**The Western Erasure of African Tragedy**

*Media coverage of the crash of Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302 framed a horrifying accident in appallingly familiar ways.*

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On Sunday morning, an Ethiopian Airlines jetliner crashed shortly after leaving Bole International Airport in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia’s capital, en route to Nairobi, the capital city of neighboring Kenya. Minutes after takeoff, the Boeing 737 Max 8—the same model of aircraft that went down in Indonesia several months ago—lost contact with air-traffic controllers. Soon after, the aircraft crashed; all 157 people on board Flight 302, including the crew, died.

According to a list shared by Ethiopian Airlines following the crash, these passengers hailed from 35 countries. Several nations suffered more than five casualties—among them, Kenya, Canada, Ethiopia, China, Italy, the United States, France, the United Kingdom, and Egypt. In the hours following initial reports, the corners of Twitter, WhatsApp, and Facebook frequented by African users were filled with shock and horror, mourning and disbelief. The crash seemed senseless, and its human toll devastating.

But in the aftermath of the tragedy, many Western media outlets reported the news with unevenly rationed compassion. Some stoked unfounded suspicions about the caliber of the airline itself. Others stripped their reporting of emphasis on Africa almost entirely, framing the tragedy chiefly in terms of its impact on non-African passengers and organizations.

On a broadcast of the Turkish channel *TRTWorld*, for example, the British anchor Maria Ramos asserted that Ethiopian Airlines had a “poor safety record historically,” a baseless claim that the British aviation analyst Alex Macheras challenged on air, even after Ramos suggested that a 1996 hijacking attempt made the African airline categorically unsafe. (Macheras also contextualized Ethiopian Airlines’ record, by comparing it to that of American and European carriers such as United Airlines, Air France, and American Airlines.) On Twitter, the *Financial Times’* East Africa–based reporter pondered in a now-deleted tweet whether “questions may well be asked about the pace of the carrier’s rapid expansion since 2010,” despite acknowledging that the reasons for the crash remained unknown.

Elsewhere, Western publications engaged in selective reporting about the deceased. *The Washington Post*, for example, led its homepage coverage Sunday with a headline that informed readers only that “Eight Americans among 157 people killed in Ethiopian Airlines crash.” (The Washington metropolitan area has the largest population of Ethiopian descent outside the country itself.) In a tweet about the national background of the deceased, *the Associated Press* listed eight nations affected by the crash. Not one of the countries mentioned in the AP’s list is populated by black Africans. This, despite the fact that Kenya topped the list of the deceased, with 32, and nine Ethiopians were on board. On *CNN* and *BBC News*, the presence of American and British nationals respectively is what drew narrative prominence. (In a brutal irony, the Nigerian writer Pius Adesanmi, author of *You’re Not a Country, Africa*, was among those on the flight.)

For many African readers, and other black people across the diaspora, it is perhaps unsurprising that Western media outlets would fail to report on a tragedy as devastating as the Ethiopian Airlines crash as—first and foremost—an African tragedy. Both the impulse to question the largest African air carrier’s credibility and the hyper-focus on Western passengers are consistent with the pervasive, long-running Western disdain for—or simple inability to empathize with—people of African descent. Since the advent of the transatlantic slave trade, Africa has been treated largely as a repository for the Western world’s fears (and during the colonial era, as the site of Europe’s most dangerous and banal desires). Africa’s residents and descendants, then, are more often portrayed as threats than as people.

Consider the recent *New York Times* reporting on the January terrorist attack in Nairobi, during which 21 people were killed. The outlet’s first article about the assault on the luxury hotel and office complex in Kenya’s capital was tweeted with a photo of three dead Kenyan men, their bullet-riddled bodies slumped over chairs on the hotel’s veranda. The photo of the deceased men was also the lead image on the article page. This was a tone-deaf decision that magnified the damage of the initial tragedy by failing to account for the image’s psychological impact. The photo drew a swift backlash, particularly from Kenyan readers and others with ties to the continent, who noted that the Times frequently covers violent crime in the United States and Europe without posting gruesome images of slain victims.

But rather than remove the disturbing photo, the Times published a conversation with two editors about the decision to share it. One acknowledged that “there are people in the newsroom who felt in retrospect that we shouldn’t have run the Nairobi photo,” and said that the Times “can do a better job of having consistent standards that apply across the world.”

In this case, as in the frequent proliferation of videos and photos of black people killed by police in the United States and of Africans drowning in the Mediterranean during attempted migrations to Europe, the most common justification for sharing macabre imagery is that the images might spur an otherwise unfamiliar viewer into action, or at least into feeling. Whether that sentiment manifests as a condescending pity or a more full-throated empathy, the effort to enlighten unfamiliar readers takes precedence over the psychological response that these sorts of images elicit from more directly affected groups, including the families of the deceased.

These gaps in consideration emerge from a troubling history. In her 2016 book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, the Tufts University professor Christina Sharpe argued that black people in America and around the world exist in a state of nonbeing, that the specter of slavery has rendered black pain and death fundamentally incomprehensible to the world: “Living in the wake means living the history and present of terror, from slavery to the present, as the ground of our everyday Black existence.”

In Sharpe’s analysis, black people do not easily earn sympathy, whether by dying in a plane crash or in an altercation with a police officer. Racist myths challenge the basic tenets of human compassion, even and especially in death. If black people are innately violent, if Africans live on an inherently backwards continent with fundamentally shoddy airlines, then their deaths are not tragedies. They are eventualities. They are facts, not stories.

But what might it look like to consider the immense loss of life each year at the hands of police as more than a statistic, to recount the life lived by each victim with deep attention to that person’s specific histories and particular quirks? How might the reporting on terrorist attacks and other tragedies that occur in Africa shift if considered outside the narrow framework with which Western outlets portray the continent? These are devastatingly simple questions. And many community-driven outlets have been answering them for years.

Shifting the tenor with which African stories, tragic or otherwise, are reported in Western media requires an acknowledgment of both African humanity and all the social forces that have conspired to erode it in the public consciousness. It demands accountability, not to Western audiences for whom proximity is the only shortcut to empathy—but to black victims and the readers who would most easily join their ranks.