# Artificial Intelligence & Black Intellect:
## The Cultural Nuances of 'Afropeanism'

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In collaboration with:

Centric

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# About the author

Dr. Abdul Haqq Baker is the founder and Managing Director of the 2009 award winning youth initiative, Strategy To Reach Empower & Educate Teenagers (STREET) UK, a former Lecturer in Terrorism Studies at the Centre of Studies in Terrorism and Political Violence (CSTPV) in the University of St Andrews and Research Fellow for the University of Exeter's European Muslim Research Centre. He was also chairman of Brixton Mosque, London between 1994 and 2009 where he successfully countered external extremist threats to the local Muslim community and successfully challenged the destructive propaganda that accompanied it.
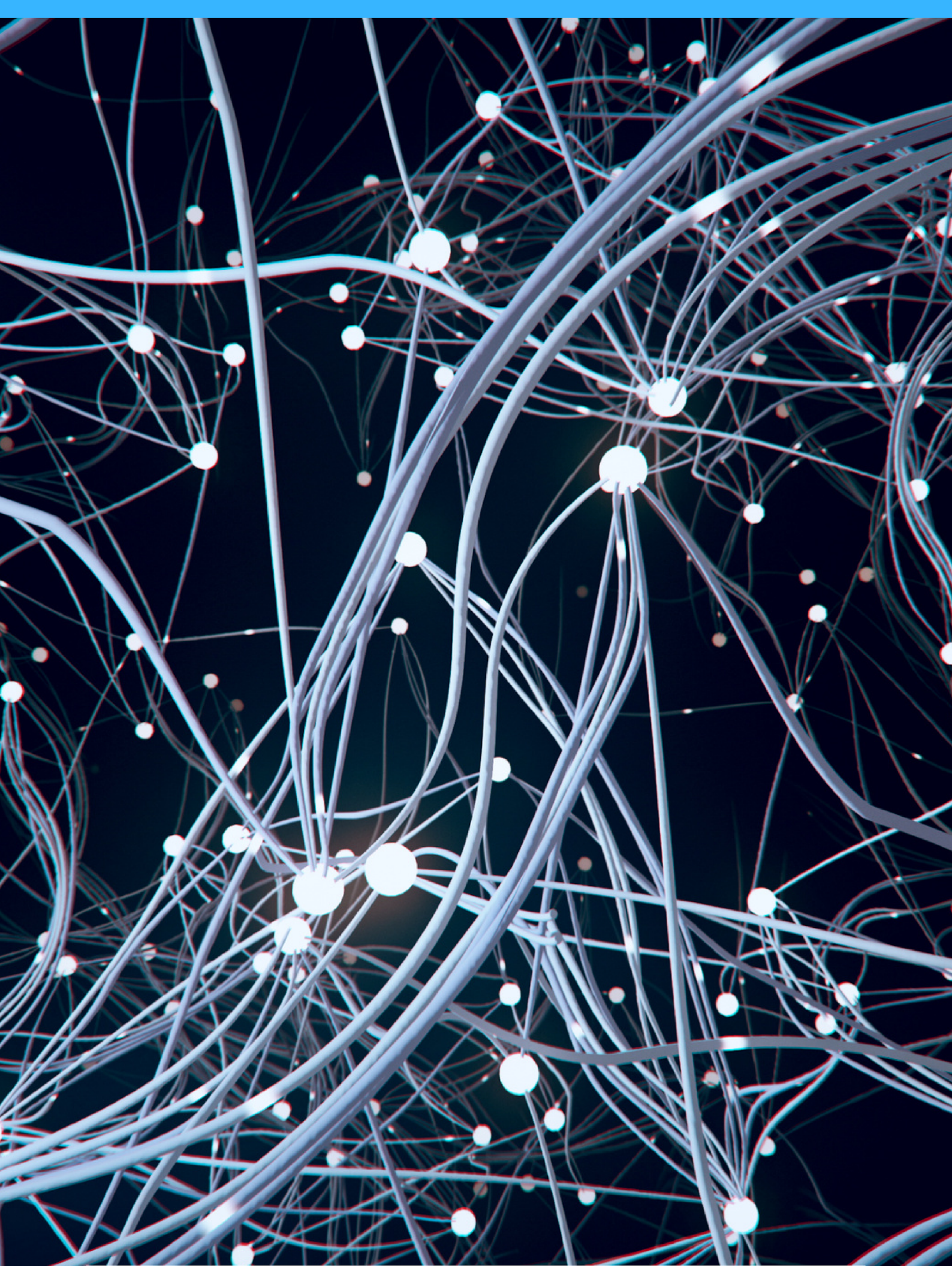
His strategic focus involves intervention frameworks that enable strategic community based and statutory collaborations/partnerships to address the multifaceted challenges faced by violent extremism and environments at risk of developing them. His STREET programme was subsequently cited by the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and British think- tank DEMOS, among others, as a model case study. Its effective approach towards youth engagement and intervention led to it winning the Preventing Violent Extremism Innovation award (17th February 2009) for the most innovative youth programme in 2008.

Abdul Haqq's insight, experiences and expertise in successfully challenging violent radicalisation has led to him being widely acknowledged as an authority on violent extremism and counter-radicalisation in the UK as well as an expert in the field of youth intervention projects. He has acted in the capacity of adviser and on occasion, expert witness regarding international terrorism cases.

Dr. **Anthony (Abdul Haqq) Baker MBA [Ed.], PhD**
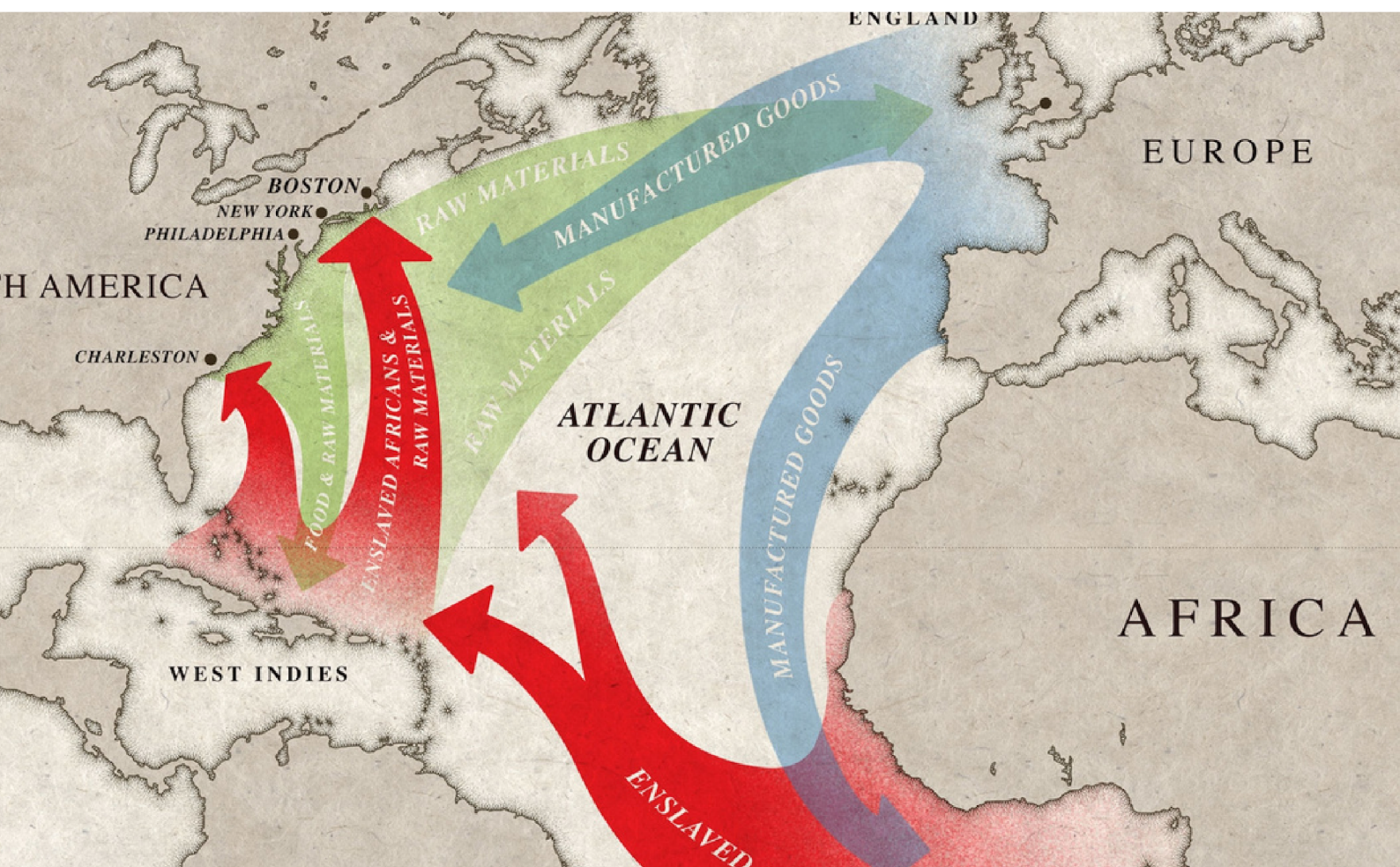
Strategic Director

# Introduction

It is an established fact that the first Industrial Revolution was effectively developed through profits of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Imperial Europe monetised an entire continent through the commodification of particular phenotypes, subjugating arguably millions of Africans, developing theories in the process, such as Darwinism and the science of Eugenics to further justify this wide scale oppression:

> Plantation slavery created unique patterns of trade and systems of work. These patterns and systems were adapted and used during the Industrial Revolution. Indeed some historians have argued that the plantation slavery system was the engine which helped create the Industrial Revolution.
>
> The historian Eric Williams describes how key technologies such as James Watt's steam engine improvements (1784) were developed using profits from slave trading merchants. When fully developed, it was sugar plantation owners who used these steam engines to increase efficiency by replacing horses.
>
> The huge profits that came from plantation slavery in the Americas and the new industries that were created to process goods imported from these plantations changed Britain dramatically. It went from being an agricultural economy to an industrial one in Britain in the late eighteenth century.

The Triangular Slave Trade became the economic channel for the transportation of commerce, the most valuable asset being that of black African slaves.

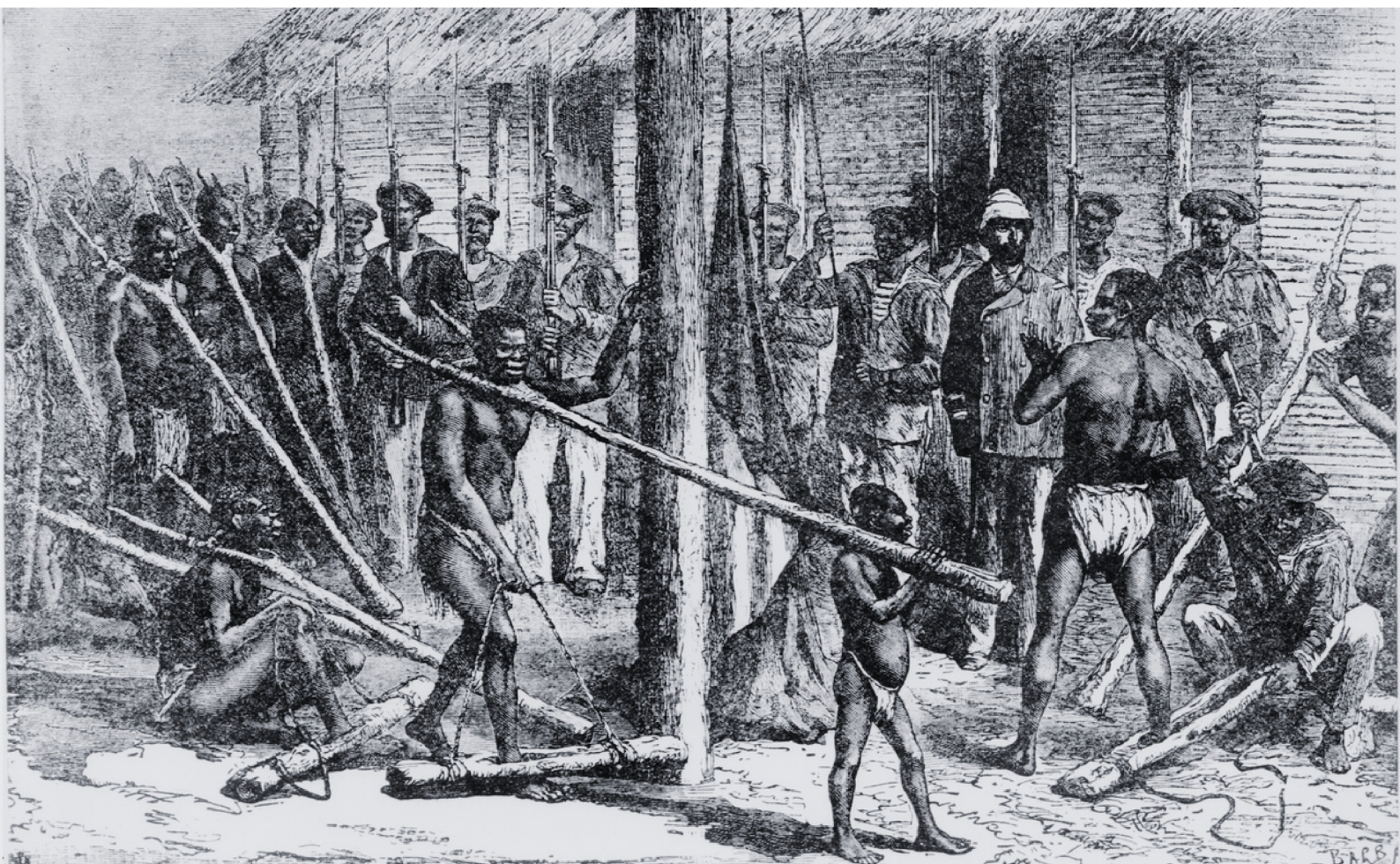The 3-stage journey can be described as follows:

1. A British ship carrying trade goods set sail from Britain, bound for West Africa.

In 1700, a slave cost about £3-worth of traded goods (cloth, guns, gunpowder and brandy).

2. The slave ship then sailed across the Atlantic to the West Indies – this leg of the voyage was called the 'Middle Passage'.

On arrival in the West Indies, enslaved people were sold at auction. In 1700, the selling price of an enslaved person in the West Indies was £20.

3. Some ships then loaded up with sugar and rum to sell in Britain, before making the voyage back home. (2)

# Reclaiming Spaces;
# Redefining Boundaries

Referencing the above-mentioned historical context is important if we are to reclaim and redefine equitable parameters that have, up until now, systematically distorted or obscured the less edifying legacy of the first industrial era. The latest discourse regarding reparations for descendants of slaves has gathered international momentum with the acknowledgment of global institutions and aristocratic dynasties that have profited immeasurably from their forebears. Contrast this with generations that continue to suffer both inherited trauma and poverty emanating from slavery to understand the urgency with which such societal imbalances need to be redressed.

Today, the 4th and latest Revolution – Digitalisation – affords marginalised communities the opportunity to participate in, as well as influence, the direction of travel insofar as this rapidly advancing technological age defines our present and future existence. In order to avoid once again becoming subservient to or, exploited by scientific and/or technological advancements of the era, it is imperative to engage with and utilise Artificial Intelligence (AI) to our advantage.

AI algorithms are increasingly providing Caucasian classifications as the standard upon which non-white ethnicities are being subjected, yet again:

> Facebook users who watched a newspaper video featuring black men were asked if they wanted to "keep seeing videos about primates" by an artificial-intelligence recommendation system... It is the latest in a long-running series of errors that have raised concerns over racial bias in AI. (3)

More recently, we read:

> Artificial intelligence has produced its idea of what the "ideal" man and woman look like, based on social media data and results on the World Wide Web.

> The AI images of men and women were created through engagement analytics on social media, using tools to look at billions of images of people...images of women tended to have a bias toward blonde hair, brown eyes and olive skin - while for men, there was a bias toward brown hair, brown eyes and olive skin. (4)

This should not come as a surprise due to the existing and pervasive societal apparatus that maintains such inherent racism. In fact, as Robin DiAngelo elucidates:

> Being perceived as white carries more than a mere racial classification; it is a social and institutional status and identity imbued with legal, political, economic, and social rights and privileges denied to others. (5)

Achille Mbembe further highlights:

> The fierce colonial desire to divide and classify, to create hierarchies and produce difference, leaves behind scars. (6)

To reiterate, the latest manifestation of Europeanised whitewashing as it relates to AI configurations should come as no surprise, particularly in view of the foundations upon which it has been predicated; namely, the legacy of imperialism. The ensuing threat, however, is our ineptitude to proactively (as opposed to reactively) address this attempted artificial standardisation because subsequent failure to do so will be detrimental generationally until the next revolution. One only has to look at the damaging effects of eugenics and its continuing influence on particular aspects of research today (i.e. Statistics):

> **The eugenics movement's greatest holy warrior was Karl Pearson, the person primarily recognised today as having created the discipline of mathematical statistics... Pearson had extreme, racist political views, and eugenics provided a language to argue for those positions...**
>
> **Pearson considered the colonial genocide in America to be a great triumph because "in place of the red man, contributing practically nothing to the work and thought of the world, we have a great nation, mistress of many arts, and able...to contribute much to the common stock of civilized man." (7)**

# Throwing AI in the
## BIN (Black Identity Nexus)

**A nexus can be defined as follows:**

i. a connection or series of connections linking two or more things or

ii. a central or focal point

For the purpose of this article, both definitions will be used interchangeably as they relate to the contexts about to be discussed. My colleague and founder of Cen-Alliance, Centric and their associated entities, Dr. Shaun Danquah and I, have devised an encompassing strategy to address somewhat incongruent connections between diaspora of African descent, historically disconnected by slavery. Before reconnecting particular communities geographically, essential discussions must first ensue at localised levels in order to acknowledge long-standing cultural fissures that were originally implanted as a colonial strategy of divide and rule. This is seldom discussed due to an existing reluctance to highlight the heterogeneity existing among black communities, the preference being to project a unified façade of homogeneity. The latter has occasionally contributed toward the disadvantageous positioning of particular black communities due to their being blithely cobbled together under the BAME umbrella, arguably diminishing, instead of strengthening, their respective positions that remain culturally distinct. While not ignoring the consolidating effects of unity among such minorities, it is imperative to acknowledge the subtle institutional and societal constrictions imposed on them under these broad categorisations.

A Black Identity Nexus provides the opportunity for communities to forge their own amalgamations away from an institutionalised lens that invites carrot and stick boundaries within which they become dependent on government funding for myriad social enterprises. In contrast, the identity nexus will facilitate platforms for investment as a result of its interconnected socioeconomic, sociopolitical and sociocultural ecosystems, each defined and driven by the very communities among which they are developed. These ecosystems are encapsulated in an overarching geographical framework, designed to:
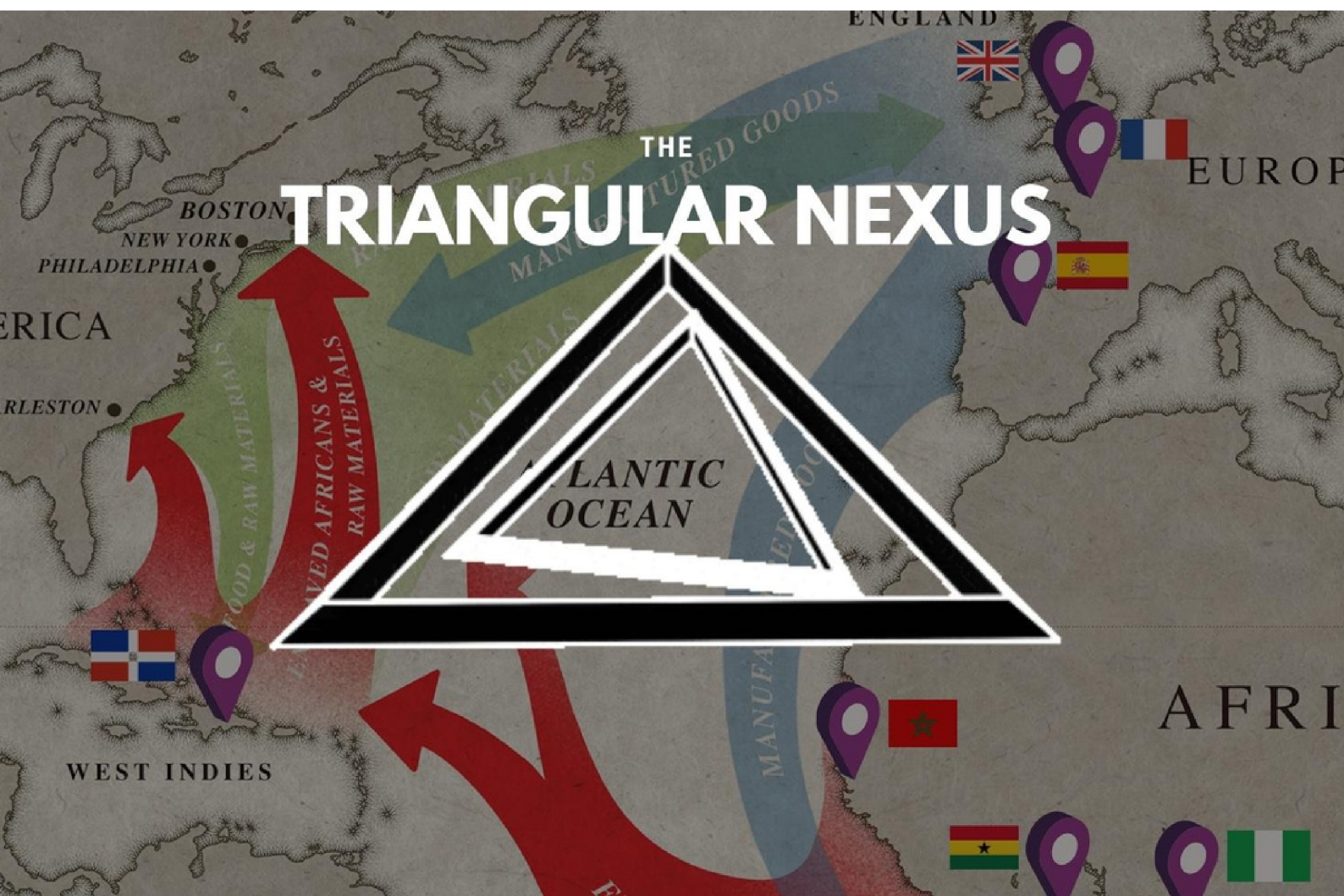
a) Redefine the Triangular Slave Trade Route (by replacing former imposed and repressive channels with new, voluntary avenues between communities)

b) Reconnect formerly displaced diaspora (providing opportunities for grassroots connectivity and learning), and

c) Reunite and [re]build across these continents.

This overarching Cen-Triangular Identity Nexus is a foundational framework upon which to develop AI strategies designed to elevate the above-mentioned socio-ecosystems of communities from the grassroots upwards. Citing Mbembe once again:

> **The potential fusion of capitalism and animism presents a further implication: the very distinct possibility that human beings will be transformed into animate things made up of coded digital data.** (8)

Recent warnings surrounding the threat of AI to humanity's existence could not be starker, much of this being the result of western hegemonic ideologies that continue to incorporate destructive elements to most, if not all, scientific and technological discoveries. The requirement – indeed necessity – for leadership in the field of AI to emerge from minority communities in the west, alongside non-western counterparts across the globe, is vital if a level playing field is to be achieved or, at the very least, a counterbalance is established to avoid further western dominance and weaponisation of latest technological advancements. As another colleague, Adnan Coker-Mensah, urges in his article (unpublished):

> **It is important to avoid being behind the curve and instead, be on or ahead of it. In other words, our communities must keep abreast with the pace of AI development as opposed to chasing or, adopting reactionary approaches that could result in our becoming guinea pigs for AI research due to a lack of knowledge. A proactive approach towards this latest technological advancement is necessary in order to create a sustainable pipeline that democratises opportunity for all irrespective of their societal status or background. (9)**

# Afropeanism:
## A Descriptor of Black Solidarity & Ownership?

Since the advent of the slave trade and commodification of Africans as black, the classification of ethnicities has largely been through a prism of whiteness. Today, ethnic majorities (i.e. Africa and the West Indies), as well as minorities (UK etc.), are divided over using the term Black, some considering it pejorative while others adopt it to signify power and excellence. However, the tide is shifting and an expansion on its definition is occurring as technology – AI in particular – increases in ability to control and indeed, enslave its end users:

Across early capitalism, the term "Black" referred only to the condition imposed on peoples of African origin...

Now, for the first time in human history, the term "Black" has been generalised. This new fungibility, this solubility, institutionalised as a new norm of existence and expanded to the entire planet is, what [is called] the Becoming Black of the World. (10)

Afropean is perhaps, an alternative, more palatable classification that encapsulates African, European and Caribbean heritages of the black diaspora due to its geographic and linguistic inclusivity. There is a viable opportunity to now eschew previous western categorisations due to their colonial connotations:

The term "Afropean" was coined by David Byrne and Marie Daulne...in 1991. Since then, it has been claimed by many men and women... (11)

Johnny Pitts, author of Afropean: Notes from Black Europe explains:

Afropean...seemed like something I could use as an anchor, but not in a monolithic way – it had to be allowed to shift and evolve, functioning as the antithesis to the nationalist narrative, to its ethnic absolutism, and its rhetoric of blood and soil. It was to be a zone of fusion and blurring. (12)
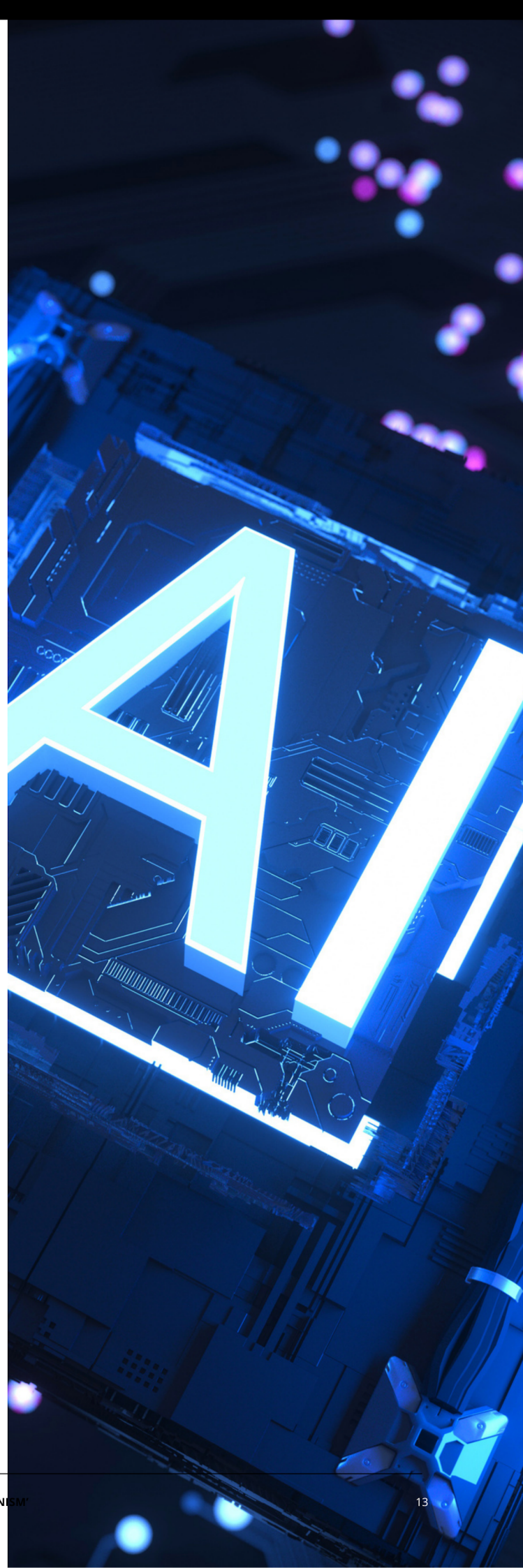
# Conclusion:

## 'The technology will be colonised' *(13)*

The above heading is the title for Chapter 10 of Annabel Sowemimo's recent publication. As one reviewer states, 'the book is a vital call to action.' I would add, what has been intimated throughout this article is the requirement to redefine our identities through lenses that are our own, constructing an ethnic mosaic reflective of our distinct characteristics, while proactively engaging today's technological advancements in order to adequately prepare our future together as active participants, as opposed to passive recipients. The age of black guinea pigs has to be consigned to a history never to be repeated. In conclusion, Sowemimo's concerns are likely to resonate with many as a clarion call before its too late:

Despite promises of innovation and creativity, the technology industry is still much the same as every other lucrative industry, in that its diversity statistics are appalling...

We don't just have problems with who creates technology and how it is implemented. We also need to think about the ways that this technology is being created. It appears that history is repeating itself and those that are marginalised due to low income, race or a legacy of colonisation seem to be the primary targets for experimentational technology. (14)

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