

The Danger of ADOS: How Disinformation Campaigns Threaten Reparations and Pan-African Movements through Digital Media

Disinformation is the intentional spreading of false information for manipulative purposes (Fallis 2015). It has been used on digital media platforms by various campaigns, nationally and internationally, to attach false narratives to Black activist movements. The false narratives are then amplified by bots, fake accounts and accounts using digital Black face (Freelon et al. 2020). Disinformation campaigns are also driven by online influencers or spokespersons and amplified by manipulated followers.

From 2016, the long-standing US-based reparations movement has struggled with a targeted disinformation campaign aimed at disempowering and derailing the long-standing reparations movement. The American Descendants of Slavery (ADOS) movement, branded as a new civil rights and reparations advocacy group, has used digital media platforms to spread disinformation, attack US-based reparations activists, derail federal reparations legislation and promote right-wing anti-immigration policies (Drayton 2019; Media Matters 2019; Nkonde et al. 2021).

The implications of digital media-amplified disinformation campaigns targeting Black activist movements are widespread and

Jessica Ann Mitchell Aiwuyor
National Black Cultural
Information Trust
Washington DC, USA

present a potential threat to Pan-Africanist movements for civil and human rights.

The creation of ADOS: Pushing nativism into the reparations movement

The American Descendants of Slavery movement was founded in 2016 by Antonio Moore, an attorney, and Yvette Carnell, a social media commentator. Commonly referred to by its acronym ADOS, Carnell and Moore promoted the hashtag-powered movement through their weekly YouTube shows focusing on African-American economic issues. With each live broadcast reaching approximately 30,000-plus people, Carnell and Moore's new 'identity' spread quickly.

Carnell and Moore promote ADOS as a unique ethnic identifier for African Americans. They assert that the term ADOS is a legal marker that would make reparations finally attainable in the United States due to its 'specificity' for the African-American justice claim. The new identifier would reject Africa as

the original homeland for African Americans, it would reject African identity, and most significantly, it would reject Pan-Africanism (Carnell 2018).

Previously, a similar movement was launched in Louisville, Kentucky, by businessman, Norris Shelton. Shelton founded an organisation called American Slaves Inc, in 2001. He also founded a political party called Descendants of American Slaves (DOAS) in 2012 (Pohlman 2012). Much of the writings and rhetoric of Shelton's DOAS are similar to what is now shared by Carnell and Moore. Additionally, Carnell and Moore maintain close ties to Louisville as their first ADOS conference site.

For generations, African Americans have called for reparations that would repair the centuries of violence, enslavement and racial injustice endured by Descendants of Africans Enslaved in the United States (DAEUS) (Randall 2015). Two of the most notable reparationists in history include Callie House, leader of the National Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty, and Pension Association, and Audley Queen Mother Moore, co-founder of the Republic of New Afrika and founder of the Reparations Committee for the Descendants of American Slaves (Perry 2010; Farmer 2019).

The National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America (N'COBRA) was founded in 1987 after a convening of lawyers, activists and reparationists (Aiyetoro 2003). Raymond Jenkins (aka Reparations Ray), co-founder of N'COBRA, influenced the H.R.40 Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African-Americans Act, introduced in 1989 by US Representative (Rep.) John Conyers Jr. (Miller 2009).

According to activist-lawyer and N'COBRA co-founder, Adjoa A. Aiyetoro:

Through its various chapters, N'COBRA got state and local legislatures to pass resolutions to support Conyers' bill, submitted each Congressional session in the House of Representatives Judiciary Committee, usually designated H.R. 40. The varied resolutions usually cited the work of N'COBRA. The coalition developed legislative, litigative, direct action, and economic development strategies to fuel the train and increase the speed with which it was moving to its destination—reparations. (Aiyetoro 2001)

Following Rep. Conyers's retirement, Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee of Texas became the sponsor of H.R. 40 and the key legislator advocating for its passage (Congress.gov 2019). As the struggle for reparations continued, the National African American Reparations Commission (NAARC) was established in 2015, convened by activist-scholar Dr Ron Daniels.

Co-opting the movement: Xenophobia, disinformation and project takeover

Much of the current grassroots reparations movement has been sustained by decades of activism

by N'COBRA and NAARC, through their national and local-based advocacy. However, one of the greatest influences on the current mainstream conversation concerning reparations was Ta-Nehisi Coates's 'The Case For Reparations', published by *The Atlantic* in 2014. The new explosion of interest concerning reparations helped garner mainstream appeal among the US media, coupled with a new-found enthusiasm among Black Americans.

The ADOS movement was founded two years later as a Black isolationist ideology that uses the reparations issue to promote anti-immigrant policies, nativism and birtherism, and disconnect African Americans from the global African world.

According to journalist Farrah Stockman, at the first ADOS conference:

The audience was told that they should trace their origins to American slavery, not Africa. They were told that their ancestors had built the country with slave labor and that the country owed them a debt. They were told that they should demand reparations, and withhold their votes in 2020 unless the Democratic nominee outlined a specific economic plan for ADOS. (Stockman 2019)

Historically, the US reparations movement has been part of a global movement with support from the African diaspora (CARICOM Reparations 2016). Yet, ADOS rhetoric aims to fracture any sense of kinship among the various Black/African diasporic communities. Carnell and Moore refer to collective Black identities in the United States as a 'flat Blackness' that they label as harmful to ADOS (Moore 2020b). In their videos, Carnell and Moore fan the flames of anti-Black xenophobia. On 25 May

2020, Minneapolis police officers arrested and killed an African-American man named George Floyd. Carnell placed partial blame for his death on programmes that support Somali refugees.

In a live YouTube broadcast, Carnell stated:

You have to talk about what he didn't have and why he didn't have it. You have to talk about Somalians being placed in [*sic*] and the refugees being placed there, and they're [*sic*] being resettled with money and he not having any. You have to talk about the generational wealth that we are missing because that is what defines him even being there in the moment where he was killed by police. (Carnell 2020)

Similarly, Moore in a now-deleted video stated:

He was using a \$20 counterfeit bill because he didn't get his reparations. I'm gone go into the whole ... what they do for refugees. Minneapolis, not even the federal government. Minneapolis and how inviting they are to refugees. And what they did to lock Black people out of neighborhoods for a hundred years. Black people meaning ADOS Black people. (Moore 2020a)

Moore and Carnell's xenophobic rhetoric ignited an influx of social media accounts using the hashtag #ADOS while viciously attacking Black immigrants, activists and politicians who rejected their message. One such social media account referred to Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee as a 'sneaky African/Caribbean immigrant masquerading as a native born Black American' (ADOS Watch 2019). Additionally, Carnell and Moore frequently ignite online debates over Black movie roles and received international

press for their condemnation of British-born actress Cynthia Erivo, of Nigerian heritage, for her portrayal of Harriet Tubman (EurWeb 2019). These arguments are tools for gaining media attention and getting free access to millions of readers or viewers.

Black nativism is not a new occurrence. In response to an influx of white immigrants in the early 1900s, African Americans sometimes embraced nativism to advocate for employment inclusion and prioritisation in the face of expanding whiteness (Rubin 1978; Brietzer 2011).

There were also conflicts between first-generation Caribbean immigrants and African Americans in the 1930s and 40s. Both groups endured racial discrimination and employment disparities while also experiencing conflict and shifting racialised identities. Class dynamics and white-influenced racial stigmatisations also played a role in these conflicts. However, ultimately, both groups were economically exploited and formed merging identities (Warner 2012).

The ADOS co-founders' usage of black nativism merges reparations, disinformation and hashtag-powered manipulation, making it a special case deserving attention. ADOS leaders call for limits to the H1-B Visa programme to limit Black immigrants' entry into the US (ADOS Black Agenda 2019). Carnell and Moore's talking points are similar to those of white nationalists and right-wing politicians, repeating the false claims that Black immigrants are taking jobs away from African Americans (Scott 2019). Most of their anti-immigrant rhetoric is aimed at Black immigrants and minimally towards white immigrants.

In 2019, Carnell and Moore shared their plans to take over the reparations movement. They publicly called for a project takeover, encouraging their followers to join established Black organisations, like the NAACP and Urban League local chapters, and spread the ADOS ideology from within (Russ 2019).

Simultaneously, Carnell and Moore sought to discredit existing reparations organisations. They spread disinformation about both N'COBRA and NAARC, stating that the two groups were purposely hindering the reparations movement. Carnell and Moore repeatedly sought to turn audiences away from long-standing reparations advocacy groups. Carnell stated falsely that N'COBRA was 'opposed to reparations' and falsely claimed that both groups sought to give away Black-American reparations to Black immigrants. Carnell told viewers, 'N'COBRA did nothing. They are nothing,' and encouraged followers to write to the media and tell journalists that N'COBRA was 'not a real reparations movement' (Carnell 2021). This disinformation about reparations activists was streamed to thousands of followers during her live broadcasts.

PFIR, white nativism and Black anti-immigration front groups

Another key piece to ADOS's origin story is Yvette Carnell's membership on the Progressives for Immigration Reform (PFIR) board, an organisation linked to the Tanton Network (Lee 2014; SPLC 2010). White supremacist and eugenics supporter, John Tanton, helped create and fund several organisations to keep America white through anti-

immigration policies. A few of the Tanton-affiliated organisations are the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), Center for Immigration Studies (CIS) and NumbersUSA. PFIR's former executive director also worked for FAIR and maintained close ties (Zaitchik 2010).

To gain buy-in from African Americans, PFIR and its affiliates create front groups attempting to appeal to Black economic concerns. These initiatives are used to blame African-American employment disparities on Black and Brown immigrants and push anti-immigrant policies. There have been at least three previous Black economic front groups affiliated or linked to the Tanton Network.

1. In 2006, FAIR created a group astonishingly similar to the current ADOS Movement called Choose Black America. The organisation's now-defunct website stated, 'mass illegal immigration has been the single greatest impediment to Black advancement in this country over the past 25 years'.
2. In 2012, FAIR created the Blacks for Equal Rights Coalition, another Black economic issues organisation used to limit immigration.
3. In 2013, CIS created the Black American Leadership Alliance. Bertha Lewis, of The Black Institute, published a warning to Black communities titled, 'On Immigration: Beware of the Black American Leadership Alliance' (Lewis 2019).
4. In 2016, ADOS was co-founded by Yvette Carnell, a former board member of PFIR using the same anti-Black immigration rhetoric. PFIR rejoiced at the success of ADOS in a newsletter to members (PFIR 2019).

From obscurity to legitimacy: The three pillars of ADOS

The ADOS hashtag picked up steam on various platforms, including Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Instagram. However, it moved from obscurity to legitimacy among mainstream media, institutions and academics through three academic pillars: Dr William A. Darity Jr, Dr Cornel West and Dr Kevin W. Cosby. The new anti-Pan-African reparacionists, many of whom had never engaged in reparations activism before, brought with them sensationalism that skyrocketed social media engagement.

This engagement helped boost the national platform of the first pillar of ADOS legitimacy, Duke University professor Dr William A. Darity Jr. Carnell, Moore and Darity partnered on promoting the ADOS ideology through forums and publications. Darity's work was often shared and promoted by the ADOS co-founders among their thousands of followers. In 2020, Dr William A. Darity Jr and Andrea Kirsten Mullen published *From Here to Equality: Reparations for Black Americans in the Twenty-First Century*. Like Carnell and Moore, Darity and Mullen write through a Black nativist lens, distancing the African-American experience from the rest of the African diaspora by minimising the experience of slavery and racism in the Caribbean.

Dr Shennette Garrett-Scott addresses these issues in a review of *From Here to Equality*, stating:

Darity and Mullen reject the notion that the experiences of Afro-Caribbeans and other Blacks across the Diaspora living in the United States are 'synonymous [with] the experience of... African

Americans.' Their contention that 'voluntary immigrants to the United States' (emphasis in original) make a conscious choice to live in a country that has benefited from racism means that these groups assume the debt their adopted country owes. The logic here is troubling on many levels, not the least of which is the assumption that immigrants don't suffer racism and other forms of discrimination in the United States. Darity and Mullen try to smooth over the nativist implications by adding that reparations encompass collective, national redemption rather than individual, specific guilt.

The most serious flaw in limiting the deserving groups is that the authors' plan ignores the history of enslavement in the United States, which extended to the Caribbean. The practice of slavery in both places was intimately bound together, even after the US won its independence from Britain. Darity and Mullen also ignore the aspects of slavery, particularly white supremacy and anti-Blackness, that animated twentieth-century US imperialism in the Caribbean, Latin America, and the Pacific. (Garrett-Scott 2021)

Additionally, *From Here to Equality* celebrates and casually introduces the ADOS movement to readers as innocuous.

Darity and Mullen state:

Unexpectedly, the 2018 congressional midterm elections were followed by an even greater surge of interest in black reparations. A movement blossomed in early 2019 on electronic internet platforms under the label #ADOS, an acronym for American Descendants of Slavery. This campaign asserts that black American descendants of persons enslaved in the

United States have a unique and exceptional claim on the nation's government for justice. (Darity and Mullen 2020)

Darity and Mullen's description of the ADOS 'campaign' is misleading and glosses over the movement's questionable beginnings, xenophobia, disinformation, voter suppression and online harassment (Media Matters 2019; SOVAW 2020; Stockman 2019).

The second pillar of ADOS legitimacy is Dr Cornel West. West participated in several online ADOS forums and was a speaker at the ADOS 2019 conference. During a 2019 speech, West repeated the talking points of ADOS, minimising slavery and its impact on the Caribbean, stating:

I know my dear sister Yvette Carnell and others have been trying to zero in on the varieties of Blackness in the United States. And it's very important. We ought to love all people, we ought to love all Black people; but when you come from a people that have been enslaved in their own country and built that country and still ended up being lynched after they were so-called freed. There was no Jim Crow in Jamaica. There was no Jim Crow in Barbados. No Jim Crow in Antigua. No Jim Crow in St. Kitts. We love our brothers and sister there but no Jim Crow there. (West 2019)

The third pillar of ADOS legitimacy is Dr Kevin W. Cosby, the President of Simmons College of Kentucky, the site of the 2019 ADOS conference (Corsey 2019). Cosby has repeatedly used the institution's resources to host online forums featuring ADOS co-founders. Cosby pushes the ADOS nativist ideology into spiritualism. He posts 'ADOS Sermons' online and refers to Black immigrants as

'PIMPS' and 'replacement negroes' (Cosby 2020; Moore 2020). Cosby, West, Carnell and Moore promoted an initiative called the National Coalition of Churches for Reparations to attract Black church leaders to the ADOS movement (Simmons College 2020).

Protecting Pan-Africanist movements from disinformation

Academics, researchers and activists are taking notice of the ADOS movement's usage of disinformation on Black communities in digital spaces, with various bad actors participating. In 2019, Media Matters warned that white supremacists planned to use the ADOS hashtag on social media with the specific purpose of confusing Black communities (Media Matters staff 2019). They planned to create accounts using 'digital Black face', the practice of a non-Black person pretending to be Black through a social media account (Freelon et al. 2020). Shireen Mitchell of Stop Online Violence Against Women (SOVAW) warned that bots were using the ADOS hashtag as part of a coordinated Black voter suppression effort (SOVAW 2020). In January 2020, I published a report detailing part of the ADOS movement's origins and its harassment tactic referred to as 'swarming' done by ADOS members online (Aiwuyor 2020).

In February 2021, Harvard Kennedy School's *MisInformation Review* published 'Disinformation creep: ADOS and the strategic weaponisation of breaking news'. The researchers did a content analysis of 534,000 #ADOS tweets. Their analysis found that ADOS co-founders Carnell and Moore used breaking news cycles to

manipulate online discussions and move Black communities towards adopting a right-wing agenda.

The authors referred to this as:

... disinformation creep, a phenomenon in which legitimate positions and information are slightly distorted and reinterpreted to leverage a separate position entirely, one that may even be at odds with the interests that it purports to support. (Nkonde et al. 2021)

From #BlackLivesMatter to #EndSARS, Pan-Africanism's future depends on increased awareness of online disinformation campaigns, indoctrination and digital Black face. The rise of ADOS must not be treated as a one-time event. The manipulation of Black social media users coupled with the promotion of Black 'isolationism' threatens Pan-African activism's future growth and can recur under new groups or campaigns.

Activism has become heavily dependent on digital spaces for education, discourse, advocacy and collaboration. Pan-Africanists must develop and implement strategies to counter disinformation campaigns and protect Black communities from Trojan Horse initiatives or 'disinformation creep' seeking to disrupt Black activist movements. There must also be continued education in digital media and strategic communications.

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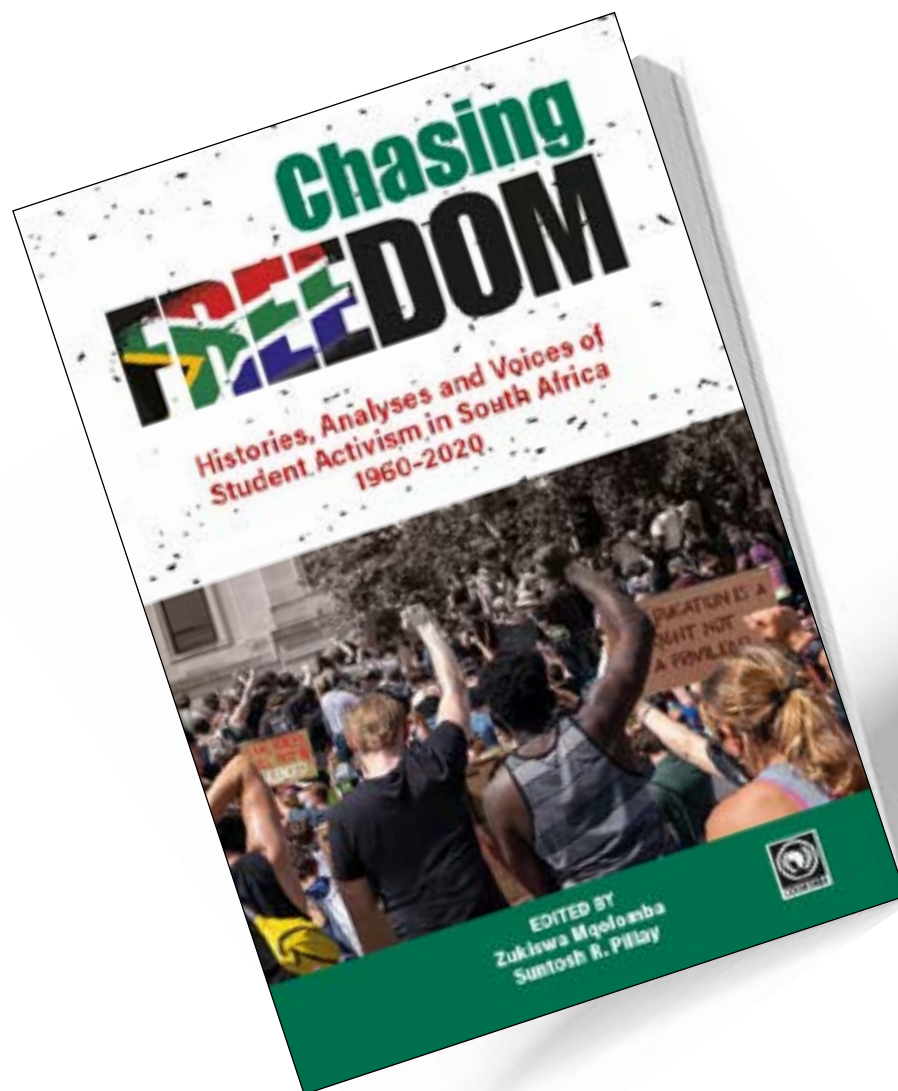
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FORTHCOMING / À PARAÎTRE



This book covers diverse histories of student movements in post-apartheid South Africa, taking note of the historical moment of the 1976 student uprisings and the evolution of student activism since that seminal event. Decolonization and reform of the higher education sector are important themes of the book. The volume aims to understand how student movements comprehend and articulate demands for the process of decolonization and Africanization of the curriculum, their transformative effect on the university and the role that a decolonized and African university should play in South African society's pursuit of freedom. The book explores transformation of universities specifically with regard to race, gender, patriarchy, sexuality, and people living with disabilities in relation to student experiences. The book also deals with aspects related to institutional racism, funding, class, access, violence, and student services. It explores the nature of contemporary student mobilization as a quest for education as freedom in a democratic country, deconstructing the Rhodes Must Fall and Fees Must Fall movements that have reignited interest in the role of student activism in South African society. This book is timeless and timely: celebrating and critiquing student activism in transforming higher education, society and our times.