

## Raising Africa?: Celebrity and the Rhetoric of the White Saviour

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The ‘White Saviour’ has long been a vehicle for celebrities in Hollywood film. From *Lawrence of Arabia* (dir. Lean 1962) to *Blood Diamond* (dir. Zwick 2006), from the Indiana Jones franchise that began in 1981 with *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (dir. Spielberg) to *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (dir. West 2001), actors perform roles as heroes who save the day against all odds and thwart dark and ominous adversaries (Shohat 1991; Shome 1996; Dyer 1997). Pop stars take on characters and ‘exotic’ identities as well, from the heroic, virginal, and steadfast, to the sexy, bad and ‘ethnic,’ as with Madonna’s Geisha, Evita or Indian Summer personas (Fouz-Hernández 2004). And with increasing visibility, the famous perform real-life hero roles as philanthropists who endorse and fund a variety of social causes around the so-called ‘developing’ world. This essay explores how the celebrity philanthropist is constructed as redeemer of distant Others and how this philanthropic role mingles with a celebrity’s on-stage personas to create the White Saviour, a powerful brand of contemporary cultural authority.

Africa is a particular focus of celebrity gaze in recent years, a development that I take up here by looking at three iconic celebrities: Bono, Madonna and Angelina Jolie. These and other well-known people deploy their fame in/on the continent in a complex admixture of spectacle and branding, using a range of philanthropic models. Rock star Bono’s Product RED campaign raises money to fight HIV/AIDS in six African countries. It is a cause marketing effort that partners with iconic brands to sell designated products; companies give a percentage of sales toward the cause. Madonna

started Raising Malawi to build a high profile school similar to Oprah Winfrey's academy in South Africa. She later scaled the project back amid allegations of misuse of funds and partnered with an organization called BuildOn to build and renovate smaller schools in Malawi. Angelina Jolie's work as a United Nations goodwill ambassador highlights the issue of displaced people around the world, including in Africa. Both she and Madonna have also adopted children from African countries, a fact that gives them high-profile roles as famous mothers of needy children.

Celebrity philanthropy is, after all, about harnessing spectacle. Stars deliver media attention to social causes, often where government will is lacking. Celebrity can cut through the inertia of bureaucracy and governmental politicking, using social, symbolic and economic capital to draw affluent consumers and influential people to the social ills that define Africa in the Western mind. Bono is seen cajoling recalcitrant world leaders into making aid commitments. He has been photographed at the shoulder (or the knee) of presidents, prime ministers and popes. Bono, Madonna and Jolie all have the ear of powerful people.

Yet celebrity philanthropy in 'distant' locales, including in Africa, is fraught with ideological tensions given that no aid happens outside of the colonial legacy and post-colonial machinations that have left their mark on the continent. As publicity generated by famous people highlights the dire social and political inequities of our time, celebrity philanthropy in Africa generates a cultural authority that recentres whiteness, and in turn burnishes the celebrity brand. It does this recentring, I argue, by exoticizing non-specific representations of African countries and peoples and by creating narratives of near-divine greatness about the celebrity.

In this paper I explore the discursive power evinced by Bono, Jolie and Madonna as key figures in contemporary African celebrity aid and diplomacy work. I look specifically at Madonna and Jolie as famous philanthropic mothers. I analyze Madonna's charity, Raising Malawi, and a 90-minute film called *I Am Because We Are* (dir. Rissman 2009), which she produced and narrated in connection with her charity. I look at Jolie's work as a UN Human Rights Committee for Refugees ambassador primarily through a feature-length CNN interview she did with journalist Anderson Cooper in June 2006, titled 'Angelina Jolie: Her Mission and Motherhood.' The broadcast exemplifies the kind of news coverage that depicts much celebrity philanthropy work (Bell 2013). I also

examine Bono's Product (RED) campaign website and a 30-minute campaign film called *The Lazarus Effect* (dir. Bangs 2010). These examples demonstrate two particular discourses of speaking *for*, namely a narrative of religious salvation that is prominent in publicity of celebrity philanthropy and a related privileging of celebrity motherhood in the cases of Jolie and Madonna. A critical reading of these cases reveals the ways in which the celebrity gaze on Africa produces material benefits as it maintains a normative discursive space of whiteness. The cases also show the ways in which fame, as a production of 'ideal' race, class, gender helps reproduce the conditions of global capitalism through the media.

This essay is a call to examine how celebrities are part of a 'discursive formation' (Foucault 1972), everyday discourses that reproduce material life. In these examples the discourses include neo-colonial stereotypes of African peoples as passive and helpless. Nakayama and Krizek (1995) remind us that it is important to examine racial representations from the centres of power as well as from the margins, to decentre whiteness in order to make it visible. This analysis does not negate celebrities' desire to bring their fame to bear on global problems of human deprivation. They do make on-the-ground interventions in the spiral of poverty, illness and repression. Yet as they speak *for* Africa and *for* themselves, they employ a rhetoric of human communality that works in tension with their (perhaps unintentional) representation of Africans as Other.

### **Celebrity as cultural authority: Speaking *for* Africa**

I represent a lot of [African] people who have no voice at all. In the world's order of things they are the people that count least ... They haven't asked me to represent them. It's clearly cheeky but I hope they're glad I do and in God's order of things they're most important. Bono (Iley 2005)

Celebrity as a phenomenon is a key source of cultural authority in contemporary life. It forms a triad with the media/culture industries and the public or audience, and each of the three is produced and enhanced by the others. Celebrity is, of course, a 'voice above others' (Marshall 1997: x). It is not surprising that people who have success in the entertainment industries would want to 'be a megaphone,' as George Clooney called it in an interview with CNN's Larry King (2010), for activists and workers engaged on the ground in troubled parts of the world. They have ready access to both media publicity and to the halls of power. To quote Clooney again, 'My job is to show up, because

cameras follow me. That is the best way to spend my celebrity credit card' (Diehl 2010). In short, celebrities have social and economic capital, and many of them use it to highlight the dire social problems of our day.

Entertainment celebrity, as Clooney's remark suggests, is ultimately a commercial transaction. Individual stars are both brands and products, and they must remain salient in the public mind like other brands. Their celebrity must be constantly reproduced through their creative production and via their public/private lives. They do charity work, they endorse commercial products, they marry and divorce, and they rear children. Increasingly they mete out tidbits about themselves via social media sites such as Twitter. All of these activities service the brand, feeding a parasocial relationship with fans. In other words, we feel we have a kind of relationship with famous people because of the publicity about them (Dyer 1986). And their branded personas generate a form of authority in the context of their relationship to fans and culture industry. This authority gives them media credibility to speak on behalf of distant Others.

Since entertainment celebrities derive their authority via their status as pop culture icons, their creative production works in tandem with their philanthropy and aspects of their 'private' lives to produce their personas (Marshall 2010). In short, we come to know them, or the public version of them, by way of both on-stage and off-stage performances. Both aspects convey ideas and beliefs. Through celebrity we see the public and private realms of life cross, especially given that fans are as interested in what famous people do in life as in what they do on stage or screen (Dyer 1986: 8). This crossing of public and private is part of what generates their authority to speak on behalf of others.

Cultural production, as a site where ideologies are produced, maintained, challenged and transformed, has always been imbued with racialized, gendered, classed and nationalistic meanings. At the height of the British imperial project from the 18<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> centuries all socioeconomic classes connected to nation via popular culture and it was instrumental in maintaining empire in Britain (MacKenzie 1986; Richards 2001). 'Every aspect of popular culture contrived to instill pride in the British imperial achievement,' says music historian Jeffrey Richards. From novels to stage plays to music halls, and later in feature films, popular culture was 'about gallant imperial heroes showing the flag and quelling the rebellious natives in far-off dominions' (2001: 2). Music was replete with jingoistic refrains. Postcards, magazine illustrations,

advertising and commercial packaging were all geared to the nationalistic project of empire (see also McClintock 1995).

Richards writes that popular culture had an instrumental role in the colonial zeitgeist to ‘reinforce the components of the ideological cluster that constituted British imperialism in its heyday: patriotism, monarchism, hero-worship, Protestantism, racialism and chivalry’ (2001: 525). Today, pop culture’s role in shaping contemporary values is not diminished, although it is embedded in a somewhat reconfigured ‘ideological cluster’ of global capitalism. Components of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century cluster include patriotism, celebrity-worship, individualism, consumption and a post-racial colourblindness that obscures the racialized power dynamics at play. Now, with burgeoning media interest in celebrities’ private lives, its meanings are equally embedded in the off-stage ‘real’ lives of entertainment celebrities as in their creative roles.

For the three celebrities discussed here, their creative production intermingles seamlessly with their charity work and the public performance of their private lives. Their words and actions are read as representations of their personal views as expressed through traditional mass media and online in social media (Marshall 2010). The ideologies embedded in their creative work reach their fan bases more inferentially than does their philanthropy and self-promotion, yet the two streams of publicity feed each other and infuse their public personae. Jolie’s films, with strong female heroes, are an aspect of her off-screen role as a philanthropist. The same can be said for Bono as front man in an iconic male rock band, and for Madonna with the ever-changing characters of her stage performances and recordings.

Andrew Cooper suggests, for example, that Angelina Jolie’s ‘ability to mix art and real life’ gives her a unique credibility (2008: 116). Her work as a star in adventure films, often in ‘exotic’ locales, bolsters her power as a celebrity ambassador. In fact, Jolie says her interest in the plight of refugees grew out of shooting on location in Cambodia (Jolie 2003). Likewise, her philanthropy burnishes her appeal as an actor. Reputation is a powerful factor for better and for worse. Jolie’s decision with her partner, Brad Pitt, to birth their first biological child, Shiloh, in Namibia generated a measure of negative media coverage. Some media viewed it as a crass juxtaposition between their wealth and the privation in the country (O’Neill 2006). However, they have largely blunted such criticism through their philanthropic work. They have strategically managed

publicity to positive effect, as with Jolie's feature interview with CNN's Anderson Cooper that I take up below.

Madonna's foray into Malawi has been more contentious (Grigoriadis 2011). She has been criticized for adopting Malawian children and for her promotion of an African school curriculum with links to a religious group, loosely based on Jewish Kabbalah teachings popular with US celebrities. In his book *Celebrity Diplomacy*, Cooper calls her charity work 'crude ventures into Africa' (2008: 116). Biographer Andrew Morton (2001) characterized Madonna as egocentric. Such critiques are not unconnected to her many pop personas dating back to her early Material Girl image in the 1980s, with some read as aggressively sexual, and others campy and appropriative (Fouz-Hernandez & Jarman-Ivens 2004). Natalie Clarke of the UK's *Daily Mail*, suggested Madonna's Malawi project was yet another reinvention 'as Mother Madonna, a leather-booted hybrid of Mother Teresa and Angelina Jolie' (2007: 20). Yet Madonna's cultural authority and material resources remain strong. She deploys them in the Raising Malawi charity and in the feature-length documentary with high production values that I discuss below.

Bono does not mingle his domestic life as a parent or spouse with his work as a rock musician and philanthropist, as readily as do Jolie and Madonna. He does, however, mix his art with commerce and philanthropy in such a way that at times they are indistinguishable. He promotes his wife's fashion label, Edun, a high-end purveyor of 'sustainable' clothing that promotes trade with Africa. He and his wife, Ali Hewson, appeared in 2010 as part of the luxury brand Louis Vuitton's Core Values advertising campaign wearing the Edun clothing line and carrying Vuitton bags for the African-themed photo shoot by iconic photographer Annie Liebowitz. The ad featured the couple disembarking from a small plane in the middle of the African savannah. They both speak of such work as activism and as part of the mission to increase trade with Africa (Louis Vuitton 2010), though the ad campaign has no charitable component.

These artists share in common an assumption that their personal interest serves the public interest. Their personal desires share the spotlight that follows them to illuminate these otherwise 'dark' areas in the Western conscious. However, they follow a long colonial tradition of speaking for the Other that tends to make the nameless faceless Third-World Other as a blank recipient of their goodwill. For example, Bono made the

remark above about speaking ‘for people who have no voice at all’ upon the 2005 launch of the RED campaign. RED is a cause marketing effort in which major brands such as Apple, The Gap and Starbucks donate a portion of their profits from designated products. The money goes towards AIDS treatment and prevention through an international agency called The Global Fund, which distributes it in ‘qualifying’ countries, among them Zambia, Swaziland and Botswana. In saying ‘[t]hey haven’t asked me to represent them. It’s clearly cheeky but I hope they’re glad I do,’ Bono activates his cultural authority and signals the presumption behind his efforts. He shows an awareness of the power and privilege that he has explicitly used to put the issues of poverty, developing-world debt and AIDS on the public agenda. He is effectively suggesting that he is maintaining God’s ‘order of things.’ It is a sort of ‘meek shall inherit the earth’ perspective, which he constitutes as a near-divine intervention to bring about a pre-ordained common good.

By speaking for the Other, Bono continues a long Western tradition of creating an ‘undifferentiated subject,’ as Gayatri Spivak (1988) describes the First World practice of conflating and mapping its desires and interests onto the subaltern. So-called First World representation presumes to speak for a generalized subaltern subject, with no distinctions from within. Such representation ventriloquizes the subaltern, produces a universal subject that matters only in relation to its capacity to serve the ventriloquist. As Spivak puts it, ‘This benevolent first-world appropriation and reinscription of the Third World as an Other is the founding characteristic of much third-worldism’ (1988: 289). In other words, Bono’s speaking *for* does not, indeed cannot, acknowledge a differentiated post-colonial subject. To speak *for* is to maintain the order of things.

The examples discussed here constitute an ideological stance that defines a common good, valued in visitors’ terms (Spivak 1990; Ogundipe-Leslie 2001). The voices of the non-African celebrities stifle African perspectives on the desired direction of economic and social life. This is how critical scholar Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie explains it: ‘The African person is that person who does not have a “self,” who gets represented or spoken for by others. At the creative level, travellers and settlers in Africa become the spokespersons for the indigenous peoples’ (2001: 135). White celebrities are among the visitors with a uniquely privileged authority to designate what they see to be a collective need. They can ‘claim to speak for the communality of humanity (Dyer 1997: 2).’ And

with the media's fixation on fame and exotic locales as a backdrop for issues, the story invariably becomes about the celebrity's good deeds in a faraway land (Richey & Ponte 2011; Bell 2013).

Celebrity largesse can ultimately take the form of a 'cure' without a thoroughgoing diagnosis. African peoples become 'victims' of poverty or disease, problems which apparently sprang, without history, from hapless circumstance, poor choices, or rotten luck. Such characterization obscures the ongoing legacy of colonialism, including the substitution of colonial rule for institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (Altman 1999; Barnett & Whiteside 2006; Mbaku 2008; Moyo 2009; Patterson 2008). Further, there is little space in an ahistorical philanthropy for the specificities of individual African nations and cultures. African problems become generalized and its peoples homogenized. Abstraction is what *invents* Africa in the Western mind, as an amorphous locale that is at once exotic, sick, culturally rich, financially poor, diverse and yet non-specific.

The Product RED campaign is an example of this sort of 'cure' without the diagnosis that would be afforded by a contextualized view of poverty and AIDS (Jungar & Salo 2008: 94). The campaign obliterates the colonial history and the context of the HIV/AIDS crisis from the picture it paints in order to create an aesthetic space for affluent consumers to buy their favourite brands, guilt-free. The campaign has said RED wanted to eschew the pictures of despair common to many charity projects (Perry 2008: 288–89). Rather, the funding model hails Western consumers as activists, using celebrities to encourage people to choose RED products for all the fashionable things they want or need anyway. RED hinges on the mass purchase of consumer goods, which ultimately makes it a contributor to the global economic conditions that are part of the AIDS pandemic (Richey & Ponte 2011; Bell 2011). The configuration of global capital requires cheap material and human resources, and Africa is home to both. With the corporate relationships upon which RED is founded requiring a fashionable message, we get a stylized Africa that is branded through product designs, campaign promotion and through people as symbols of the power of RED to restore health.

Bono, the personality at the centre of the campaign, deploys his brand to attract other celebrities, corporations and consumer to the cause. And Brand Bono is valuable. Product RED states that it raised more than US\$200 million as of the beginning of 2013.



It claims to have reached 14 million people with testing, treatment, and counseling (Product Red Website 2012). The campaign is spearheading a drive to ‘eliminate AIDS’ in Africa by 2015. The RED case, then, well exemplifies the tensions and contradictions within the celebrity gaze on Africa.

As these stars speak on behalf of distant Others in both an activist sense and through their creative output, they represent a contradiction between the desire to alleviate global problems of human privation and discourses that serve to reinforce the dire inequities of globalization. I explore two such discourses below: the frequent theme of divine salvation in celebrity campaigns and in media coverage about them, and a specific dominant ideal of motherhood that Jolie and Madonna, and other female celebrities, model publicly. Both of these themes—divine salvation and ‘ideal’ motherhood—figure prominently in media publicity surrounding famous philanthropists more broadly, and they speak powerfully about how race, gender and class are constituted globally.

Such publicity reconstitutes these three stars’ personas, brands and cultural authority as it offers individualized solutions for complex structural problems. Mass-mediated celebrity philanthropy helps stars ascend from the ‘crudely commercial to the sanctified, quasi-religious realm of altruism and charity, whilst revealing or constructing an added dimension of personality: of compassion and caring,’ as Jo Littler puts it (2008: 239). Celebrity philanthropy is a mechanism through which stars speak for themselves as they speak for Others, where they claim authoritative voice regarding the problems of Africa and accumulate more cultural authority along the way.

### ***Ubuntu: The mission to ‘raise’ Africa***

When it comes to Africa, celebrities express their message of hope and salvation through a rhetoric of one-world communality. *Ubuntu*: I am because we are, as Madonna’s film repeats the Zulu phrase (dir. Rissman 2009).<sup>1</sup> *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*: a person is a person through other persons. All three of the celebrities discussed in this essay invoke a version of this South African Zulu-inspired philosophy to explain their motivations for getting involved. This message of human oneness is

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<sup>1</sup> This phrase Ubuntu has been appropriated as the commercial brand of a computer operating system (see: <http://www.ubuntu.com/>).

very compelling. On her website Madonna's mission is explained similarly: 'We are all inextricably connected. That is why we strive to raise Malawi' (Raising Malawi 2009–2013). At the same time, there is a powerful neo-colonial echo in the deployment of this theme of communality, one that resonates through much celebrity philanthropy.

Christianity was the 'civilizing' instrument of the colonizing powers in Africa. It is historically entwined with the growth of capitalism and the exploitation of the continent's human and natural resources. The colonial zeitgeist of moral superiority was the mandate for bringing both ideologies of capitalism and Christianity to the so-called 'the dark places of the earth' in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Burton 1994: 40). This is not to say that celebrities operating in Africa are necessarily on an overtly religious mission as was the case under colonial expansion. Yet the language of their campaigns contains strong religious themes that gesture to an earlier imperialism that asserted the duality of white and divine salvation.

Product RED's signature slogan, for example, is the 'Lazarus Effect,' a Biblical reference to Jesus's divine powers to undo death. We hear repeatedly that 'two pills a day' will make the difference between life and death for someone living with HIV. The drugs can and do save the lives of people who are sick, and they are having an impact in many African countries. In the Gospel of John, Jesus demonstrates his divinity by bringing his friend and follower, Lazarus, back from the dead. This story is the basis for numerous RED campaign ads, and inspired the 30-minute RED documentary *The Lazarus Effect* (dir. Bangs 2010) that aired on the US television network HBO on 24 May 2010.

Likewise the name of Madonna's charity, Raising Malawi, has a missionary ethos. She started it after she reportedly received a call from a local businesswoman in the city of Lilongwe. Victoria Keelan asked her to use her considerable means to help the country cope with the dire circumstances of its many AIDS orphans. Madonna, in her feature-length documentary *I Am Because We Are* (dir. Rissman 2009), confessed that she did not know where Malawi was located. That was the start of the pop star's philanthropic journey to and in Malawi, an experience she describes in the film as doing as much to 'save' her as she is doing to help the country.

Madonna's charity introduced into Malawi a school curriculum linked to the Kabbalah

Center, based in Los Angeles, where she is a member. The center is popular among some Hollywood elites, Demi Moore, Ashton Kutcher and Rosanne Barr among them, and is based loosely upon the secretive Hasidic mystical tradition in Judaism (Ryan & Christensen 2011a, 2011b). Judaism is virtually nonexistent in Malawi. The organization, Spirituality (later changed to Success) for Kids, or SFK, denies any links to Kabbalah, saying that it teaches personal responsibility and self-determination (dir. Rissman 2009).<sup>2</sup>

The Kabbalah-based program described in the film contains a powerful message that individual strength and perseverance will help Malawi transcend a culture of victimhood. The SFK program emphasizes individual cause and effect as an ethical orientation. ‘We are all in control of the world around us,’ Madonna says in the film, citing herself as an example:

For so many years I played the victim card. When you tap into that consciousness, it keeps you from moving ahead. You get into a cycle of self-destructive behavior. If I could think of a phrase that summed up Spirituality for Kids it’s more like ‘You’re somebody. Believe in yourself. You’re not the sum total of your surroundings. You can change your destiny.’ And more than anything that’s what these kids need.

Here Madonna asserts that salvation comes from within, that victimhood is a state of mind and that to suggest otherwise is to abrogate personal responsibility. She invokes a variation of the term ‘race card,’ which became an axiom in the USA in 1990s, when former football star, actor and broadcaster O. J. Simpson was on trial for the murder of his former wife, Nicole Brown. The term had a pejorative meaning that suggested he accused police of racism simply as a smokescreen to obscure the damning evidence of the case. Here Madonna’s use of the term invokes the same meaning that victimhood is something people use to unfairly blame others. She implies that no matter the circumstances of our misfortunes, we must never look for causes outside ourselves.

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<sup>2</sup> The son of the Kabbalah Center’s founder, Michael Berg, founded the Raising Malawi charity with her. Madonna severed its connection with the Center after a scandal over charitable donations that were been unaccounted for. There is a US federal tax investigation of the Kabbalah organization. She abruptly cancelled plans for a school, similar to one built in South Africa by Oprah Winfrey, in spring of 2011 barely breaking ground, and fired its director. There were extensive media reports about questionable spending practices by those hired to oversee the school project and about the Kabbalah links (Barrett 2011; McDougall 2011). Madonna temporarily suspended the charity, hired a philanthropic oversight organization, and changed her options by funding numerous existing schools and programs rather than the original large school project (McDougall 2011).

At the same time, Madonna places her own trials alongside those of people who have no secure access to life's basic necessities. She equates her life after the death of her mother when she was six years old to the lives of AIDS orphans. By personalizing her story she is recentred in the documentary. Her truth—that we must all pull ourselves up individually—is put forward as a universal solution. This message is a key feature of the American Dream mythology, where individual rights and responsibilities are paramount, where all have the potential to achieve equally, and where success comes from hard work. The American Dream is an ideological mainstay of contemporary celebrity (Sternheimer 2011). Fame is frequently viewed as a result of individual genius and hard work even though it is, as mentioned earlier, bound up in a powerfully complex relationship with the culture industries and audience.

The American Dream myth as deployed in the Madonna film is racially charged, though she never mentions race. Her message of individuality is post-racial in that it asserts a level playing field for attaining material security. Post-race, also sometimes referred to as 'colorblind racism' (Bonilla-Silva 2003), is an ideology that asserts that the structural inequalities of race are largely in the past. Thus socioeconomic success is within the grasp of all (Joseph 2009: 239). Post-racial politics assume that the social and civil advances of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have largely eradicated historical structural inequalities. The view that race and, in this case, the legacy of British colonial rule, is a distant memory negates the historical inequalities that remain a part of Malawi's ongoing life as a country in a global economy.

The 'Spirituality for Kids' segment of Madonna's film, with its emphasis on individual attitude and hard work, as an example of post-racial ideology, comes at the beginning of a crescendo in the documentary story arc. It appears as a message of hope after extensive documentation of the struggles of numerous individuals with HIV/AIDS and their families. The segment is situated just before the script circles back to its overarching message of communality and after a segment that implies causality for current conditions in the fact that people turn to 'backward' ways such as witchcraft and to alcohol to escape the grind of poverty.

The film then segues to an upbeat ending, acknowledging what Westerners see as the backward practices at the root of the problem. It states that Malawians are finally shedding their worn-out ways and taking responsibility, that they are 'more eager to

tackle their own problems' as former US president Bill Clinton says in the film, and they want outsiders to 'empower' them. This juxtaposition repeats well-worn narratives of Africa as a primitive place that can be brought into modern times given First World help. Such help includes cultivating a Western sense of individuality as a solution to large structural problems.

The philosophy of 'Spirituality For Kids' exemplifies a profoundly contradictory rhetoric regarding Africa. On the one hand there is *ubuntu*: 'I am not defined without you,' as former Malawi finance minister Mathews Chikaonda says in the film (dir. Rissman 2009). On the other hand, we alone must change our own destiny. Personal responsibility is an attractive ethic, particularly when combined with a message of communality. In a sense, universality is fetishized in the use of the borrowed Zulu *ubuntu* concept, and retooled in the language of individualism. This discursive move has the impact of applying a hegemonic US ideological response—individualism—to the specificities of life in Malawi. As an outside solution it may be attractive to the home audience of potential donors to tout individual responsibility. However it posits a deeply US value as a universal non-ideological truth.

Clinton and Madonna repeat the message of oneness while continuing to portray the people of Africa as Other. Clinton says *ubuntu* signifies 'that what we have in common is more important than our interesting differences.' Those differences and similarities are defined and valued primarily in the so-called First World, by people like him. They reinforce the superiority of the First World in its own eyes, (Ogundipe-Leslie 2001; Spivak 1990). Edward Said has called this *flexible positional* superiority, where Western solutions and desires remain at the forefront of interactions with the formerly colonized Other (Said 2003). Indeed, as Said says, the hegemonic Western persona is created in juxtaposition to the Other and the other is essential for dominant identity formation as well.

The 'interesting differences,' between 'us' and 'them,' as Clinton calls them, are visualized in both the Madonna and Bono films using similar imagery. We hear in both documentaries that Africans have a gloriously untrammled take on life, and that the developed world must preserve that worldview. People, particularly women, dance and sing in African garb in both films. The scenes are shot without explanation or context about the meanings or significance of the dance. Both films are shot largely in rural

areas, presenting a particular image of Africa, including portrayals of 'tribal' people with 'weird' rites of passage. As Ogundipe-Leslie (2001) reminds us, the idea of African woman in the Western mind connotes someone who is impoverished, uneducated, primitive, and rural. Few of these representations depict the educated, urban or middle classes in African countries, though they are surely essential contributors to the societies' economic and social aspirations.

Ultimately the celebritized 'traveller' gets to define the quintessence of Africa's diverse peoples. Clinton has the definitive word on the nature of African-ness in Madonna's film: 'People ask me 'Why do you love it so much there'? And I always say it's because they have the highest percentage of people, I believe, anywhere on earth who wake up every day with a song in their heart. They sing through their pain and their need and the madness of people around them. It's almost like an ingrained wisdom of more than 100,000 years' (2009). As a former US President and head of the William J. Clinton Foundation philanthropic organization, he is deemed a foremost expert in the film.

Jolie claims a similar expertise in her interview with Anderson Cooper. She waxes poetic in describing the Democratic Republic of the Congo, saying 'The Congo is lush, and it's amazing, and ... all the people, and they're so different. And they're passionate. And they're tough. And they're vibrant. And they're ready to live' ('Angelina Jolie: Her Mission and Motherhood' 2006). Jolie, like Clinton, is deemed to have the cultural authority to pronounce about the general disposition of the people of the Congo. She does it with a sense of great admiration, which makes her remark appear as an optimistic gesture. Yet such a sweeping pronouncement positions her exoticizing perspective as authoritative and superior.

In her film, Madonna says: 'Being in Africa has made me realize that suffering is subjective. There is an enormous amount of suffering here that is really tangible ... And yet they have an appreciation and a joy and a gratitude that we could never understand' (2009). She presents such comments, as with images of people singing and dancing, and standing in line for food, as evidence of magnificence and resilience as seen through the eyes of the White Saviour. Jolie, Madonna, Clinton and others express their views about the African continent with great respect. At the same time their characterizations define the Other in a way that ignores the structural inequalities of race, gender, class and the uneven impact of globalization. The rhetoric of one-world communality, of 'raising'

another, is the discursive space of the White Saviour in all of its 'functional invisibility' (Nakayama & Krizek 1995: 297). For the White Saviour to exist, it must have the Other, in this case Africans as a singular timeless human monoculture that bears little resemblance to 'us.'

There are moments where Bono's film does decentre whiteness. *The Lazarus Effect* (dir. Bangs 2010) offers a look at on-the-ground AIDS treatment from the perspective of Zambian health-care professionals and patients. It tells of how local workers are distributing medication and promoting openness and HIV testing through the work of Constance Mudenda, who runs three clinics, and Dr. Mannesheh Phiri, a pioneer in the use of antiretroviral AIDS drugs. The film is partly about local empowerment and the ground-level effort to destigmatize HIV/AIDS; the quoting of local professionals is a powerful way of doing so.

*I Am Because We Are* (dir. Rissman 2009) likewise provides a glimpse at colonial life in Malawi. That history includes direct rule starting in the 1880s and 1890s, when the British established the area as Nyasaland, and when they later established the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland in the early 1950s, against local will. The film includes footage of Lord Perth, a former British colonial minister, admitting that Nyasaland was not a priority: 'I'm afraid its priority slipped although we genuinely were going to do things for them. We kept on finding that other things cropped up, which to us seemed more important.' Such references to the colonial project are rare in celebrity work.

Madonna also discusses the problems that generations of grinding poverty have brought to Malawi. She aims to contextualize those conditions within the broader problems of the so-called developed world by pointing to the barbarism of war, environmental disaster, religious and political strife in the USA and elsewhere. The film moves through a collage of images of Western religious zealotry, clearcutting, gambling, a stock exchange, garbage dumps, flag burning and other violence as evidence that 'modernization equals no humanity,' as Madonna says. It attempts to frame local traditional practices in the context of harsh and violent practices globally. It is a move that helps contextualize aspects of life in the country that are often dismissed as backward.

The film ultimately circles back to a we-they ‘dichotomy,’ as Madonna herself calls it:

You get caught up in this dichotomy where you think ‘If they could only understand what I understand then they could fix everything.’ Then I look at the way they live and I think ‘Oh God, they have illnesses and they have cultural traditions that seem antithetical to life but they’re happy. And you could drive down a street in Beverly Hills and ... and you don’t see that kind of joy.

This characterization suggests that while poverty is primitive, it is where true joy flourishes. It is a curious invocation of the notion that ‘money can’t buy happiness’ in the face of consumption-dependent modern celebrity.

These manifestations of the White Saviour narrative are sometimes overshadowed by the material impact of fund-raising projects such as Product RED and Raising Malawi. Yet their racialized ‘post-race’ stance serves to maintain a neocolonial footprint on the continent and also posit individualistic responses to deep structural problems. The universalizing representations that flow from the cultural authority of celebrity ventriloquize the Other, to return to Spivak, and define the African subject’s needs in the context of so-called First World ideologies such as the American Dream. Below I examine motherhood, a related post-identity narrative that is evident in contemporary philanthropy. Celebrities’ deployment of their roles as mothers creates a strong brand of cultural authority that also has an unseverable link to the colonial past.

### **Mother Africa: Speaking *for* motherhood**

Next we’ll adopt ... We don’t know which country but we’re looking at different countries. And it’s going to be the balance of what would be best for Mad and for Z right now. You know, another boy, another girl, which country, which race, would fit best with the kids. Angelina Jolie (Cooper 2006)

Angelina Jolie made the above remark during a feature interview with CNN’s Anderson Cooper in 2006. It contains a bold assumption that she has her pick of children from around the globe. She and her partner, Brad Pitt, can select the gender, race and circumstances of her family to ensure that the adopted members of the Jolie-Pitt clan are good matches with the others. She can essentially shop the world for children, as this statement would have it. The couple went on to adopt a three-year-old boy named Pax from Vietnam in 2007. Her expression of privileged motherhood in this comment is wrapped up with her social location as a wealthy, famous woman who travels through the world almost without restriction.



The privilege of her whiteness inheres in its invisibility. Its status is essentially that of non-race in that it appears to have a normative essence. ‘Thus the experiences and communication patterns of whites are taken as the norm from which Others are marked,’ as Nakayama & Krizek say (1995: 293). It is partly Jolie’s normative invisibility as a white person, even though she is far from invisible as a famous actor, that gives her power. Her identity as someone seemingly without race is partly what enables her to make such a remark without challenge. Anderson Cooper never questions the presumption behind it; Jolie is seemingly a universal subject (Bell 2013).

As such, Jolie embodies a particular kind of 21<sup>st</sup> century celebrity motherhood that is at once hip and edgy, doting and playful. She is a former goth turned working mom. The actor once wore a vial of then-husband Billy Bob Thornton’s blood around her neck. These days she cultivates a cleaned-up image on and off screen and her child rearing is very public. She and Pitt are frequently photographed with their six children in tow, which serves as a strategy for managing the intense media gaze that follows the Jolie-Pitt brand.

The CNN feature interview introduced her as ‘the most famous mother in the world’ (2006). She and Pitt have three biological children and three children adopted from the so-called Third World, from Cambodia (Maddox), Ethiopia (Zahara) and Vietnam (Pax). Their biological daughter, Shiloh, was born in Namibia in 2006 amid the aforementioned media spectacle and criticism about the resources the small country was required to expend on ensuring the privacy and security of the famous couple. After Pax’s adoption Jolie gave birth to twins in 2008 in Nice, France. The interview was recorded just four days after Shiloh’s birth.

Madonna has four children, two of whom are adopted from Malawi. She has used her media access to blend her motherhood with her philanthropy, and to defend herself as an adoptive mother against some of the critiques (Alina Cho Interview 2009; Kristy Wark Interview 2006). She has been criticized in the media over the adoptions, particularly because her child named David is not an orphan. His biological father is living in Malawi, although without the means to care for his child, according to media reports. Her second adoptive child, Mercy, has family as well (McDougall 2011). As with Jolie and Pitt, Madonna is frequently photographed with her children, in Africa, on the red carpet, and elsewhere.

Both celebrities—and others such as Sandra Bullock and Mariska Hargitay who adopted African American children—are models for idealized motherhood. ‘Proper’ motherhood in the Western mind is affluent, hip and largely white (Hill Collins 2006). It is also highly commoditized. This sort of motherhood is a lifestyle and an aspect of contemporary popular culture. The media derive valuable content from their fixation on the celebrity ‘baby bump’ and on the accouterments of childrearing, from strollers to children’s designer clothes. Stars such as Jolie and Madonna model this idealized, wealthy version of motherhood that is seen to be glamorous and consumptive, and is largely unattainable for most women.

Such idealizations characterize what Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels call the ‘new momism’ (2004). They do it all. Jolie in particular has a thriving career and presents herself as devoted and present mother. She is in control of her destiny and motherhood makes her a go-to expert on Africa because its children are in need. In a sense she has a diplomatic passport to pronounce on all things related to women and children, to speak for those perceived to be voiceless. She claims the privilege of white femininity and its presumption to speak for motherhood.

As this discussion suggests, motherhood is a loaded concept in terms of power relations. It is pregnant with politically charged ideals of purity, race, class and belonging. There are ‘real’ mothers, legitimized as best suited for reproducing the American population and the ‘alleged values of the U.S. nation-state,’ Patricia Hill Collins says (2006: 55). They are represented in all kinds of media as authentic, sincere, honest and reliable, but also as affluent, heterosexual, married, white and American. People of other races, classes, and positions are commonly framed against this ideal as inherently less fit. Those ideals, as Hill Collins notes, can have direct material consequences for access to resources.

Motherhood has deep roots in the imperial project as well (Burton 1994). African women remain, ‘at the heart of the discursive storms around voice and voicelessness,’ when it comes to their lives as spouses and mothers, as scholar and activist Ogun-dipe-Leslie argues (2001: 135). In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial era, white motherhood was juxtaposed with non-white motherhood. By drawing distinctions from their colonial counterparts white European women could leverage their own aspirations and struggles (Mama 1997). Inequalities of race, class, gender worked together ‘generating a

repressive imperial ideology' that acted in and on European life (Mama 1997: 49). In fact, the First Wave feminist campaign for women's suffrage was built upon the argument that British women were moral and civilized creatures, and to deny them the vote was to cast them as no better than the 'primitive' women of the colonies who were subject to the brutality of their husbands and to backward cultural norms (Burton 1994).

The historical ideal of colonial women as civilized mothers and keepers of the race, tasked with teaching colonized women about childrearing, is a trope that lives on in the contemporary Western milieu of celebratized parenting. Both Jolie's and Madonna's lives are intimately entwined with the politics of African motherhood and its vast imperial legacy. Even in the RED campaign, Bono deploys famous celebrity mothers such as Christie Turlington and Elle MacPherson as 'ambassadors' to the women and children in designated RED countries (Bell 2011). Their presence has discursive power to represent African motherhood as primitive and unreliable. Their gestures—plucking chosen babies from a harsh existence to live in luxury, being photographed amid a sea of black faces, touching, holding, feeding, and playing with children—are highly individualistic acts that reflect and construct their authority.

There is a particular self-referentiality in the mission of these celebrities. They frequently speak as mothers in their media interviews, as Jolie does in the interview with Anderson Cooper. Jolie's quote about choosing the birth country of her next adopted child displays a sense of ownership in that she has the run of the so-called Third World and a mandate to be the mother of its children. Behind her comment about choosing her next child is a tacit assertion that her philanthropy serves her parental desires, and vice versa. The CNN interview title itself, 'Angelina Jolie: Her Mission and Motherhood,' makes this symbiotic link between motherhood and missionary zeal, suggesting that her mission in Africa includes being a mother of its children.

When Cooper asks Jolie about AIDS, it is in the context of the couple's fear that their adopted daughter Zahara would be HIV-positive (she was not). Jolie's discussion of the refugee conditions she has witnessed is tinged with an air of *there but for the grace of God go I*. It can be read as an expression of humility and grace, but it is also self-referential to compare one's privilege to the suffering of others. She tells Cooper that she reminds herself of what the refugees endure each time she begins to feel negative about something in her life: 'Even just today, I was, you know, breast-feeding, and tired,

and thinking, God, I really don't know how I'm going to get myself together to be thinking for this interview. But you think, Jesus, the things these people go through. I owe it to all of them to get myself together, to stop whining about being tired, and get there and get focused' (2006). This sort of remark, while empathetic, also has the effect of juxtaposing her with, and distancing her from, the Other.

Madonna takes up the White Saviour stance directly through the name of her charity, Raising Malawi. It suggests a mission to lift up a poor nation, and to raise its people. The characterization of Africans as childlike, in need of rearing and salvation, is a discourse that dates back at least to the slave trade. People were infantilized visually and in multiple forms of publicity directed at the citizens of colonizing countries (Burton 1994; McClintock 1995; Hall 1997). The name of Madonna's charity is an echo of this imperial past.

*I Am Because We Are* (dir. Rissman 2009), produced as part of a major publicity effort for the charity in 2009, conveys a strong image of Madonna as mother to both African children and in a larger sense of its peoples. The film opens with scenes of Madonna walking through a village, flanked by a group of people, holding the hand of a young boy. The shot zooms in on the two and eventually on their two hands—black and white. The opening sequence is interspersed with a rapid-fire collage of news headlines about the court case surrounding Madonna's adoption of a young orphan named David Banda, who ultimately became the third of her four children. A Malawian court initially rejected her application to adopt David because his father and other relatives still live in the country. They lacked the means to care for a child. In the film, the singer picks up David's story at the Home of Hope orphanage:

When I returned to Malawi three months later, David's health had deteriorated. He had pneumonia and malaria and God knows what else. There was not medicine for him at Home of Hope, or any means to treat his illnesses. What was I prepared to do? If I was challenging people to open up their minds and their hearts, then I had to be willing to stand at the front of the line. I decided to try and adopt him. The rest is history. (dir. Rissman 2009)

Madonna never puts her decision to adopt David into a larger context. Malawi has one million orphans and nowhere does she discuss why foreign adoption could be an answer. Nor is it evident why she inserted her personal narrative into the documentary. The choice to include her own adoption story recentres Madonna, a White Saviour who comes in the form of a mother. The narrative, without a broader context about

international adoption, stands out as a one-off response to a seemingly intractable problem. Ultimately Madonna is a traveller, as Ogundipe-Leslie says, speaking for the parents and children of Malawi and for herself as a mother. She tells her own story, implying that it has wider relevance to the problem of HIV/AIDS in Malawi.

Madonna never explains the controversy about David's case, nor any of the complexities of international adoption. Headlines that flash through the opening sequence are about the delays she experienced as Malawian courts challenged her right to adopt, but she never takes them up in the film. Thus she posits adoption of AIDS orphans unproblematically as a universal remedy. Is it a call for other parents to step in and adopt Malawian children? This is not clear. In one study at the University of Liverpool, psychologists suggest that this so-called 'Madonna effect' actually contributed to an increase in international adoptions without a concomitant discussion about the potential repercussions for the children ('New Concerns' 2008). The point is that this aspect of the documentary creates a particularly self-referential construction of Madonna as a White Savior with the cultural authority to speak as an ideal mother about the cures for Malawi's HIV orphan crisis.

Madonna's film also highlights the personal help and support she gave to two other children. In one case a child named Luka had his genitals cut off in an attack. She helped him get the surgeries he needed and helped his family get a new home and places in a private school for Luka and his siblings. In another she helps a young orphan named Fanizo get into a posh private school. Her intervention is again decontextualized. She does not set it in the context of other aid efforts or programs so it reads as an individual act by a privileged white woman. To say this is not to critique her desire to assist these or other children, but to suggest that her work reinscribes the legacy of the white mother that dates back to the colonial period.

These examples of celebrity motherhood mixing with philanthropy are a discourse of whiteness enabled by the cultural authority of these famous individuals. There is no inherent problem with deploying affective ways of knowing that flow from an aspect of life that has formerly been devalued, namely the private domestic realm of child rearing. Yet in their deft blending of celebrity philanthropy and motherhood the stars are primarily constructing and maintaining their own brand (see Littler 2008) and asserting their power to define a common good that serves their own needs. Their representations

help produce Africa as a large, amorphous locale replete with already-existing stereotypes of child-like primitivism that needs mothering. The self-referential nature of this publicity around their efforts sets these celebrities up as mother-saviours.

### **Afterword**

Each of these examples demonstrates the complexity of celebrity involvement in Africa. Famous people can make a material difference in the lives of those they encounter because of their roles as privileged travellers in a globalized world. In some ways celebrity advocacy has become *the* window on Africa for many Euro-North Americans. It brings the media to places of need that would otherwise remain invisible to people who live in wealthy countries. The language of universal good and the material benefits of philanthropy in Africa make it challenging to critique celebrities' actions, and the underlying rhetoric of the White Saviour that operates in the background.

Yet as we excavate beneath the contradictory discourses of universality and individuality, and the representations of people in Africa in these cases, we unearth the white subject 'as the universal ubiquitous subject of humanity' (Shome 1996: 513). That universal subject *speaks* the 'truth' of Africa, and sanctions individuals in Africa to speak. The universal subject speaks for the mission of 'raising' Africa, and for the parents and children of Africa. This critique is aimed at theorizing the discursive as the material. The discursive space of whiteness in Africa must surely be examined as an impediment to Africans' long-term efforts to break the cycles established under colonial rule. The cases here are a part of those cycles through the celebrities' highly individualistic, and in some cases piecemeal, responses.

This is not to suggest that celebrity activism and philanthropy relating to distant locales can only ever be self-serving for the celebrity or disempowering for those who might be helped by their philanthropic efforts. This analysis is meant to be part of a conversation that challenges us to think about how celebrity charity work is a double-edged sword. The same celebritized power that can force difficult social problems and political positions to the fore can be part of a rhetoric that shores up the status quo, in this case a timeworn portrayal of Africa as a place of singular primitive beauty and heartbreakingly intractable problems. Celebrity is a fact of contemporary life that is a deep well of raw power, as the publicity and fund-raising of these and other campaigns suggest. The question becomes how it is deployed or, rather, how it might be deployed in the service

of progressive discourses that do not universalize or generalize the Other, that do not model one-off, self-referential solutions to enormously complex structural problems.

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