that, a pastor like Martin Ssempe, can basically scream gay porn, hardcore porn in a church in front of people, and everybody's shocked, everybody is in a state of trans. And I'm asking to myself, "Your problem is not homosexuality, there's poverty here. There's this dictatorship."

Nathalie Etoke:

So, the scapegoating of the queer subject in Post-colonial Africa. And also, this are... When [inaudible 00:22:32] talks about power, he said power is everywhere, and how an individual feels empowered, you have this sense of morality. There's an economy of morality with regards to the question of homosexuality. Therefore, to me it's like a distraction. And at the same time, we're an outlet, a catharsis, we're the powerless, because it also creates a sense of unity. What brings you together in that church? It's not just your love for Christ, but it's this anti-gay agenda. And also, anybody out in the street, if you watch those documentaries, like God loves Uganda or Missionaries of Hate. Anybody can get up one morning and preach against homosexuality. They're outing people, they're calling for their lynching. And it's not necessarily the state, although the state promotes that, and the church and the education system.

Nathalie Etoke:

So, there is you have all these state apparatuses, the ideological state apparatus, and it's pervasive. And I'm thinking about how scapegoating can create unity and how you can dehumanize the most marginalized. So, I'm not necessarily talking about the queer subject. I'm talking about who we become as human beings when we dehumanize others, knowing that this troop of dehumanization is central, when you think about conversation about imperialism, white supremacists, et cetera. And it's was also to challenge this idea that because you're a victim, you're righteous. You're a victim because you're powerless, because we can see situations where people who have been victimized are also victimizing other people.

Nathalie Etoke:

So, I'm looking at those dynamics and the power of a certain kind of Christian Church in Africa. Because it's not only homophobia that they're promoting, they're building hospitals, they're building schools. So, you can see the ways in which the state is failing, but at the same time, who's stepping up to provide for the people, the [crosstalk 00:24:35] evangelical. So, there's this connection, and I think it's very toxic and very dangerous. So that's in the context of Uganda. So, dehumanization through religious discourse and opportunistic political discourse. But at the same time, it provides a collective catharsis. And what I will call a strange breed of homo-nationalism.

Tanya Domi:

Oh definitely.

Nathalie Etoke:

Because you equate patriotism, love for your country and fight against Western influences with homophobia. And also, you're combining homosexuality and pedophilia. So it's just a whole [crosstalk 00:25:16] problematic approach, but then to me, it's a distraction. In the context of South Africa, there are ways in which we can all talk about the constitution and Zanele Muholi says that it's like a textbook. You read it, it's nice, but it's theoretical. In practice when you're a working-class Black lesbian, it's a whole different story. So, you have this violence. But what does that violence tell us about South Africa? What is the problem? How do you connect that violence with the previous history of oppression? And then at the same time, people are always talking about gay rights and I think we should fight for gay rights.

Nathalie Etoke:

But if we don't address the cultural component of those societies, to me, South Africa is the perfect example, cultural and class component. You can have all the rights in the world, but French philosopher, Simone Weil says that, "A right is meaningless if no one respects it."

Tanya Domi:

Absolutely.

Nathalie Etoke:

And I think that's the problem there. So, in my work, I'm trying to look at the specificity of that question in Sub-Saharan Africa. Because I also have to confess that the Western, I won't use the one lobbying, but I will give you two examples. President Barack Obama goes to Senegal, which is a majority Muslim country.

Tanya Domi:

I've been to Senegal myself.

Nathalie Etoke:

And the first thing he speaks about, he talks about gay rights. Yes, that's great. But by the time he's gone, he did the same thing in Kenya and there's a backlash for the people who live there. And also, there's an ability to address the complexity and the contradictions of those individuals there. So, the Western world is trying to help, but in many ways [crosstalk 00:27:14] it creates also a lot of chaos, whether we're talking about the right-wing evangelical, or whether we talk about what [foreign language 00:27:21], sexual democracy. So, I think those issues are very complex because we're in a conundrum. On the one hand, you want people to have access to their rights and you want all those sodomy laws and anti-gay bills to just disappeared. Because right now, in my country, in Cameroon, you have two trans women who are in jail.

Nathalie Etoke:

And then on the other hand, you want the uniqueness of the African queer experience to contribute to this global conversation. And it's just hard to have those competing narratives at the same time. But at the end of the day, I'm really obsessed with this question of what does it mean to be human? Because I

think the queer subjectivities are basically dehumanized. They're viewed through the lens of bestiality. We don't think about people loving each other. We don't think about people just being like us. It's just very, very negative. And a lot of African societies are conservative. I think people create culture. There're ways in which yes, you can have certain... What's the name? [foreign language 00:28:37], social ambitus. But to me, it's not an act of God or something that cannot change. The problem is if the politicians and the religious leaders promote homophobia, it becomes pervasive in the society and nothing changes.

Nathalie Etoke:

But I really wonder about what the mistreatment of queer people in Africa, what does that tell us about our Africanity? We always like to talk about Ubuntu, I am because we are, our common humanity, solidarity, taking care of each other, it takes a village to raise a child. What if your child is queer? You're not going to raise your child. So how do queer subjectivities challenge our understanding of the human in Africa? Because it's also part of identity politics. Talking about identity politics. They will tell you, "Oh, it's un-African. [crosstalk 00:29:36] It's a bi-product of colonization.

Tanya Domi:

Yeah. Like being African in France is not... it's like a parallel, you can't be fully French. And if you're queer and you're African, you don't really belong.

Nathalie Etoke:

Exactly.

Tanya Domi:

Exactly. I totally understand it. And let me just also add this. When you were talking about the dehumanizing and the demonization. As a genocide scholar, I would submit to you that what happens is you get killed, and many, many people who are queer in Africa have been murdered. I would also add, and I will say this because I have traveled in Africa and have worked in Africa. One of the things I most fear... For example, when I was in South Africa several years ago, the one picture that I have in my mind is all these white missionaries on the planes flying in, and one of them was Franklin Graham. And he actually is so homophobic, and so Islamophobic. And brought Samaritan's Purse, this humanitarian organization to South Africa.

Tanya Domi:

And what happens, a lot of the South Sudan... Many of the leaders there are educated in Iowa because there, a lot of people have moved from South Sudan to the United States, over many of the United States trying to help stop the war there, for whatever it's worth. And so, they're educated in the United States and then Franklin Graham shows up and others, and they impose these anti queer views on the leadership. And all of a sudden, the President of South Sudan is saying, "Oh, no we don't accept homosexuality at all." And that to me is very disturbing as a white woman from Africa who happens to be gay, I happen to be queer and I've traveled a lot. And I see these people as undermining the queer communities or the potential for queer communities in many of these countries.

Nathalie Etoke:

Yes. And it's still a crime.

Tanya Domi:

I know.

Nathalie Etoke:

And add to that [crosstalk 00:32:02], religious fundamentalist discourse, there's a lot at stake. And particularly the violence against lesbian black women in South Africa and the whole [crosstalk 00:32:18].

Tanya Domi:

Does that emanate from misogyny if it's at its core?

Nathalie Etoke:

Well I don't know [crosstalk 00:32:24].

Tanya Domi:

... question. I'm just throwing it [crosstalk 00:32:25].

Nathalie Etoke:

I don't know because I really like how Zanele Muholi talks about the issue. She talks about the fact that we need to address what disorganizes the mind of the rapist. And she also addresses the political and the social economic situation in South Africa. Yeah, misogyny is probably part of it, but misogyny has existed for a very long time-

Tanya Domi:

For sure.

Nathalie Etoke:

... and that's not the reason why people are going out there and just killing women. But I think there's something very unique also about this question of manhood and powerlessness. Because at the end of the day, in the mind of some of those people, unless [we're 00:33:12] in person makes men totally relevant. When you think about that-

Tanya Domi:

That's an interesting point.

Nathalie Etoke:

In terms of [crosstalk 00:33:20] hetero-patriarchy. Because you don't need that type of validation. The man is not the main source for your happiness or your care or what not. But then what happens in a society where men are powerless, men are jobless, coming out of this context of apartheid. So Zanele Muholi has a good approach because you have several factors-

Tanya Domi:

It's in layers. Yeah.

Nathalie Etoke:

... multiple layers. You cannot just choose one and say, "This is it..."

Tanya Domi:

It's this one thing.

Nathalie Etoke:

This is the problem. But then at the same time, she also talks about how the problem is that we only talk about queer issues in South African in relation to violence. She also wants to tell stories about love, because I think that's also the problem with this conversation in the West about LGBTQI plus quote unquote issues in Sub-Saharan Africa. Yeah, there are issues, but you still have people who love each other and who care about each other, and who try to create and be a family. She wants to strike that balance between the two, because at some point she was saying that the stories of the black lesbian working class in South Africa, was just a story of violence. It was like documenting people who are dying and people who are being killed, but there's more to those individuals that [crosstalk 00:34:45] that violence. Yeah.

Tanya Domi:

Of course, that makes sense. And I do think there was a shift in the United States in 2012 after same sex marriage became a law and people began marrying. And one of the messages that came out of that, you'll see it on the Twitter feed now is, love is love. And so, you need to start talking about love, you start talking about people's relationships and actually we saw pictures of them getting married, and people having their lives and their children. It did shift the dialogue, I think in a different way. It did.

Nathalie Etoke:

I agree. But I think in Sub-Saharan Africa, we need to deal with the laws first.

Tanya Domi:

Of course.

Nathalie Etoke:

Because those people, yes, they exist, but they're underground. They have to hide, they're in danger. And I think as citizens-

Tanya Domi:

This is real in many people's lives. I totally agree with you.

Nathalie Etoke:

Exactly. As citizens, they have to be protected. And I think if we don't get a strong signal from the state in terms of abolishing all those anti-gay laws, and making it a crime to assault or to abuse a queer person, I think people will be afraid. I'm afraid, people are afraid of retaliation and punishment, it's sad to say. But if the state allows you to abuse individuals, anything goes, so it's really a political issue as well. But then at the same time, I can see how that question is being manipulated in the context of the theory of the post-colonial state, because it brings people together. It empowers them in the most disturbing way to tell you the truth. Because what kind of power is that to destroy another human

being? How is that helping you pay your rent or your medical bills, or put your kids to schools? Or get a job?

Tanya Domi:

It's a very corrosive way to solidify and come together. I want to talk to you about your third book, which you published last year, *Shades of Black*. I want to read the description for our audience. Its description reads, Nathalie Etoke examines what happens when race obliterates historical social cultural, and political differences among populations of African descent from different parts of the world. Focusing on recent and ongoing topics in the United States, including the murder of George Floyd, police brutality and the complex symbolism of Barack Obama and Kamala Harris. Etoke explores the relations of violence, oppression, dispossession, and inequalities that have brought us here, face-to-face with these existential questions, are you breathing? Are you breathing? I am estimating that America's maltreatment of black Americans, these are my words, may have played a significant role in your writing of this book, as well. Particularly in the aftermath of Michael Brown's murder in Ferguson in 2014, which launched Black Lives Matter.

Nathalie Etoke:

Yes. And also, I wanted to address a discourse that is not really part of mainstream media. You have what they call today, The New Black Media. Is basically a lot of YouTubers who are providing a certain kind of transgressive discourse about identity politics in relation to reparations and access and the problem of global blackness in the United States? In other words, "I'm black, but I'm a black immigrant."

Tanya Domi:

So, there's distinctions-

Nathalie Etoke:

We have, American descendant of slavery is an organization, that basically is fighting for reparation, but also would like to desegregate blackness. Because blackness is flattened when we're all lumped in one group, but there are doing that in the context of access. Who is graduating from Ivy leagues? Who is getting the jobs? So, you have this tension or conflict at times between-

Tanya Domi:

So, categorizing people.

Nathalie Etoke:

People who appear to be black. In terms of [crosstalk 00:39:18].

Tanya Domi:

... you're an immigrant, so you actually fall out of this because-

Nathalie Etoke:

Exactly. And how in many... Yeah. I know, right.

Tanya Domi:

That's very corrosive.

Nathalie Etoke:

I know it's very corrosive, but then at the same time, we are dealing with this question of identity today, and identity-

Tanya Domi:

Yes, we are.

Nathalie Etoke:

... politics. How identity can be used as a currency to have access to X, Y, and Z. And we don't necessarily address the question of class either. So, in my book, I was trying to have a conversation about some of the conflicts that you sometimes have between all the different groups that are part of this black population in the US.

Tanya Domi:

Who are seen as being black.

Nathalie Etoke:

Exactly. And [crosstalk 00:40:06].

Tanya Domi:

... of blackness, right?

Nathalie Etoke:

Exactly. But also, in relation to access and success. Because Candace Owens once tweeted that, Nigerians got here yesterday and they were able to achieve the American dream [crosstalk 00:40:23] what she said. They were able to achieve success in less than 10 years. And people who've been here... She was talking about African-Americans. So American descendant of slaves. They've been here for so many centuries and they've not been able to achieve X, Y, and Z because they are on their, how does she call it? The democratic plantation or something. And you can see how the so-called black immigrant story can be framed as a success story to deny the reality of racism and this specificity of anti-blackness in this country.

Nathalie Etoke:

So, I was trying to look at those dynamics, but also in the context of capitalism. Because at the end of the day it's not necessarily just about race, particularly in the context of this conversation. It's about who gets the jobs, who is graduating from Ivy leagues, who is able to quote unquote, have access to the American dream and who was excluded from it. And can we really create a society that promotes equality when capitalism is really about competition, regardless of your race-

Tanya Domi:

And then against the backdrop of economic dispossession of intergenerational [crosstalk 00:41:53]. And so, you don't even get a shot at it because you have no family wealth. So, if you're lucky and you're

fortunate... Not lucky, I'm sure these people worked really hard to get into an Ivy league school, [inaudible 00:42:07] and they're able to benefit. But that is few and far between. It's going to take so much longer because of the lack of opportunity.

Nathalie Etoke:

Exactly. So, I talk a little bit about that. And I also have this book chapter titled, Decolonizing Freedom. So, I look at this question of police brutality in the context of what does it mean to be free in America? Who

Tanya Domi:

Wow, that's an existential question, right?

Nathalie Etoke:

Exactly, right?

Tanya Domi:

And you really go into existentialism, which I really appreciate.

Nathalie Etoke:

Exactly. And I'm thinking about how this country was created and how indigenous people, native Americans, people of African descent, Asians, you name it. A lot of people-

Tanya Domi:

Right. I'm the granddaughter of an immigrant who came from Albania like in 1928. This is what Americans have in common. But if you are black, you probably are a descendant of slaves, at some level if you were born here. So yes, we came in different ways, some of us came shackled in ships. And the other ones were up in the upper [inaudible 00:43:32], if they were lucky.

Nathalie Etoke:

And not only that. There was a certain kind of political framework in this country that excluded African Americans, even after the ablation of slavery. Jim Crow laws, et cetera. So, what is the meaning of freedom in that context? [crosstalk 00:43:53] When you think about the police, when you think about violence and how violence has been used. Psychological violence, physical violence against people of African descent in this country. So, I think that the way we understand freedom today is a colonial understanding of freedom, because to be free meant that you were white. So, if we don't... it's going to

Tanya Domi:

If you were a white heterosexual.

Nathalie Etoke:

Exactly.

Tanya Domi:

Right.

Nathalie Etoke:

If we don't decolonize freedom, we're never going to be free. But some people are always going to be free. Because why is it that it's always the same group of people-

Tanya Domi:

They wrote the laws and they wrote the rules. [crosstalk 00:44:35].

Nathalie Etoke:

And also, the Black people are... Is like this legacy of sub humanity. What do you see when you see a black person? Do you see a person or do you see a creation of your imagination that does not belong to the human race? There is no citizenship and reciprocity. I always use this example and I mentioned it in my book. So Dylann Roof kill eight individuals at a black church.

Tanya Domi:

Yes.

Nathalie Etoke:

The police finally catches up with him and he says, he's hungry. They take him to Burger King. Tamir Rice is playing with a toy gun, he has not killed anybody. The police showed up. He ends up dead. But Tamir Rice is an American citizen and Dylann Roof is also an American citizen. So what explains the differential treatment?

Tanya Domi:

I think we know.

Nathalie Etoke:

So that's also what I'm trying to address-

Tanya Domi:

What you're exploring here. Just very quickly. I just read... When I read about the description of this book with Barack Obama next to Kamala Harris, just in the sentence and I went, "Oh, she really has something here." Because he was the son of an immigrant from Africa. And Kamala Harris was the daughter of someone from the Island and someone from India-

Nathalie Etoke:

Yeah [inaudible 00:46:03] in India.

Tanya Domi:

That's right. And so, you had these really complex mixtures. And Obama grew up in Hawaii and I lived in Hawaii. So, as we say, in Hawaii, "Really chopped silly," everybody's mixed up, with an Asian flair. And he grew up in that really, [foreign language 00:46:24] oh, Hannah, which means home, loving, embracing Hawaii. And a lot of people thought he was really kind of soft, but that is that culture. Very, very interesting culture. Just quickly. I want to hear it very quickly, because we really should probably wrap it

up in a few minutes, so and have you back. But to talk about those complex identities of those two people and the way they're viewed. Very interesting.

Nathalie Etoke:

Yes. So, I am very critical of Barack Obama and Kamala Harris because I think that in America race sometimes can be in a muscle the tiny use as a veil. So, people focus on their racial backgrounds. And in many ways, they become the embodiment of this narrative of American success and progress. And a little Black girl in the south side of Chicago is supposed to look at them and think that, "Yes, I can become like them too." I want to talk about class. You talk about their social upbringing. And what role does class play in their quote, unquote success?

Tanya Domi:

Their social mobility.

Nathalie Etoke:

Their social upward mobility. [crosstalk 00:47:52] Why is it that we just want to talk about their identity? That's fine. But to me, their identity is a private matter. But at the same time, what about politics in relation to identity? And what do we make of this commodification of blackness in American politics? And how does it erase the situation and the needs of working-class Black people. So in other words, how can I have a conversation about George Floyd, Philando Castille, Sandra Bland, Tamir Rice, Barack Obama, and Kamala Harris at the same time. And remember BLM became big under a Barack Obama presidency.

Tanya Domi:

This is true. [crosstalk 00:48:41].

Nathalie Etoke:

And I don't. Oh, sorry, go ahead.

Tanya Domi:

No. I was just going to say Professor Etoke, we will do our own session on this question. Okay.

Nathalie Etoke:

All right. [crosstalk 00:48:53].

Tanya Domi:

I want to have you back. This has been a wonderful conversation. And so just very quickly for our listening audience, you will be publishing "Black Existential Freedom" next year by Rowman & Littlefield, but what's next for you? Just what are you working on? What's new besides the fact that you have to get this book out?

Nathalie Etoke:

Well, that's next. Because I just had another book out last April, "Shades of Black" came out last April, and this book is coming out next year, so I'm finalizing it. Once I'm done with this project, I think I will

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take a little break and then think about something else. But right now, my head is just like all over the place-

Tanya Domi:

It's floating.

Nathalie Etoke:

... yeah, because one book just came out and this one is about to come out too. So it's like, okay. Once I'm done, I'll be able to think about what I would like to do next.

Tanya Domi:

Congratulations on both books. I hope the graduate center is giving you a book talk or something because you deserve it. Thank you for being with us today.

Nathalie Etoke:

Thank you for having me.

Tanya Domi:

Thanks for tuning into the Thought Project and thanks to our guest Professor Natalie Etoke of the Graduate Center CUNY.

Tanya Domi:

The Thought Project is brought to you with production, engineering and technical assistance by Kevin Wolfe of CUNY TV. I'm Tanya Domi tune in next week.