From Starving Child to Rebel-Pirate: The West’s New Imagery of a ‘Failed’ Somalia

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Within dominant Western scholarship, foreign policy and media discourses we have recently seen the rise of new images to explain Somalia’s ‘failure’. It is through the selective imagining of the ‘rebel-pirate’ and the fetish-like reproduction of his image that the West [un]makes Somalia. Through a critical analysis of existing literature, media coverage and state documents, I argue that such images have become weapons to reaffirm the stability of Western whiteness in the face of the Black Muslim threat inscribed onto Somali bodies. With the United Nation’s declaring an end to Somali famine on February 3rd, 2012, the image of the hungry Somali child – which has for so long mediated the West’s relationship to the region – has been formally put to bed. After tracing the genealogy of ‘failed state’ discourse, this paper asks how images become used by the West to demonstrate Somalia’s ‘failure’, and what the implications are when those images change.

Keywords: Somalia, ‘failed state’, anti-blackness, bodies as images, race, imperialism, anti-colonialism, hunger, al-Shabaab, piracy
What the general economy of race endlessly produces, then, is bodies as images – not images of bodies, but rather living images of race – Jared Sexton (2008, 29)

Introduction

If images are used to tell stories, then the West’s story of Somalia has experienced a recent shift. Once singular images of hungry children in need of charity now share narrative space with those of dangerous rebel-pirates, with the two existing in a sort of cause and effect relationship. As consumers of these images, we – and by ‘we’ I’m referring to the recipients of dominant Western imaging – are led to believe that the rebel-pirate is the foremost de-stabilizer of Somalia today. We are led to believe that it’s because of his insurgency that Western food aid is prevented from reaching Somalia’s hungry masses. These two sets of images exist in a semiotic relationship. Somalia is hungry because rebel-pirates destabilize it; just as rebel-pirates are believed to be produced, in part, by the Somali peoples’ scramble for finite resources in order to avoid going hungry. In other words, each image, along with the narrative power it evokes, explains the other: Somalia is hungry because it’s destabilized and it’s destabilized because it’s hungry. On one hand, the West projects images of al-Shabaab rebels and Gulf of Aden pirates in need of violent discipline. On the other hand, and parallel to the threat of the rebel-pirate, is the fading image of the starving child, disciplined into hungry submission. They are shown sleepy-eyed, subdued, dependent on Western charity, and often enclosed within the sanctuary space of the refugee camp. From these two divergent images we see that Somalia is doubly articulated. It is at once portrayed as subdued and subversive; a threat to be contained and in need of arms length charity. What remains constant is Somalia’s definition as ‘failed’. What also remains constant is the West’s imaging of particular Somali bodies as images, that is, living images of race. Here, I argue that the West’s change in image is reflective of its change in strategy, and explanatory of a shift away from humanitarian pretensions (i.e. food security) to a more militarized intervention (i.e. ‘War on Terror’). I use both analyses of anti-black racism and anti-colonial discursive frameworks in considering the intersections of anti-blackness and colonialism, and how the two operate in the West’s construction of Somali people and nationhood.

The African nation-state is always already failed. In the popular imagination of the West, it is never too far from its inevitable institutional death. To share a joke I recently told a friend, ‘If Africa has one foot in the grave, that’s only because the World Bank is holding the other foot as collateral’. In other words, Africa is only alive because it is believed to be too poor to die. It must first pay its debts. Until then, even if only hanging by a thread, the life that it has is indebted to foreign states, development agencies and corporate interests. There is something both commonsensical and inevitable about Africa’s looming ‘failure’. It’s like throwing a stone into a well. Even in the process of falling you know the stone will eventually hit
bottom; you know, with an almost calculable certainty, that if you listen hard enough you could hear the stone splashing into the water below. The outcome is taken-for-granted. The majority of African states are no different. Even in the process of falling we are made to know they will eventually hit bottom; we are made to know they will ultimately ‘fail’. In academic, political and media discourses Africa is popularly believed to be in a constant state of degradation and unraveling. It is little more than an ailing continent hastily glued together by foreign aid, international development industries, and the elusive promises of change put forth by corrupt politicians. For all intents and purposes the African nation-state is running on the fumes of a forgotten democracy, and as such, is commonly believed to be in need of Western imposition (or at least supervision) in establishing multiparty politics and human rights.

Cue Western states, which enter the scene as the benevolent caretakers of an infantile Africa, too inexperienced in the global community to care for itself. As such, Western caretaker states reserve the right to come and go as they please and see little relevance in the internationally recognized sovereignty or local capacities of African nation-states. What results is a paternalistic defense of Western imperialism in both its historical and contemporary forms. As Michael Ignatieff argued just months before the 2003 invasion of Iraq:

> Imperialism used to be the white man’s burden. This gave it a bad reputation. But imperialism doesn’t stop being necessary just because it becomes politically incorrect. Nations sometimes fail, and when they do, only outside help – imperial power – can get them back on their feet. Nation-building is the kind of imperialism you get in a human rights era, a time when great powers believe simultaneously in the right of small nations to govern themselves and in their own right to rule the world. (Ignatieff, 2002b)

Explicit in Ignatieff’s argument is the ‘fact’ of imperialism as a set of benevolent policies and practices oriented towards the South’s development of national security and human rights. He does well to obscure the violent and disempowering nature of Western intervention by framing it in the optimistic language of ‘nation-building’. He also leaves strategic moral and military space for the West’s intervention in/over the South as an exercise of its ‘right to rule the world’. Through this self-appointed right the West awards itself narrative control over which of the world’s geographies require imperialism and which are permitted to participate in acting it out. Although Ignatieff has since distanced himself from such blatant support for Western imperialism, we saw the same debate regain traction in the 2012 Presidential race. Where Governor Mitt Romney both condemned President Obama’s attempt at a ‘post-imperial’ foreign policy, and advocated in favor of a more militarized engagement with so-called ‘failed states’ that threaten US hegemony. Here is where self-identified centrists (Ignatieff) and the proud conservative right (Romney) meet. They share the strategic position that the only criteria needed to justify
Western imperialism is, first, a geography’s popular designation as ‘failed’, and second, the existence of a terror threat internal to that geography.

In considering case studies to examine the West’s imaging of ‘failed states’, Somalia seemed like the obvious choice. The Horn of Africa nation has come to epitomize state collapse, not just in Africa but also around the world. Each year it sits atop the Fund for Peace’s Failed State Index – a ranking of states produced by the American not-for-profit research group initiated by the Clinton administration in 1994 (Fund for Peace, 2012). Somalia is also ranked last in the Ibrahim Index for good governance (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2012). It is routinely described by academics as the ‘the very definition of failed state’ (Kaplan, 2006, 116), or as a ‘textbook failed state’ (Omaar in Jones, 2008, 185). All of which comes to influence US, Canadian, and European foreign policies, aid programs, and imperial projects in the Horn of Africa. In an era of otherwise-tumultuous geopolitics where states flow in and out of different categories depending on the month, Somalia is made a fixture. Along a global landscape of political turbulence and uncertainty it is permanently locked into its category. As the Economist so candidly put it, when it comes to attributing the title of ‘failure’ or not, ‘only Somalia unambiguously fits this definition’ (Jones, 2008, 185). There is something especially unambiguous about the quantifiable nature of ‘failure’. It’s often cited that Somalia has an estimated GDP (Purchasing Power Parity) of only $600 US; suffered two decades of interrupted – if not absented – state service delivery; a mere 32% enrollment for primary school-aged children; a life expectancy at birth of 51 years (World Bank, 2012); and ranks next to last globally – only second to Sierra Leone – in infant mortality under the age of five (UNICEF, 2012, 34). Although these statistics are useful in situating the country in a development studies context, they belong more to conversations framed by political economy than sociology of race. This paper approaches the subject of ‘failure’ from the perspective of racial(ized) symbolism rather than statistics, with one of the primary goals being to theorize beyond the very (quantitative) criteria by which ‘failure’ becomes popularly classified and understood.

There is something both permanent and reliable about Somalia. We are educated to believe that it will always require food aid and medical supplies, just as it will always be hungry and ravaged by war. Some NGOs even plan their famine-relief campaigns for the region up to five years in advance, confidently assuming that food crisis will still be an issue in the distant future (World Food Program, 2011). So we see that even in the unforeseen future there is still something to be seen in Somalia: more famine, more tribalism, more terror, and ultimately more ‘failure’. Somalia’s future becomes colonized by Western constructions of its ‘failed’ present. In this way the West succeeds at colonizing time itself. ‘With a single definitional category, the West can, and indeed has, written off the past, present and the future of the non-West’ (Sardar, 1999, 46). The future becomes pre-determined by the West’s reliance on Somalia as a reference point for poverty in the
world. Thus, images of starving Somali children remain some of the most recognizable and familiar images of poverty in the world today. Of course these images never capture Somali children playing, smiling, laughing, working, learning, loving etc. That is not the point. Instead, splashed across highway billboards, school textbooks and World Vision infomercials, these images present Somali children just as still and lifeless as the nation itself. These images present a static reality in which even after the cameras disappear, we can imagine the photographed child still sitting on the dusty roadside waiting to be re-discovered by another foreign journalist. These images perform their familiarity through the details we as viewers are trained to look for: sickly mothers, crying babies, flies on cheeks, snotty noses, bloated bellies, exposed ribs, extended hands, dusty roads, and crowded refugee camps. Photographed children are often asked to remove their shirts, pants and other clothing that conceals their body. It is necessary, in the West’s pornography of Third World famine, that the Somali child lays bare the credentials of their hunger; that they lay bare the suffering and desperation required by the West to qualify for its charity. The West demands it. It is only through these credentials that the Somali child’s body as image allows the West to understand itself as the child’s mirrored opposite: sympathetic, charitable, sovereign, physically and morally nourished, and crucially, as white.

It has come to the point where it would be intellectually dishonest to write about ‘failed state’ discourse without centering Somalia in the conversation. Since 1991 the country has been used as the barometer of collapse in the world, and to engage any critique of the discourse we must engage ‘the classic failed state. real failed state’, as former US Assistant Secretary for African Affairs Jendayi Frazer put it (Jones, 2008, 184). In making the case for Somalia’s central place in the conversation I am reminded of an old friend of mine, who after hearing about the outbreak of violence in post-Mubarak Egypt, asked if Egypt could become ‘another Somalia’. I responded that it was a different situation all together, which seemed to comfort her. Even though I said it was ‘different’ without speaking to which situation was more urgent, she simply assumed that since Somalia represents the world’s worst-case scenario, ‘different’ could only mean better.

‘Failed state’ discourse is always racialized. It becomes used to ascribe coded meanings of pre-modernity, barbarism, and cultural deficit. It is premised on eurocentric binaries of essentialized good and evil in a world that demands a much more nuanced approach to comparative international politics. Critical scholars who use the discourse to critique the West’s role in Somalia’s instability still cede the terms of debate to a flawed explanatory framework. Simply put, the discourse is plagued by an Orientalist gaze of the Other and incapable of explaining African governing crisis or the West’s responsibility in creating it. ‘Failed state’ discourse also reaffirms the West’s dependency on Somalia as a symbol of authentic poverty, through which it has come to educate itself on the recognition of poverty in general, and famine in particular. What do the various
fictions of Somalia do for the West? What do these same fictions do to Somalia? How do pretentions to poverty alleviation and development allow the West to maintain proxy control of the region for imperial purposes? The remainder of this paper traces the imagery through which Somali ‘failure’ has been imagined over the years. Moving from the image of the hungry child to the rebel-pirate, it argues that in the West's imperial toolbox exist many Somali bodies as images used to maintain a ‘failed’ Somalia in the Western imagination. Through a critical analysis of existing literature, media coverage and state documents, I argue that such images have become weapons to reaffirm the stability of Western whiteness in the face of the Black Muslim threat inscribed onto Somali bodies.

The paper is divided into four sections. First, I trace the genealogy of ‘failed state’ discourse and locate Somalia in its historical production. I employ key concepts put forth by Mbembe (2001; 2003), Fanon (1963; 1965; 1967), Sexton (2008; 2011) and Agathangelou (2010; 2012) in examining how the Somali nation space gets racialized, and the particular role of anti-blackness in shaping its ‘failure’. The second and third sections examine the Somali rebel and pirate separately. Here, I'm interested in how the rebel and pirate become constructed as living images of race, as well as the discursive meanings that lurk within them. I examine the particular themes that get mapped onto the rebel and pirate by Western imperial actors (i.e. Muslim extremism, civilizational intrusion, blackness as pre-modernity, blackness as a sexual threat). To do this, I refer to a few examples of Somali bodies as images, including the London Conference on Somalia held last year; the bombing of Somalia’s National Theatre, also last year; and the abduction of a Danish family by pirates in the Gulf of Aden, a year earlier. The last section takes a brief look at how spaces of Somali aid and refuge become gendered, and how Somali women figure in the colonial/imperial quest to put down rebel-pirate insurgency.

**Language as a Colonizing Tool: A brief history of Somalia and ‘failed state’ discourse**

The term ‘failed state’ first entered Western vocabulary in 1992 when Gerald Helman and Steven Ratner of *Foreign Policy* magazine – along with senior officials in the Clinton administration – published *Saving Failed States*. In the article they argue ‘a disturbing new phenomenon is emerging: the failed nation-state, utterly incapable of sustaining itself as a member of the international community’ (Helman & Ratner, 1992). Written only one year after the fall of Siad Barre’s government in Somalia, the article is largely a response to the lack of governing stability in the Horn of Africa. But more importantly, it was written as a call to reformulate US foreign policy in relation to formerly Soviet-aligned states following the Cold War. Ultimately, Helman and Ratner are asking a more imperial question obfuscated by the humanitarian pretensions of their article, which is, ‘If the Soviets have left the Third World then how can we take it back?’ ‘Failed state’ discourse originates in this moment of post-Cold War geopolitics; and
signals a renewed effort to name, measure and contain Third World geographies. Third World states that were once categorized as ‘Soviet-aligned’, ‘US-aligned’, or ‘non-aligned’, are now implicated in a new, highly politicized vocabulary that determines how and where they fit in the current configuration of the world. The same way the US once invaded Vietnam and Cuba to quash the rise of communism, the ‘failed state’ offers an equally useful pretext for invasion. If the former examples once signaled the threat of nuclear war, then the latter example signals the reality of an ongoing ‘War on Terror’.

Returning to the example of 1992 Somalia, we see that the term quickly made a jump from academic to popular vocabulary when US Ambassador to the United Nations, Madeline Albright, used it in inviting Western powers to ‘help lift [Somalia] from the category of a failed state into that of an emerging democracy’ (Albright, 1993). Once again humanitarian rhetoric was used to obscure the US’s imperial ambitions. Albright succeeded in socially engineering the public debate on Somalia. The Clinton administration’s growing likelihood of invasion and occupation became coded in the liberal dishonesties of ‘peacekeeping’, ‘relief campaigns’ and ‘transitional trusteeship’. In her short article Albright offered a foreshadowing of events to come when admitting, ‘military operations can complicate and temporarily slow humanitarian efforts. But critics are wrong to suggest that relief and development work in Somalia has stopped’. Her rationale for raising the possibility of military intervention was that since UN humanitarian missions intervened in Somalia, ‘children are no longer starving to death’ (Albright, 1993). With this brief reference, one long buried in the annals of foreign policy, and for the very first time since its introduction into Western lexicon, we see the first association made between ‘failed state’ discourse and the image of the starving child. It was not that the American public was ready to uncritically accept Somalia’s classification as a ‘failed state’, and thus ready to support another US-led invasion just two years after the Gulf War, but that Albright’s comments were read with the backdrop of images of starving children, who were mobilized as convincing symbols in support of intervention.

Arturo Escobar’s work has been foundational to critiques of dominant development studies (Escobar, 1995). He argues that international development industries have long been used to both cloak and facilitate state interests abroad. As one of the most actively deployed symbols of this project, ‘the symbolism of hunger...has proven powerful throughout the ages’, and often strategically deployed by Western governments as a ‘potent social and political force’ of public manipulation (Escobar, 1995, 102). Escobar observes that it is through symbolisms of hunger – which become visualized as sacks of rice with ‘US AID’ printed on them, dried-out crop fields, and emaciated bodies – that Western states raise support for otherwise-controversial interventionist projects. Hunger becomes an example of what Escobar elsewhere calls ‘cruel little wars’, or those discursive projects that seek to unmake and remake the Third World in the Western imaginary (Escobar, 2004, 214).
Development, he looks at the dehumanizing nature of hunger discourses; and how post-WWII famine and starvation in the South has created growing fields in Third World demography, nutrition, and child advocacy, with each field seeking to reduce human suffering to a neatly compacted statistic. Of course these fields are also based in the US, Britain, and other major Western research centers. Thus, they work to further empower Western development and state agents to professionalize Third World hunger. “[T]o be blunt, one could say that the body of the malnourished – the starving “African” portrayed on so many covers of Western magazines … is the most striking symbol of the power of the First World over the Third” (Escobar, 1995, 103).

Just as Escobar warns, Albright’s call to arms was strategically accompanied by images of starving children and child-killing warlords, both of which were said to pose a serious threat to American civility at home and its position as a moral authority abroad. Here, we must distinguish between what is read – Albright agitating war – with how it is read – the moral hostage-taking of the American public who believed that if the US state intervened, vulnerable children would be spared from starvation. Albright’s position was an ironic one, considering that in a nationally televised interview on May 12th, 1996, just three years after her public defense of starving Somali children, she justified the starvation of five hundred thousand Iraqi children as a result of post-Gulf War sanctions. When asked if the mass starvation of children was equitable to the weakening of Saddam Hussein’s government, she responded, ‘the price is worth it’.

Over the next two months the Clinton administration played upon public sentiments of white moralism by further drawing connections between ‘failed states’ and starving children, until it gained enough public support for its first invasion of Somalia on October 3rd, 1993. Clinton would hang on tight to ‘failed state’ discourse and come to depend on it as a rationale for US intervention. The discourse was even given central attention in his National Security Strategy for a New Century (1997). This document facilitated the eventual passing of the imperial torch so to speak, as George W. Bush preserved the discourse’s place in the US imperial project and oriented it towards the ‘War on Terror’. In both historical moments – the 1993 invasion of Somalia and ongoing ‘War on Terror’ – we should think critically about the instrumental role that ‘failed state’ terminology and discourse play in rationalizing Western interventions. There is a clear continuity between how the discourse operated in the moment immediately following the Cold War and how it operates today in the ‘War on Terror’. Jones observes that

In the post-Cold War era of ‘War on Terrorism’ the discourse of ‘state failure’ with its hierarchy of categories – ‘weak’, ‘fragile’, ‘failed’, ‘collapsed’ – legitimized intervention by identifying lack, inferiority and incapacity. (Jones, 2008, 198)

In recent years international doctrines like the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) have sought to formalize the cause and effect
relationship between claims of state ‘failure’ and Western imperialism. As one of the lead drafters of R2P, Michael Ignatieff has defended his position that when a state loses control of its domestic political climate, ‘other states have a responsibility to step in and provide the protection instead’ (Ignatieff, 2002a). Of course it is assumed by Ignatieff that the West always constitutes ‘other states’, and that there is no possibility for these dialectically prescribed roles to blur or change. The non-West will always be under threat of ‘failure’, and the West will always be tasked with saving it. R2P is a useful example of how ‘humanitarianism’ and ‘human rights’ have become code words for imperialism. In the post 9/11 world, where the West is said to be fearful of state fragility as a recipe for terrorism, Western ‘responsibility’ becomes a useful guise for the necessity of imperial conquest and resource extraction. ‘Failed states’, by default of their membership in this category, are believed to no longer exercise territorial sovereignty. In other words, a nation space with a ‘failed’ or absent state is no longer entitled to control that space. It is seen as vacant; waiting to be secured and developed; waiting to be violently captured and integrated back into the global community of states. Sexton notes that, although racialized bodies are only ever half invited into the discursive and material community of state sovereignty, the West shows the fastest ‘divestment of sovereignty at the site of the black body’ (Sexton in Agathangelou, 2010, 204).

What doctrines like R2P fail to address is by whose moral-ethical grounds ‘failure’ is identified, the asymmetrical and racialized terms under which the term is applied, and the discourse’s obvious function within imperialist projects. Policies like R2P are still being drafted to intellectualize and soften the historical violence and colonialism experienced by the South. They offer us an ‘imperialism lite’ in a world where human rights discourse has discouraged the outmoded, over-exposed, and unapologetic technologies of Western imperial violence. ‘Failed state’ discourse and its philosophical appendages were born from this very compromise. Without actually engaging such critiques of ‘failed state’ discourse, Ignatieff attributes R2P’s failures to the moral perfectionism of its critics. In an article published shortly after the doctrine was released, he responds to his critics in saying, ‘moral perfectionism is always the enemy of the possible and the practical. Doing the right thing appears to require the tenacity to do it when half the world thinks you are wrong’ (Ignatieff, 2002a). In the post 9/11 context, where fears of terrorism and political Islam are exploited daily, we must also think about how these fears are exacerbated by ‘failed state’ discourse, and how the term comes to vilify the geo-communities to which it is applied. More than anything else, we must pay close attention to the ways in which the discourse produces racialized identities demarcated by one’s access to the modern and pre-modern; civilization and savagery.

‘Failed states’ discourse is ultimately about race. Essentialized racial categories determine which political communities will succeed at governing themselves and which will fail. White/ened nations are associated with fiscal responsibility, service delivery, job growth,
rational leadership and social stability. While Black/ened nations are associated with fiscal disorganization, service implosion, clientelism, authoritarian leadership and social chaos. Nations are often placed in categories in which they do not belong. For example, given the current global economic crisis and volatility of Southern Europe, why aren’t Greece or Spain categorized as ‘failed’ especially when hundreds of thousands of protestors fill the streets of their capitals? How is it that Europe is completely exempt from ‘failure’ but the world of the Other, blackened by the civilizational shadow cast by the West, finds itself in a constant state of regression? There is a need to bring critical interrogation to the language of ‘failure’ to expose its more implicit racism. The West’s creation of the ‘failed state’ is little more than a conceptual Trojan horse, loaded with assumptions of premodernity, cultural barbarism, political volatility, and racial inferiority.

Blackness – defined in this instance as a set of aberrations and body politics born from the white supremacist imaginary – is deemed especially vulnerable to Western narratives of disease and collapse. If we consider how the discourse intersects with racial geographies, we see that of the 35 states the Fund for Peace considers to be either ‘failed’ or under immediate threat of ‘failure’, all are in the South and 22 are in Africa (Fund for Peace, 2012). Using the example of HIV/AIDS in Africa, Jared Sexton makes the argument that epidemic has become synonymous with Africa’s blackness, to the point where the two have become mutually generative (Sexton, 2008, 242). This is the result of a denied past by which Africa has been historicized as always without – health, civilization, humanity, governance etc. – and an already contaminated future in which the world will undergo a ‘globalization without Africa, a multiracialism without blacks’ (Sexton, 2008, 244). If the West’s increasingly militarized engagement with Gulf states in the post 9/11 era is the result of a clash of civilizations, then Africa, both before and after 9/11, is still incapable of achieving civilization at all.

From the colonial perspective, Africa is always ‘a mixture of the half-created and the incomplete’ (Mbembe, 2001, 3). The very logic of colonialism was to render Africa’s sense of historical memory incomplete. The benefits of this strategy are clear. When you control a people’s history you control their relationship to the past, sense of self worth and capability in the present, and the possibilities and limitations by which they imagine the future. In short, you control their understanding of self in relation to humanity. In this way we should understand history and humanity as being relationally linked, so that ‘the greater appreciation you have of your history, the greater the grasp and appreciation of your humanity’ (Karenga, 1987, 21). Fanon speaks of this logic in relation to Africa:

Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it. This work of devaluing pre-
In the West’s perverted logic of denial, Africa, as a result of the global perniciousness of anti-black racism, was always denied the capability of succeeding in the modern world. Whereas other Southern nation-states, even if they stand little chance at achieving eurocentric modernity through nation-state building, are at least granted the chance. For this reason critiquing ‘failed statism’ from the perspective of Third World solidarity or the North/South divide is limiting. Since the discourse is disproportionately unleashed on Africa in general and Somalia in particular.

Another feature of ‘failed state’ discourse is the intellectually shallow nature of its analysis, which is incapable of speaking to the historical, social and political conditions that lead to a state’s supposed ‘failure’ in the first place. Fundamentally, the discourse works to decontextualize struggling states by extricating them from the ongoing colonial power relations, global capitalist markets and asymmetrical terms of trade that contribute to, if not ensure, the perpetuation of ineffective governance. The discourse relies on simple terms of conversation that stand in for historical explanation. The use of terms like ‘failure’, ‘collapse’ and ‘basket case’ act ‘by way of tautology to form a substitute for historically informed social analysis and explanation’ (Jones, 2008, 184). In this way the discourse not only works without history but also against it. And yet its rise in mainstream media, international development and foreign policy has many scholars convinced. Once-critical scholars on Somalia are even starting to lend legitimacy to the ahistorical analysis offered by ‘failed statism’. In a recent editorial in The Guardian, in which he speaks optimistically of international trusteeship over Somalia, Ahmed Samatar says the besieged nation has become the ‘poster-child for wretchedness … primarily from the folly and abject failure of its leadership, as well as the derisory efforts of the international actors’ (Samatar, 2012). Samatar’s comments only mildly implicate the West in Somalia’s current problems and attribute the country’s real troubles to the leadership deficit of Somali peoples. By breathing renewed life into old stereotypes about African despotism and abject leadership (as if the story is ever that simple), Samatar’s comments become reminiscent of Rudyard Kipling’s White Man’s Burden, when the English writer encourages the White Man to save Africa from ‘the iron rule of kings’ (Kipling in Razack, 2004, xi). How else would order be restored to these seemingly orderless lands? With each geography labeled a ‘failure’ the West reaffirms itself as the arbiter of moral and political truth. Importantly, the West only sees itself as succeeding in and through the ‘failure’ of the non-West. To return to Ignatieff’s earlier point, the West is only helping as much as it is intervening.

The Somalia painted by ‘failed state’ discourse is charity dependent. It is the subject of food drives and international adoption schemes. We are told that for just three cents a day we can pluck one of its children from the chaos and provide them drinkable water, food and even a
Western education.\textsuperscript{11} The ‘failed’ Somalia is a collection of the broken dreams and failed promises of the nation-building project. It raises the question of whether decolonization is a good thing for colonized peoples, or whether we can benefit from remaining stewards of the West. The ‘failed’ Somalia is no longer a struggling child forced to learn quickly in a community of modern states, but is without a modern birth all together. To more closely examine the new symbols of Somalia’s ‘failure’, let us now turn our attention to the al-Shabaab rebel.

\textbf{Emergence of ‘the Rebel’ in the Western Imagination}

We can begin to examine the rebel-pirate by looking at the first half of his construction: ‘the rebel’. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, white fears congregated around the fact that the ‘terrorists’ responsible were both faceless and nameless. As a proactive response, ‘right after 9/11, the [US and allied] state, organizations, and independent citizens produced cartoons, images, and films that made terrorism legible’ (Agathangelou, 2012, 29). These images sought to make the ‘terrorist’ figure knowable again. I examine the Somali rebel in this context of post-9/11 fears and desires to come to know and legislate the ‘terrorist’. For the West, knowing the ‘terrorist’ and creating a legibility by which they can be recognized is where power resides. In her work examining popular images produced right after 9/11, Agathangelou describes this process as an imperial quest to invent an ‘onto-slave-visuality’; otherwise known as the images Western actors come to rely on to visualize ‘terror’, its subversive threat, and the potential for controlling it. ‘Onto-slave-visuality’ can be summarized as the process that ‘consistently mobilizes that which is profoundly feared and violently expunged, but not explicitly visible’ (Agathangelou, 2012, 30).

As apparent in \textit{Black Hawk Down} (2001) and other popular films on Somalia, Western military intervention is imagined to unfold along a standard plotline: \textit{Heroic white saviors bravely enter the world of the Other. They smoke the cowardly rebels out of the caves and dusty huts they hide in, and persevere to defeat them in order to liberate the savage nation}. Within this standard plotline is a spectrum of specific bodies as images. Visual media and state propaganda are mobilized to create racialized portraits of Somali bodies. Black bodies are carefully curated to tell stories of ‘Somalia the hungry’, ‘Somalia the war-torn’, ‘Somalia the terrorist’, and ‘Somalia the Islamist’. The West is in constant need of such narratives to perform its self-glorified position as imperial savior. What is crucial to this narrative, however, is that the savage masses show their gratitude for foreign military intervention and its expulsion of the rebels (Razack, 2004, 45). When we hear Western heads of state argue their case for military intervention, they do everything short of promise parades led by grateful natives and flowers being thrown at the feet of incoming soldiers. In reality, both during and after the US invasion (1993) and the US-sponsored invasions by Ethiopia (2006, 2011), the Somali
masses showed widespread disgust and anti-colonial resistance rather than gratitude. And yet there was talk of a fourth US-sponsored invasion at the recent London Conference on Somalia held on February 23rd of last year, where leaders of extractive industry, foreign ministers, and NGOs gathered to move discussions away from famine and towards domestic insurgency. Why is the international community still considering invasion and occupation when it has only proved to further destabilize the country? Why does the US political hydra speak peace and reconciliation with one mouth and containment and annihilation with the others? To find the answer to these questions we must first consider how imperial violence is itself a process of identity-making. The West must perform its moral and civilizing might in/through its military might. The nature of this performance is often contradictory. There is a bizarre connection between the contradictory projects of saving the Other’s soul and annihilating the Other’s body. A former US soldier in Iraq summed up the dual missions of salvation and annihilation nicely when he joked, ‘our guns are only as big as our hearts’. When we apply this logic to Somalia today we see that it is the hungry child who is marked for salvation while the al-Shabaab rebel is marked for annihilation.

The al-Shabaab rebel is depicted as being trapped in the dogmatic traditions of political Islam. They are ‘extremists’ in every sense of the word. Their character is dangerous precisely because it is one defined by excess. They are too irrational, too violent, too culture-ridden, and too sacrificial. They are too much of the West’s opposite and must be annihilated as a result. What complicates the West’s move toward annihilation is the last feature I mentioned. The West fears the rebel’s capacity for sacrifice and martyrdom. This was recently demonstrated by al-Shabaab’s bombing of the National Theatre in Mogadishu – an institution that was only open for two weeks when it was attacked, and up to that point praised as an impenetrable symbol of increasing state security. The blast, which was set off by a suicide bomber, killed ten people and wounded twenty (Chonghaile, 2012). The figure of the suicide bomber in particular is one committed to martyrdom. They perform a masked and evasive style of violence that is able to penetrate the Somali government’s sanctuary zones. The suicide bomber is feared precisely because they are more subtle than American helicopter strikes or European Union naval attacks, and harder to spot. Unlike the West they offer no spectacle, no showmanship or pretensions in their attack. They only require a certain closeness to be effective. They move undetected through Mogadishu markets and UN checkpoints to walk amongst their targets. They are spontaneous, calculated and anonymous. Their weapon is concealed and inseparable from the body so that ‘the body is transformed into the weapon’ (Mbembe, 2003, 36).

The same week the UN was debating whether it should declare an end to famine in Somalia, al-Shabaab released a statement of its own. Spokespeople for the insurgent group announced that it had formally joined the ranks of al-Qaïda, the greatest organizational threat to the West today. The announcement hardly came as a surprise as the
insurgent group was long suspected of having a close relationship to al-Qaida. What was less predictable was the rapid shift in Western foreign policy rhetoric. If ‘peacekeeping’ and ‘peace enforcement’ were interventionist catchphrases of the 1990s, then today we are witnessing a more proactive and militarized language of intervention. It is a language premised less on peace and more on strength, justice, and securitization in a post 9/11 world. In a 2004 publication, while reflecting on Canada’s peacekeeping mission in Somalia during the early 1990s, Sherene Razack observed that ‘peacekeeping today is a kind of war, a race war waged by those who constitute themselves as civilized, modern and democratic against those who are constituted as savage, tribal, and immoral’ (Razack, 2004, 86). During the period Razack was writing, peacekeeping was very much still en vogue in the context of Somalia. Although elements of the old peacekeeping project can be seen in the region today, projects of peacekeeping/peace-building are typically focused on the bodies of Somali women and children. (We will visit the Somali woman later).

The question posed by Somalia is no longer one of peacekeeping or not, precisely because it is believed there is no longer a livable peace to be kept. For the West, the rise of al-Shabaab has condemned the Somali space to being absented of peace. Because of this the framing of intervention has also changed. The aim is no longer to keep peace but to actively impose it in the form of a militarily backed, neoliberalism oriented, post-transitional government. Mitt Romney, amongst others, has called for a new US foreign policy characterized by ‘peace through strength’ (Romney, 2012). For Romney and his co-advocates strength becomes measured by a nation’s ability to realize its desired outcomes through military rather than diplomatic means. Achille Mbembe offers us useful insights into the shrinking gap between diplomacy and militarism, peace and violence. He tells us that in the current moment of late modernity, characterized more by peace through violence than by peace from violence, peace is more likely to take on the face of a “war without end” (Mbembe, 2003, 23). To understand the relationship between the colonizer and colonized today, we must first understand that the former sees the latter as living in what is only ever a half-human world. ‘It is thus impossible to conclude peace with them … In fact, the distinction between war and peace does not avail’ (Mbembe, 2003, 24-25). Within this moral configuration the West not only answers the question of ‘what is peace’, but also ‘what is sovereignty?’ If peace means violence then sovereignty is the choice to choose violence or not; it is the choice to determine which of the world’s populations may live and which are marked for death.

During her talk at the London Conference, appropriately titled ‘Intervention’iv, former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton centered discussion on the need for a multi-layered approach to justice-seeking intervention. Amongst her announcements was the threat of international sanctions to be used against Transitional Federal Government (TFG) members critical of US regional presence, and the doubling of the African Union Mission in Somalia’s (AMISOM) troops
by nearly half while ‘expand[ing] its mandate significantly’ to include a stronger offensive character. Consistent with the shift in media and academic spheres, Clinton’s messaging moved away from famine – which some sources accuse of being exacerbated in the first place by foreign direct investment and humanitarian aid – and towards the need to aggressively engage al-Shabaab. Her speech painted a devastating picture of Somalia in which local insurgency:

has turned an already bad situation into a nightmare. It has dragged fathers and sons from their homes, forced them to fight in a hopeless, bloody conflict. It has forced young girls to marry foreign fighters. And when extreme food shortages struck last summer, al-Shabaab mercilessly helped turn those food shortages into a famine... ... With its recent announcement that it has joined the al-Qaida terror network, al-Shabaab has proven, yet again, it is not on the side of the Somalis but on the side of chaos, destruction, and suffering. (Clinton, 2012)

After painting an oversimplified and one-dimensional picture of Somalia, and placing blame squarely on the shoulders of women-hating Islamists living beyond the parameters of Western modernity, Clinton closes her speech with a dangerous foreshadowing reminiscent of Albright’s article twenty years prior: ‘As the security and political situation improves, the U.S. will look for ways to increase our involvement in Somalia, including considering a more permanent diplomatic presence’ (Clinton, 2012 – emphasis added). Given the cloud of dishonesty under which US foreign policy on Somalia has historically been crafted, it is worth doubting the diplomatic claims of what is more likely to be a continued project of US proxy occupation, annihilation, and exacerbated food insecurity. Like the mineral rich Congo next door, the US has a stake in the perpetuation of a ‘failed’ Somalia to rationalize its long-term presence in the region, resource extraction in partnership with friendly public/private actors, and surveillance of hostile African/Gulf states. Only now the symbol of ‘failure’ is no longer the hungry child but the al-Shabaab rebel, who along with the pirate have been imaged as lead antagonists in a narrative of collapse, misogyny and terror.

The West needs Somalia to be violently expelled from the modern world. In the following section I discuss how the international ‘crisis’ posed by piracy in the Gulf of Aden since 2008, is at its core, a crisis of modernity. I will explore the ways in which the pirate is differently situated than the rebel in relation to modernity and how the West has engaged them since ascending to primacy.

**New Moments, New Figures: The Emergence of the ‘Pirate’**

Sociologically speaking, ‘modernity is characterized by certain institutions, particularly the nation-state’ (Escobar, 2004, 211). To live in a modern world is to accept that ‘modernist political theory has seen the nation-state as the only desirable and legitimate form of political organization; a people without a nation-state are thus a
people without a home’ (Sardar, 1999, 47). Nations without states become viewed with great suspicion and accused of being somehow disloyal to, or undermining of, the modernizing project. The Somali pirate, along with the rebel previously discussed, is seen as counter to the nation-state project and its close association with modernity. But there is an important difference in how the rebel and pirate are taken up in dominant Western media, academic, and state discourses. For one thing, piracy is predominantly based out of Garowe and other cities in Somalia’s northern coastal region. Whereas al-Shabaab has a strong southern base that primarily operates out of Mogadishu, Baidoa and other southern cities. Although Western critics have tried to map a relationship between the two networks it is clear that they operate in relative material and ideological isolation from one another. Maybe the most striking difference is that the al-Shabaab rebel is portrayed as living external to modernity. Their ideology is violently anti-modern. Whereas in the case of the pirate, we see they are not only considered anti-modern but in fact pre-modern, and described through associations with antiquity. Of course what we choose to make of Somali piracy ultimately depends on the perspective from which we analyze it.

The piracy phenomenon has been seen by many as proof of an ‘inverted race to modernity’, in which Somali pirates are both resisting modernity and choosing livelihoods that are situated before it. The image of the Somali pirate, along with his sensationalized association with death squads and one-eyed bandits, is meant to remind us that ‘those people’ have not yet taken to modernity. It is meant to remind us that the Black Muslim pirate who makes a living hijacking predominantly white nationals is one of the last holdouts to modernity in an otherwise-modern world. An examination of dominant Western media coverage becomes useful here.

One of the most widely covered stories regarding international piracy was that of thirteen-year-old Danish national Naja Johansen, who was sailing around the world with her family when their luxury yacht was intercepted in the Indian Ocean and held hostage for six months. For a long time the story was buried beneath more high profile hijackings. It only reached international notoriety when one of the pirates allegedly offered to release the family in exchange for marrying their daughter. From a survey of Danish coverage of the incident, but also elsewhere, we see the Somali hostage-taker described at length as a ‘slave master’ or ‘human trafficker’, while the young white girl is described through imageries of rape and sex slavery. Although allegations of the incident being tied to the sex trade were never flushed out, and the family was released unharmed, the pirate in question occupied a specifically hyper-sexualized position in media coverage, reminiscent of colonial hostage narratives in which white damsel figures were said to be kidnapped by natives, subject to the lawlessness of native culture, and left helpless before the native’s insatiable appetite for sex. (This was symbolized by repeated claims that Naja Johansen was forced to wear the nijab. For many this marked her descent into the Muslim world). It is also interesting that
much of the coverage reinforced the connection between blackness and chattel slavery and whiteness and victimhood.

Naja Johansen’s white bourgeois femininity figured prominently in the media sensationalism that followed the hijacking, and since white femininity carries with it symbols of race honor, chastity, and purity, the pirates’ supposed veiling of the young girl created a moral panic across Europe. Despite being released unharmed the young girl had been temporarily tainted. She had been sullied by the perseverant barbarism that once threatened her foremothers and had returned to menace Europe. This struck at the very core of Western whiteness and its sense of temporal distance from the ancient Other. Whiteness seeks to secure itself through the uprooting and annihilation of the Other, both in their manifestations as rebel and pirate. The very foundational logic of whiteness is that ‘the calculus of life passes through the death of the Other’ (Mbembe, 2003, 18). The prevailing logic is that they must die so that we can live. Whiteness performs itself through this relational and ultimately fatal juxtaposition against the (in this case Black Muslim) Other. In this way the West remains dependent on images of slain al-Shabaab militants, jailed pirates, and exiled warlords. With each image of imperial victory another breath of life is breathed into the West’s sense of moral calm and security in its whiteness.

We see the same associations of piracy and antiquity made in foreign policy discourses. For example, when asked how Russia would engage the pirates in the absence of an international judiciary process, former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev said the country would ‘have to do what our forefathers did when they met the pirates’ (The Telegraph, 2011). Medvedev’s comment was made as part of a broader appeal for the European Union (EU) to increase its military presence in Somali waters. Central to his comment is not only the assumption that the Somali pirate is a re-emergent figure from a condemned past, a distant ancestor of sorts, but also one that responds to violence rather than diplomacy. For Medvedev, ‘what our forefathers did’ was slaughter all those suspected of being pirates. In both academic and media spheres we see the same kinds of associations being made. The most recent commentaries have imagined the pirates in sharply antiquated terms, often describing them as ‘Barbary corsairs’ (Murphy, 2011, 157), ‘pirates of the yore’ (Bahadur, 2011, 25), and other vocabularies that deny them a place in the modern world. Others still describe the pirates in more beastialized terms and draw heavily from allegorical comparisons to wolf-packs, hungry dogs, birds of prey etc.

When we consider the issue of piracy from the perspective of the pirates themselves we usually get a totally different story, beginning with why coastal Somalis take up piracy in the first place. Many interviewed pirates describe their high-risk lifestyles as a last resort, having already been displaced from livelihoods as fishermen due to illegal foreign fishing and toxic dumping. The 2004 Indian Ocean
tsunami turned up hundreds of toxic waste barrels along the coastline providing undeniable evidence that the world was using sovereign Somali waters as an international waste disposal (UN Environmental Program, 2006, 135). With a coastline of roughly 2,450 miles, along which 55 percent of the Somali nation lives and draws its aquaculture from, international dumping resulted in widespread cases of food poisoning, fatal sicknesses, and further exacerbated an already explosive food crisis. Since the 1980s, and in defense of these grave environmental conditions, Somali fisherman organized themselves into sea-faring militias to prevent potential dumping and fish poaching by foreign governments, corporations and organized crime syndicates. Making such sequential connections between international toxic dumping, illegal fishing, and the famine that followed are important if we care to historicize and lend political context to the origins of Somali piracy. These connections were rather poetically demonstrated by a major pirate financier in nearby Puntland, who when asked where the training has come for his men to operate ships and equipment, quipped that their training ‘has come from famine’ and the defense of local ecologies (Bahadur, 2011, 18).

In examining the connections between piracy, toxicity (violence to the land) and famine (violence to the body), it is important to avoid reproducing what Anna M. Agathangelou has called hegemonic economies of blackness. Hegemonic economies of blackness describe the colonial/imperial technologies that construct black bodies, especially those living in conditions of crisis, as the ‘living dead’, whose crisis is believed to be brought on by internal ‘accidents’ rather than external imposition. For these colonial/imperial technologies the Somali ecology can’t be polluted by external forces because it’s already a ‘dead matter’ (Agathangelou, 2010, 187).

With the EU announcing its increasingly militarized anti-piracy campaign in March of last year, complete with its unilateral intervention in ‘coastal territory and internal waters’, it is clear the Somali government’s claims to sovereignty are superseded by the West’s right to intervene (Al Jazeera, 2012). As the EU campaign begins shelling coastal towns, commercial centers and other supposed piracy ‘hot spots’, the highest costs are being paid by the many civilians caught in the line of indiscriminate fire. Also, despite the steady decline of piracy in the Horn, the EU campaign has been extended until at least 2014. This poses the same question asked in relation to al-Shabaab and Western intervention: Why is piracy suddenly an issue that requires international military coordination under the tutelage of the West? A closer examination reveals that despite widely projected images of kufia-clad pirates terrorizing the high seas, the reality is that piracy in the region is no longer the phenomenon it once was. In 2008 only 0.17% of all commercial transits through the Gulf of Aden were hijacked (Bahadur, 2011, 46). After rising to a peak of 237 in 2010, hijackings fell again by 36% in 2011. In fact last year ship owners spent more money on extra fuel costs to speed away from hijackers then they did in total ransoms paid, amounting to an additional $2.7 billion (Wright, 2012, 2).
Gendering Spaces of Aid and Refuge

It is important to remember the Somali space is both racialized and gendered. That being said, where and how does the Somali woman fit in all of this? The Somali woman typically appears in Western media and state narratives in one of two ways. She is primarily depicted as the barbarian princess in distress, defenseless against genital mutilation, forced marriages, sexual violence, and domestic slavery. Alternatively, she can be depicted as being expelled from the nation; displaced to one of the many refugee camps in Somalia’s still-‘failed’ diaspora. In both cases she is in need of imperial salvation, and it is her body – hidden away behind the niqab and other markers of her imprisonment to culture – that needs saving. No different than the hungry child or rebel-pirate, her body becomes an important canvas on which narratives of racial difference, ‘failure’ and rescue become inscribed. As Razack reminds us, ‘women’s bodies have long been the ground on which national difference is constructed’ (Razack, 2006, 86). Although women’s voices are largely excluded in commentary on Somalia, their bodies remain primary sites of conversation, intervention and analysis.

The two Somalias presented by the West are demarcated by two distinct gendering processes. The Somalia in need of charity – most clearly defined by hungry children and their mothers – is both feminized and linked to a sense of maternal duty. We see this demonstrated in the ways in which the Dadaab refugee camp in northern Kenya, which is also the largest of its kind in the world and end point for many Somali refugees, is commonly referred to as a ‘village of mothers’. It is a ‘village of mothers’ because aid in the camp is often delivered through the maternal line, and mothers are expected to distribute food and resources to children, welcome new arrivals, and facilitate camp meetings. The Somali woman is an ally to the West partly because she is positioned as an important intermediary for Western aid and charity.

The child, mother and refugee space are all feminized. In fact it is crucial the West feminizes the child in order to distance them from the hyper-masculine Somali man, who is always under suspicion of having links to terror. As a result the Somali father is rarely presented in the same still, shot or clip as mother and child. He is made absent. He is undeserving of charity in part because of his absence, but also because of the enduring suspicion that he could, at any given moment, become a member of the insurgency. We are meant to use our imagination in filling the information gap as to why he is absent and where he could be. Is he back in Somalia? Is he pirating ships off of the Gulf of Aden or detonating bombs in Mogadishu markets? Is he an ally or enemy to those who wish to save his wife and child? Violence doesn’t only explain the killing fields and drone strikes that make news headlines. Violence also explains how, why and what we
see to begin with. Violence is the calculated omission and over-representation of black women’s bodies for specific — and everchanging — purposes. Violence is the selective sight/site through which the colonial makes the female Other visible (Fanon, 1963). This is colonial/imperial violence trying to be subtle. But we shouldn’t forget that even when subtle, it is popular images as simple as a Somali women holding her baby enclosed in a camp, that provide the necessary and instructive precursor to material violence.

Given that the al-Shabaab rebel is himself a figure of hyper-masculinity turned outward against the West, it is interesting and worthy of commentary that the bomber of the National Theatre was a woman believed to have hidden explosives under her traditional Muslim dress. Typically omitted from popular images of resistance, the Somali woman occupies a unique space. Her participation in insurgency or anti-colonial sentiments is often made invisible because it complicates the popular narrative of who exactly the West is trying to save. If the hungry child is an extension of their mother, the West cannot simply sever the two. They must be imaged together and be saved together. But unlike the hungry child the Somali woman is only allowed to be saved after performing a few rituals of loyalty to the West. She must condemn the insurgency and be prepared to amputate its symbols from her body. She must be prepared to be unveiled in both the literal and figurative sense. Not just because her liberation from Islam depends on it, but because as the National Theatre bombing illustrates, the West will always distrust what lies beneath her veil. Little has changed in the veiled woman’s relationship to the colonial since Fanon wrote on the subject decades ago. In maybe his most cited chapter from A Dying Colonialism, appropriately titled ‘Algeria Unveiled’, Fanon interrogates the colonial fantasy of ‘unveiled women aiding and sheltering the conqueror’ (Fanon, 1965, 39). This fantasy was/is couched in an appetite of imperial discovery and know-ability; it is driven by the colonial world’s ‘humanitarian’ project to rescue, reimagine and reintroduce the Muslim woman to the world. Of course after being unveiled, she is reintroduced to the world in the image of her Western/white counterpart. It was/is this fantasy that:

enabled the colonial administration to define a precise political doctrine: “If we want to destroy the structure of Algerian society, its capacity for resistance, we must first of all conquer the woman; we must go and find them behind the veil where they hide themselves and in the houses where the men keep them out of sight” … The dominant administration solemnly undertook to defend this woman, pictured as humiliated, sequestered, cloistered. (Fanon, 1965, 37-38)

These are the forces the veiled Somali woman must contend with today. In the eyes of the ‘colonial administration’, in this case symbolized best by US development and military actors, the veiled woman interrupts the colonial gaze; she is able to challenge and ultimately sever the colonial fantasy to see, access and intimately
know the colonized subject. This fantasy is both sexual and violent at once. There is a colonial erotica involved in consuming the ‘strange beauties’ buried beneath the veil. But there is also a violence involved, since for the veiled woman, the process of consumption involves her amputation of culture as its prerequisite. In short, ‘unveiling this woman is revealing her beauty; it is baring her secret, breaking her resistance, making her available for adventure’ (Fanon, 1965, 43).

Conclusion

Today just as yesterday, the Somali nation space is sentenced to social death. ‘[S]ocial death might be thought of as another name for slavery and an attempt to think about what it comprises’ (Sexton, 2011, 17). In the contemporary Somali context, social slavery might be thought of as the engineering of Somali life, and the indebtedness of black bodies to hunger, salvation, and the necessary cultural disciplining that comes with it. But the Somali example also speaks to a type of perseverance. It’s a type of perseverance that doesn’t exist instead of colonial/imperial realities, but in spite of them. In the global economy of racialized images, then, Somalia represents ‘a type of living on that survives after a type of death’ (Sexton, 2011, 23). If we examine Somalia through the lens of necropower, we might describe it as a ‘phantom world’, a ‘state of siege’, a place of ‘raw life’, or as a form of ‘death-in-life’, in which the living are always marked for death if not already on the verge of it (Mbembe, 2001; 2003). To return to Sexton, ‘A living death is as much a death as it is a living’ (2011, 28). At a certain point, differences between life and death begin to blur and entangle. The symbols for this figurative and literal death are both omnipresent and ever-changing. The bodies of Somali children continue to suffer from hunger pangs and be marked with the scars of war. But we have in recent years seen the rise of new symbols for Somalia’s ‘failure’. We have seen familiar narratives of collapse and terror inscribed onto new bodies. The rebel-pirate is one of the most prominent symbols of state ‘failure’ in the world today. As Clinton warned in her speech before the London Conference on Somalia, the rebel-pirate stands for ‘chaos, destruction, and suffering’. They are to be violently expelled from an otherwise shrinking global community. They are antithetical to the modernizing project and represent the fears, apprehensions, and foremost contradiction to Western whiteness. Somalia is a rare case in the community of ‘failed states’ for another reason: the very public and collective ungratefulness the nation has shown the West. Reminiscent of Haitian rebels of the late eighteenth century, who dragged Napoleon’s defeated troops through the streets of Port au Prince as a gesture of anti-colonial victory, Somali resisters too dragged burnt American corpses through the streets of Mogadishu following the 1993 invasion. (Perhaps nothing is more degrading in the national imaginaries of the West than the parading of Western corpses). With the advent of global media present to capture the act, the image of American bodies being dragged through the crowded streets of Mogadishu may be the most iconic single image of anti-colonial resistance since Vietnam. For this
rare historical act of public humiliation, both Haiti and Somalia can never be forgiven by the West. Examples must be made of them.

The central question I end with is this: In a dialectically-driven world that seeks to box us into one of (usually two) antithetical categories, how do we carve out spaces of critique that do not assume our membership in one camp or the other, but rather complicate the very existence and limitations of these camps? Given the atheoretical, ahistorical, and racist coloring of ‘failed state’ discourse, what sorts of alternative explanatory frameworks could be used for understanding Somalia today? How could multiple and diverse images be used to trouble the singularity of Somalia’s construction by the West? How are Somali people themselves pushing back against dominant images of the rebel and pirate?

I have argued in this paper that in a world full of copies Somalia is the original narrative against which all other cases of state ‘failure’ are measured. The West depends on a seemingly collapsed Somalia. It demands it. Somalia must remain frozen in a permanent state of hunger, degradation, and decline, both to rationalize the West’s imperial presence in the Horn of Africa and to come to know itself as moral, rational, civilized, modern, and crucially, as white. I have also alluded to the ways in which Somalia’s supposed ‘failure’ has been historically engineered by foreign actors – in the form of imperial invaders (US, Ethiopia, African Union), Western scholarship, and dominant media. It is time that new discourses on Somalia push back against dominant ones. It is time that the terms of debate on Somalia are contested and re-defined altogether, and done in a way that makes room for anti-colonial interrogations of Western implication in all claims to ‘failure’.

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Notes

i For the remainder of the paper I put the words ‘failed’, ‘failing’ and ‘failure’ in quotations as part of my interrogation of the terms and concepts used to explain Somalia.

ii We saw this discourse appear around Minhaj Gedi Farah, the young Somali boy who became the poster child for famine in 2011. Discussion around him
focused on his semi nude, emaciated frame rather than the politics of famine more broadly. Images of Minhaj became another way of individualizing the issue of famine while detracting attention away from the structural nature of food insecurity. At the intersection of empire and charity, ‘images (especially) photographic are technologies of power deployed to legitimate a specific world-view’ (Agathangelou, 2012, 31). In Farah’s case, ‘world view’ being deployed was one of ultimate Western benevolence. Through which the West proved to itself that it had – and still has – the emotional capacity to sympathize and save at once.

iii From the West’s perspective, it is necessary that the hungry child be ‘plucked’ from their environment in order to be salvaged. As Fanon observed nearly fifty years ago, the metropole will always believe ‘the native town [to be] a hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light’ (Fanon, 1963, 39). Not only is this observation still true today, but through its engagement with Somalia in the last twenty years, the West has intensified its pathologizing of the colony.

iv The to-the-point naming of Clinton’s talk is telling of the shift away from the 1993 US strategy in Somalia, “Operation Restore Hope”, which was more concerned with humanitarian pretensions than military counteroffensives.

v For more on this see Michel Chossudovsky (1997).

vi For more on the connection between Somali piracy, antiquity, and violence see Stuart Palliser’s Ancient Problems Renewed: Piracy in Somalia (2009). In which Palliser argues ‘ancient problems’ require violent solutions. The institutionalizing of that violence is the ‘perfect fit for the Canadian military’ (Palliser, 2009, 10).

vii Although the noble origins of Somali piracy have shifted greatly since its beginnings, certain charitable traditions have continued well into the era of less justice-seeking hijackings. In some of the larger networks up to a sixth of all proceeds are paid to host communities who live near or amongst the pirates (Bahadur, 2011, 18).

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