

The rumblings of a madman, a racist, or both?

Written by SA Correspondent

Tuesday, 09 November 2010 21:26 - Last Updated Tuesday, 09 November 2010 21:35

BLACKS CAN'T BE RACIST by Andile Mngxitama

The following is a transcribed version of a talk given by Andile Mngxitama at Wits University on an essay he wrote, titled "Blacks can't be Racist". He gave the talk to a full house in August 2010.

The university is a great example of how you want to think about the continuation of racism or the white-supremacist project...if you look at how the university is organised. I was thinking Wits is the epitome of white supremacy and I know that Black thinking is outlawed at Wits, by and large. If you look at any of the courses that you do, check the readings that they give you and try to make a study of how many of them, most of the time will be African thinkers or writers....very few. Now, I thought I should introduce to you...you don't have to agree with what I say but I hope you can do this. There are two critical thinkers in this country that you know the university will not talk about. The first one is Lewis Nkosi. Lewis Nkosi comes from a writing sort of background. Check his writings, check his attitude to knowledge, check his attitude to the Black condition....the Black question and I want to dedicate this talk today to him and to the late Professor Archie Mafeje. Archie Mafeje single-handedly....by 34 he was a full professor...if you study anthropology I know that they haven't told you about him because he single-handedly destroyed the science of anthropology and showed it to be colonial studies...single-handedly. And he was not like me, he was not howling, he did very detailed scientific studies and in fact if you want to go to Archie Mafeje online you will find his debates with other white scholars in that field but I know that Wits is not going to tell you about that, the white professors are not going to tell you about Archie Mafeje. So I want to dedicate this talk to both Lewis Nkosi who is very ill right now, he is a very sick man and he's here in South Africa and to Archie Mafeje who has passed on. I think if you are serious about thinking and change you have to understand these people. There are many more but I thought today I should tell you about these two.

Now today I want to talk about "Blacks can't be Racist". I'm told by some people who were giving out pamphlets for this talk that some brothers and sisters said, "No, you can't say we're not racist, I am racist, I hate white people". (Laughter) And I was thinking how do you get around that point because that is the most natural response that Black people should have against white racism? We should hate people that oppress us. We should hate a system that oppresses us. But you see, we've been messed up so much that we can't even say it. But hatred is not going to take you very far, you see? So I was thinking that to deal with this problem you have to think about Malcolm X, because Malcolm X helps us to organize our thinking. You know the whole thing about the house negro and the field negro. You see, and this is what democracy has done, you have your field negro and your house negro is the guy who responds to whiteness. Back then on the plantation, the house negro was given leftover food, given the clothes of the master and he loved the master and he spoke like the master and in fact when the house of the master was on fire he wanted to save it and when the master was sick he prayed to the Lord and said, "God, please save us". He never even said "save the

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master”, he said, “save us”. The house negroes, one of the problems [with them] is that, even when they could hear the agony and cries of the field negroes being beaten they still did not accept that the whole institution of slavery was based on violence. They loved the house of the master so much that they wanted to save it. The field negroes, on the other hand, just like those sisters and brothers who were saying they hate white people, when the master was sick, they prayed to their Black God that the master must die. When the house of the master was on fire, they prayed to their Black God that more wind must come and burn down the whole place. So those are field negroes. At the end of the day, whatever we say, we are going to come back to this question: Are we field negroes or are we house negroes? That is the bottom line. If you understand democracy and if you understand the place of Black people...it's going to come back to that question. Now, I'm quickly going to show us how we were created as Black people, [in order] to help us deal with the issue of racism.

New Frank Talk number 3, this red one, says, “Black s can't be Racist”. Now, the context is this that in 2008 something called the Forum for Black Journalists, they invited the president of the ANC, Jacob Zuma into their forum to address them, in a closed meeting, it was not a press conference. White journalists decided to gatecrash this meeting and the Black journalists said, “You can't do this, this is white arrogance”. And the white journalists went to the Human Rights Commission and complained that being excluded from that meeting is unconstitutional and also racist, so the Black journalists are racist by excluding white journalists. So we had hearings at the HRC and I made a submission, this reading is based on that. It surprised me a lot, that after 350 years of systematic oppression of Black people, by racism, which benefits white people, when Black people gather in their own meeting, white people can insist that they want to be part of that. And then, of course complain about that. By the way, after that whole process, the HRC came to the conclusion that in fact, it is indeed true, that our Constitution does not allow Black people to be amongst themselves without supervision from white people. (Laughter) It went further to say that the Forum for Black Journalists must amend its constitution to include white people, otherwise it must stop to exist. Those who study law amongst you, must know Moreane, Advocate Moreane is a senior council, he wrote the appeal, I thought it was watertight, I thought they would win the appeal, again, from reading our Constitution very closely, the HRC could not help but come to the same conclusion that as Black people we cannot meet amongst ourselves, we cannot fight racism as Black people. That worried me a lot. How is it possible that in a racist country, Black people cannot be allowed to organize on their Black ness? And I said we need to look at this racism question. And I'm arguing in the book that what we need is conceptual fidelity. In other words, a chair is not a table, to make sense, you have to name things and give them their properties. Racism is not xenophobia, even if they are both about discrimination. It is not patriarchy even if, in some ways, patriarchy is as bad as racism. Racism describes a process of Black people's subjugation. If you don't limit this definition then racism becomes everything and everyone can be a victim of racism and Black people, as a result, are unable to make claims for reparations for slavery, for colonialism, for apartheid and continuing discrimination of Black people. You have to understand that. If racism is everything, if you say white people can become victims of racism, what you have done right there, is to wipe off the historical slate clean of the specialized, unique ways in which Black people have been oppressed over the ages. We alone, only we were enslaved in

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the manner that we were enslaved. Us alone, were colonized in the manner that we were colonized. Capitalism today and white civilization, if you like, are created out of these sort of oppressions that us as Black people, that us alone have suffered. This is the point I was trying to make. And this is the point we try to make in "Black s can't be Racist". Steve Biko helps us a lot here because he says that racism is defined as the subjugation of one group by another for the purpose of exploitation. Now, we Black people, we don't have the intention of subjugating anyone. I don't think when we talk about Black liberation we talk about oppressing anyone. And normally in Black wash we say that all we want is to share in the wealth of our country. And I can tell you about sharing in the wealth of the country; I hope you guys know who owns the wealth of our country right now. I hope you know that when you look at the JSE, that even with the BEE Black capitalists, who are part of the white supremacist project, we don't own, 10% of the JSE. Sixteen years later, the ANC has made sure that only 6% of land has been distributed to Black people and it means that more than 80% of the land is still in white hands. The ANC has ensured, that in the same period, more than 1 million Black people have been evicted from farms, by White farmers. I'm saying the ANC because the responsibility of transforming this society, must rest with the majority party that can, if it wants to change even the Constitution by getting a bit of support from [for example] the PAC. It hasn't. You see, this business of us suffering racism, does not mean that we should not take responsibility for the continuation of the oppression of Black people. We need to be clear: White people are just 10% [of the population], they are not a problem. Think about it. White people are not a problem and we should not waste too much time with them. (Laughter) The problem is this, and it's an unfortunate problem: the day Black people want to change this society to get the wealth, the gold, the platinum, the land, the people we are going to confront is the African National Congress as government. If you have not figured that out then you are in trouble.

Let me go back now to explain, in my view, the three related processes that create the Black person out of this white experience. You have to think of the Black as a creation of whiteness out of a very violent process. In South Africa it is three related dispossessions. The first dispossession is land dispossession, they dispossessed us of our land, it was a very violent process. The second dispossession is labour dispossession. They turned us into workers, servants. When they discovered gold and diamonds in the mid-1800s, they took land even when they did not need it. But because they wanted us to come and work...to work on their mines...because if we still have access to land then we don't want to come work for the white man. So they come to your village and take your land and force you to come and work for them. And Marxists tell us that it's a good thing to be a worker. Cecil John Rhodes said it back then, he said, we must tell these [Black] people, we must make sure that they're just going to become workers. Now people fight to become workers. You have to think about that. And every year they strike for about 10%, which is about R150. (Laughter) The third dispossession process is what I call the dispossession of the African being. The destruction of our Africanness was led by two processes: The one is their education, their white education and secondly their white God. Christinisation and education. When they give you their education and their God, when they are done with you, you can't remember who you are. (Laughter) And we must also say this, that it was not a peaceful process. Those people who read history, for example, will know the story of Tiyo Soga's father...how he surrendered his sons to white education. It was

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a painful process but he knew that if he did not surrender his sons to white education, then they would be destroyed. Their god was a very very violent god. If you did not surrender to their god of commerce, they would destroy your family and your communities. We must understand that. So when these three processes were concluded, we were sitting as we are now with a complex of inferiority and white people have a complex of superiority. But these things find expression in materiality. We know that Black people need to find jobs in order to live. When you finish at this university you are going to work for big companies owned by white people. Normally I say that if you think about the educational process of colonialism the first people they educated were the Xhosas, I call them the first coconuts. Nelson Mandela's mannerisms and Thabo Mbeki's mannerisms are part of that [colonial education]. They dress and speak like English gentlemen. They are Xhosa English gentlemen. And you know, in some ways, I really think they believe that they are. (Laughter) Chinweizu, the Nigerian scholar makes the point that, colonial education is almost like giving mice the education of cats. A mouse without an orientation and education of the cat, when it sees a cat it naturally runs away. That's the natural response. But if you take a mouse and you bring it to Wits and give it a lot of education and it assimilates and it believes itself to be a cat. When it sees a cat, it sees a friend. (Laughter) And now the problem is that the friend which is the cat...sometimes, it is hungry (Laughter). This is a problem.

Let's just go back then. I've just spoken about the creation of the Black out of this relationship of violence in our encounter with whiteness. I have not spoken about whiteness. I can simply say this: the benefits that accrue to whiteness, whether they are economic or social or political have become naturalised. Out of that whole violent process of marginalizing us Black people, marking us out in terms of our skin colour, for the sort of oppressions I have just mentioned, [white people] have accrued all these privileges. And in our thinking, in our thought processes, when you see a Black you can almost put together all those characteristics of Blackness – we are all these things which are not nice. When you see a white person, you don't even have to think about it. Maybe I should just go back a bit, when I came here in February, there was a place...I think they called it the Accommodations Office. There were a lot of Black students there. Some students at Wits travel by train to come to school. A [Black] student here fainted from lack of food. And do you know what the system does, what the education of the cat does to us? We are shameful. We take responsibility as if it's our fault. So we are beginning to police the system ourselves. Instead of saying wait, "we are entitled to be at university to be well fed, to be well housed, because this is our country". You don't organize on that basis, you feel individually ashamed. But that is part of the ideological process.

Now, I feel we must not waste too much time on whiteness but whites will get the privileges you will never get. Even the white revolutionary will get the privileges you will never get. Even when Joe Slovo died...he's buried right now in Soweto, you must go to his grave and you will see that he is the only person buried there identified by name amongst a lot of Black people who are sleeping there. I'm saying to you that even if a white person dies for you, you will be forgotten, they will not be forgotten. (Laughter) And I'm not saying you should not have white

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friends. It's okay to have white friends and girlfriends and that sort of thing. But I'm saying it's a lie to say that...you see at Wits they teach bad Sociology these days. They say race is a social construct therefore race has got no scientific basis. What is not socially constructed? Even God is socially constructed. Everything we know is socially constructed. Class and gender are also socially constructed. Why is it that race is socially constructed but has got no scientific basis? We as Black people we know that if you are aware and open your eyes, you can feel it. You know it. You know that you are Black when you walk into a room full of white people... you know it. (Laughter).

I'm going to round off by going back to a difficulty. Once you have established, and I think in some ways we have established the fact that we need to defend the discourse that says that, Blacks can't be racist. If you don't do that then you are not giving yourself a chance to make claims to this society about the reparations that are due to us as Black people. Then nguvula zibube ngesiXhosa, it's like open season for everyone (as the Xhosa would say). And what it means is that they are going to say that YOU are racist. The victim is going to be the perpetrator. And the best way to shut down a Black person who talks about racism is to say, "You are racist". But you see, for Black people the trauma of accepting that we are victims of racism, is serious. It is better not to accept it. It is better to pretend around that. It is better to think that we are all equal. Despite the fact that your people live in squatter camps, your people live in RDP houses. And that brings me to the ANC. You have to ask yourself the question that: how did the ANC think that it's okay to build an RDP house for Black people; a house which is worse than the house built by white people for Black people? How do you understand this? How do you understand this process? Now, I'm arguing, in conclusion that, the managers of white supremacy are Black people. In the 21st Century, whiteness needs a bit of melanin. A little bit of melanin to reproduce itself. So in South Africa in 1994 you have Nelson Mandela. In the United States of America today you have Obama, right? Has the Obama's presidency changed the condition of Black people who remain in the death rows? If you go to the death rows of America, the people being killed are Black people. If you go to the jails of America, the majority of people there are Black people. Obama has not touched that system. He has given it respectability. George Bush was good because he was clear, and he was also stupid about it: "We are going to bomb the world in their interests of white capital". Obama is bombing the world with a smile. Allowing our people to be killed with a smile. Now in South Africa it's the same thing; the ANC are the managers of the white supremacist system and we vote for them year in and year out. I'm going to be cruel and say, in the same way, if you look at Wits, the Vice Chancellor is a Black man, one of us. However, if you look at the culture and the interests of this institution, it remains white. The fact that he is sitting at the top of this institution, does not change the truth of Wits. (Applause) It is true also that, it is not just Wits. UCT was given to Mamphela Ramphele to run for a few years, she made sure that the institution did not change....she could not change it, in fact. This is the important thing. They would not allow her to change it. Before Professor Nongxa (the current Wits Vice Chancellor), there was another Black professor, Makgoba, who is now a professor at the university of Kwa-Zulu natal. I was on campus at the time. Makgoba arrived here with very very strange ideas of wanting to Africanise Wits. Very very quickly that man was out of this university (Laughter). One of the most celebrated, and I don't always agree with Mahmood Mamdani, but one of the celebrated

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social scientists who come from the African continent, contemporarily, is Mahmood Mamdani from Uganda. He went to UCT because he was becoming a celebrity intellectual, an academician, if you like, and when he arrived there he wanted to change the curriculum and to Africanise it. You can find this Mamdani controversy online, I think, and you can see what they did to him. The man did not stay there for two years, he had to be kicked out because he started saying, "You know, there are African scholars and thinkers that we can prescribe to these students". So I'm saying you have to think very hard about how white supremacy reproduces itself. In fact, to conclude that part of my talk, I must just say that it's not possible to have Obama as a Black president if you don't have two other Black people before him – and that is Condoleezza Rice and Collin Powel. It is important that when Collin Powel and Condoleezza Rice were appointed by the Republicans, the most conservative but you see, they could see that these [Black] people could serve the system...and very well. And so, Obama must be given a chance. More so because he is such a smart man, and he speaks so well and apparently he is handsome too. (Laughter)

I think I must stop there and maybe end by saying that the constitutional dispensation we have in South Africa is anti-Black itself and de Klerk...F.W. de Klerk, when he recalled...20 years after releasing Mandela, he said...and it's available online as well...he said, "actually when we negotiated with the ANC, to tell you the truth, we won in those negotiations". He said it. He said it with arrogance. He said it, I think earlier this year when 20 years of Mandela's release was being celebrated. And then somebody asked him how he could say that and he said, "You see, what we have done is...we knew that there was going to be a majority in parliament, we made sure that they couldn't make just ANY law that they wanted to make. So we guaranteed this by making a Constitutional court, which is informed by constitutional principles, which will make sure that these guys, even when they are in parliament and they make laws, those laws must become part of a constitutional review." For instance, if the ANC tomorrow wanted to say that let's have a law that will return the land to Black people without paying compensation, the constitutional court would strike that down as unconstitutional. You see? But I must also say that the ANC is not interested in testing even that (Laughter) because it has not tried to do that. It has not made any radical laws to return our land, to return our mineral resources and I would be very worried to give my mineral resources to the ANC under the current regime. Imagine what they will do when they can get access to these minerals. I mean, look at what they have done with Eskom, look at what they've done with everything else that we have given them to manage. All I'm saying is that even if they tried, the constitutional dispensation that they negotiated for and have accepted and are not testing, is anti-Black and let me stop there and let's have a conversation amongst ourselves. (Applause)

At this point, questions were taken from the audience by the facilitator.

QUESTIONS

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Question 1:

You talk about Black s not being racist, but we can also be...what is it...tribalistic? How does that venture into [the whole idea that] Black s can't be racist because if I'm racist to my fellow brother, eventually it means that I can be racist towards white people.

Question 2:

I heard you speaking on SAfm, I wanted to know...what do you think we should do with the continued threat of organisations like AgriSA that...{inaudible} and what do you think about the entitlement amongst some of us who are Black .

Question 3:

I'm interested in the fact that...do they (the ANC) have any other option to make the Constitution other than to incorporate the National Party coz you say the constitution is written to protect white interests, you say it's anti-Black . Did we have any other option or were we not going to go into some kind of civil war, if we did not go according to the route that we used, during the time that the [constitution was formulated].

Question 4:

I just want to engage you on the definition of racism...trying to understand the concept of conceptual fidelity. If racism is the subjugation of one group by another, why do we focus on one form of subjugation? Can't the subjugation be attitudinal? If I have an attitude but lack the power to subjugate, why can't I qualify as a racist? The only thing I seem to lack is the power, but if I had power then I would subjugate them. So I think conceptually that is something unhygienic. (Audience applauds)

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Andile Mngxitama:

You see, the first brother spoke about tribalism. For me that's what it is. The sort of intra-Black difficulties...that's tribalism. We know what it is. It's not racism. Even if it is a form of discrimination. You will not call tribalism patriarchy because that describes another form of [oppression]. You will not call anti-Semitism xenophobia. It seems to me a very straightforward question. Otherwise we don't know what we're talking about. Then...the black board is racist. It comes back to the issue of attitudes. I can have an attitude of...I don't like tall people. So what? I see tall people and I don't like them, but so what? But racism has material consequences. It comes back to your question about attitudes. It's not about, "I don't like weaves or I don't like dreadlocks". So what? Racism makes sure that there is Alexandra and there is Sandton. And in Alexandra there are Black people and in Sandton there are White people. The creation of Sandton is directly linked to the creation of Alexandra. Do you understand that logic? (Andile is addressing the fourth questioner directly).

Questioner: *Shakes his head.*

Andile Mngxitama: No? I can't help you. I can't help you. White wealth is created out of the subjugation of Black people, historically. You must tell me if I'm wrong there...that there were not laws, systematic laws that made sure that Black people and White people benefited. You must tell me that, "No, this is not true, historically this is not the trajectory we have followed". It seems to me that this is true so of course to lack attitude and lack power...my brother, if you lack the power to do this stuff that you imagine then we must stop the debate right there. I have the desire to kill you but I do not have the power to kill you. So what? You're fine...you continue with your life and I continue with my desire to kill you which has no material benefits. (Applause) And I do think that Black people have desires to kill white people (Laughter) But you see, when we talk about xenophobia, we killed those people. And I mean, I don't call it xenophobia, it is afrophobia. Because xenophobia means that you're killing foreigners. White people are visitors, investors, tourists and so on. (Laughter) So even if we wanted to [kill white people] we don't have the power. In this essay (Black s can't be Racist), there is a very interesting passage where James Baldwin talks to this white woman....she was in Guinea at the time, and she says, "there were 200 wild wild Black men and I was the only white woman sometimes in that plantation but they knew that if they touched me, maybe 20 or more of them would be killed". She says, "It was only white supremacy that ensured that I could control these very violent [Black] fighters as a white woman...as a lone white woman in the jungle". If you don't believe me then you must ask Mugabe what white people and white supremacy can do to you if you touch them. You can ask him. Or you can ask another brother...who's that brother who killed his white wife in the US? (Audience responds: OJ Simpson). Do you know where OJ Simpson is now? That man is in jail, hey? Serving 30 years or so for what? For taking his own stuff which was taken by some people and he went to take it back. They took him and they remembered...by the way, we must still sort this man out. Don't play around with White people, my friend. (Laughter)

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The other brother asked about the threat of white farmers and you know, this one white farmer cried on radio. She said, "These people, these [Black] farm workers...we love them, how can you say that there are human rights abuses against them"? And she cried...on radio. And they say if we give farm workers any more rights, [White farmers] are going to go away and we're going to die coz there are going to be food security problems so we must leave the situation as is and I don't want to tell you what's going on in farms. My brother, the point is a simple one: we must make a decision about whether we want to continue in this slavery path or we want to take our country back and maybe suffer some consequences but be like Zimbabwe. Give them another five years, and you'll see that country is going to...Let me tell you right now, South Africa is 350 years behind Zimbabwe. You will never touch the Zimbabweans on their capacity to take back their land, their economy and being an independent country. You will not. (Applause) You can check online a study done by Professor Ben Cousins on Masvingo, where people have taken land. Check it, it's there online. And I had stopped talking to Ben Cousins because he hated the Zimbabwean land reform process and I was supporting it at the time. He went there for three years to study, he came back and he said, he is shocked by the results. Those people who did occupy land live slightly better than those who didn't. That's number one. But even more, those White people who stayed behind...there are some people White people who stayed behind...their relationship with Black people in Zimbabwe has dramatically improved. You see? If you take away the power to be racist, White people become nice people. (Laughter)

Then the question about whether in 1994, if we did not negotiate our rights away, was there another possibility that we had. You see, even if I accept that there was no other option, we have already had three [general] elections. You have the ANC with a two-thirds majority with the possibility of changing those conditions. There is no threat of a civil war, right now. The ANC controls the army, it controls...and I'm sure amongst us there are some people from intelligence. (Laughter) The question is: Soyika ntoni? What are we so scared of? What stops us from changing our country? I don't think there's any particular reason.

Question 5: I just wanted to ask: what's your point? You know, people are always complaining, but what are you going to do about it? At this point in time, what constructive things can you do about it coz there's no point in saying that we're not supposed to be at varsity coz that's what the white man wanted us to do. What do you want?

Question 6: In terms of land distribution, how do you trace the land? Do you trace it from say, the 1990s or the 1980s?

Andile Mngxitama: The sister says that we must stop complaining. I accept that point, that we

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must stop complaining but if we accept that this is a democratic plantation, if we accept that democracy does not serve us, I don't know whether we can legitimately claim that people must stop complaining. What we CAN say is that we need to say the next thing, which is organizing. But you see, it is also true that, we have a problem. Most of us Black people do not believe that we own this country. And so, first we need to work on our minds and this is part of that of process of working our minds. And I know that I am pushing the boundaries because I want you to be uncomfortable and start thinking about these questions because we don't think about these questions. We don't think about these questions. You know, I always make this example about trains. You must see, our people are packed in those trains like sardines, hanging outside the trains and we have accepted it as normal. That's what we call institutional violence. The fact that people go to bed without food in a country that exports most of its food, is something that should not be tolerated. But we're tolerating it, right? So all I'm saying is that we need to complain and we are very open to come to your residence or anywhere else to continue this discussion because there's a lot of discussion we need to have amongst ourselves.

I'm not saying we should not be at university...I was at university myself, and from time to time I try to register to do my PhD. The point is that: are you aware that you are getting the kind of education that wants to make you into a cat? You can take some of this education and use it to serve the Black cause. (Applause) I think we can turn these things around. The problem is when we accept them as natural, as a natural progression and then you stop thinking about the Black larger agenda.

The question about how we trace our land. The thing is I don't care if you are from Rwanda or whether I arrived here in the 2nd Century, it doesn't matter. The point is that this is an African continent. And the argument is a simple one, even the white people who are here; we are not saying they must go away. We are simply saying, can't we just share, equally...all of us? This is the only thing we are saying. But these other guys don't want to share. This is the problem. (Laughter) They don't want to share the thing they took from us. That's what makes things even worse. All we want is an equal share of the wealth, the land and all other profits. In fact, in Black wash we say that we want Black socialism and it's different from these people talking about scientific socialism and workers. Workers will be liberated by us. Workers only want a salary, they will not go very far. We say Black socialism...Black socialism says that everyone of us sitting here should be a shareholder in the company that is called South Africa. All the wealth that is in this country...me and you at the end of the financial year should be able to say, it's 10% that we are going to get of the trillions that (South Africa) is going to make. Some they'll take to education, health, roads and then they will say okay, we will declare dividends. So me and you will have R2mil in our pockets. Why must Tokyo Sexwale and the Oppenheimers take all the billions and me and you not benefit from gold and the diamonds of this country? That is what we call Black socialism.

Andile Mngxitama is the publisher of New Frank Talk of which Black s can't be Racist, is one

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Written by SA Correspondent

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