ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Agency Beyond Agents: Aid Campaigns in Sub-Saharan Africa and Collective Representations of Agency

Jenna N. Hanchey

Department of Communication Studies, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX 78712, USA

Drawing from postcolonial theory and subaltern studies, this essay contributes to research in communication on humanitarian aid to Africa by using methods of rhetorical criticism to analyze how 3 popular viral video campaigns represent African agency. I argue that although representations of agency in the campaigns differ, they all reinforce Western assumptions about Africa to varying degrees, and entrench imperialistic power relations by portraying African agency in Western-centric ways. I examine absences and silences in the aid rhetoric with a focus on alternatives to current representations of agency, and propose that placing an emphasis on representations of collective agency could provoke a shift away from Western-centrism in aid campaigns and reinvigorate theoretical discussions of representation.

Western aid to Africa is a contested terrain. Many scholars consider aid a problem that needs to be solved, whether by increasing (Sachs, 2005) or eliminating it (Moyo, 2009). Others are interested in the assumptions and ideologies that constitute and are constituted by aid (Richey & Ponte, 2008). Communication scholars have much to offer to these discussions: how the "problem" of aid is constituted by communicative acts, the role of intercultural communication in implementing aid, and the material and discursive effects of how aid projects represent African people. However, little work has yet been done.

In this essay, I focus on humanitarian aid from nongovernmental organizations. Drawing from postcolonial theory and subaltern studies, this article contributes to communication studies of international aid to Africa by using methods of rhetorical

---

Corresponding author: Jenna N. Hanchey; e-mail: jenna.hanchey@utexas.edu

criticism to analyze how three viral video campaigns—Invisible Children, (RED), and Mama Hope—represent African agency. These campaigns rely on documentary films to represent Sub-Saharan African problems, portray their projects, and elicit funding from Western sources. I argue that while by some measures these campaigns may be viewed as successful, they all reinforce Western assumptions about Africa and entrench imperialistic power relations by portraying African agency in Western-centric ways. First, Invisible Children reinforces a reductive binary of self and other by representing the United States as agent and Uganda as victim. Next, (RED) portrays neither Westerners nor Africans as agentic; rather, agency is alternately attributed to the disease of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)/acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) and the medicine of antiretroviral (ARV) drugs. African bodies are the battleground where this struggle over agency plays out, and the Westerner is notably absent. Finally, Mama Hope depicts Africans as fully agentic in their videos, yet does so in a way that makes their agency dependent upon Western knowledges and skills.

Humanitarian aid, although it often goes unquestioned, is not unproblematic. Aid from the West, whether in the form of large-scale philanthropy or "grass-roots" development, cannot avoid the resonances of colonial ideologies and effects of imperialistic economic systems (Bell, 2011; Dempsey, 2009). The question then becomes how and to what extent aid discourses reinforce or challenge these conditions. This essay focuses in particular on representations constituted through aid rhetoric as an example of intercontextual hybridity (Kraidy, 2002). I examine absences and silences in the aid rhetoric with a focus on developing alternatives to the typical individualistic representations of agency. As collective agency is important in social movements, organizing, and change work, I propose that collective *representations* of agency might engender a means of moving away from Western-centrism in viral video aid campaigns through three conceptual shifts: (a) by moving away from representing agents solely as individuals; (b) by offering alternatives to configuring aid interventions as hero/villain epics; and (c) by presenting alternatives to the agonistic configurations of agents engaged in war and division. Rethinking agency in humanitarian aid rhetoric on collective terms is not only a conceptual project but also offers potential to shift aid toward a more equitable intercultural praxis.

Subaltern agency and representation

In 1982, a group of Indian historiographers undertook the project of rereading Indian colonial history from the bottom up, locating agency in the masses rather than the elite (Guha & Spivak, 1988). These authors challenged historical writing that "fails to acknowledge, far less interpret, the contribution made by the people *on their own*, that is, *independently of the elite*" (Guha, 1988, p. 39, emphasis in original). They hoped to illuminate the agency of the "subaltern," or those of inferior status, and resist the reification of agency as a capacity held only by the elite.

Beyond simply allowing for the possibility of subaltern agency, "*the* agency of change is located in the insurgent or the 'subaltern'" (Spivak, 1988, p. 3, emphasis added). Forefronting subaltern agency has ramifications for both critical revisionist historiography and organizing for social change (Bose, 2003). Framing the subaltern as the agent of change implies that movements and resistance do not merely react to established power structures, but catalyze transformation themselves.

Significantly, both critical historiography and social movement studies define agency as a collective attribute rather than individual. Subaltern studies achieve this through a "self-alienating displacing move of and by a consciousness of collectivity" (Spivak, 1988, p. 14). As these historiographers draw heavily from Marxism—but "with certain key differences" (Chakrabarty, 2002, p. 7)—this self-displacement in favor of a collective standpoint is important as a means of challenging "the tendency within Western Marxism which would refuse class-consciousness to the pre-capitalist subaltern" (Spivak, 1988, p. 14), as well as challenging hegemonic social structures in general. That is, recognizing collective agency is also important to social movement theory (Goodwin & Jasper, 2003). The collective aspect of agency is integral to transformative efforts for social change, and helps to support ethical relations with and between subaltern groups (Dutta & Pal, 2010).

African scholars relate to collectivity in a variety of ways. Some pan-African scholars, like Asante (1988), consider a collective African identity to arise from coherent cultural considerations and practices that differ essentially from those of the West. However, this essentialist view of collective agency is strongly critiqued by other African scholars. For example, Appiah (1992) reminds us that "what makes a concept interesting is not whose it is but what it is and how it deals with the realities that face those whose concept it is" (p. 102). Following Appiah, I find collective agency interesting for how it deals with current realities, such as the power imbalance between Westerners and Africans involved in aid work. I address collective agency in relation to African representations not because collectivity is an essential "African" characteristic, but rather because collective agency brings a new perspective that may assist in dealing with the problematic representations of Africans found in contemporary international aid campaigns.

Representing agency is always a problematic affair. In collective action, agency is constituted in part by subalterns themselves, yet agency in representation is the re-presentation of another's agentic capacity. In this way, the questions surrounding agency in representation do not primarily regard the *capacity* for agency—who has it, who does not, and how—but the *modality* of agency—how does it figure, how does it not, and why. Thus, even representations ostensibly showing a subaltern with full agentic capacity can end up reinforcing the agency of the critic instead through the modality of the figure. Spivak (1999) refers to this as a ventriloquist act. As Kapoor (2008) explains, "[t]his desire for the Other as heroine or hero … is a desire of the intellectual to be benevolent or progressive [… , which is] ultimately another form of silencing of the subaltern" (p. 53). Thus, systems of representation must be treated more carefully than simply discerning who has agency and who does not by

interrogating how and why agency is figured. As such, I attend to these portrayals through Kraidy's (2002) lens of intercontextual hybridity, which sees the aid video representations of agency as neither fully Western nor African, but rather attends to "how hegemonic structures operate in a variety of contexts to construct different hybridities" (p. 334).

Representations in aid campaign videos construct their producers as much as the subaltern African subjects portrayed. As Mbembe (2001) explains, Africa has often acted as "the mediation that enables the West to accede to its own subconscious and give a public account of its subjectivity" (p. 3). Therefore, representations cannot be judged apart from the producers' own political positioning and relations (Kapoor, 2008; Said, 1978). Representations of agency are particularly problematic in relation to Africa, as the continent is often considered "an ancient, 'natural' space that is still inexorably trapped in the past" (Parameswaran, 2002), and the people within it beasts, the absolute other in which subjectivity and agency cannot be imagined (Mbembe, 2001). Yet, these portrayals are more about the West than Africa itself, since "we produce [the subaltern] to suit our own image and desire" (Kapoor, 2008, p. 50).

Clearly, there is ample reason to critique representations portraying Africa as primitive and its people as inagentic. However, a project that "seeks to recover subaltern voices, … is [soon] confronted with the impossibility of recovering the subaltern essence" (Dutta & Pal, 2010, p. 373). That is, simply critiquing inaccuracy in representations conforms to an essentialism that assumes the possibility of wholly authentic representations of subaltern peoples. Although care should be taken to avoid the trap of representational correctness and its insinuation of essential identity (Schiappa, 2008), there is also a "necessary rejoinder" (Carillo Rowe, 2008, p. 49) that claims the political importance of knowing others' histories. As Shome (1996) puts it:

> The problem of essentialism that this critical task brings about is that of having to challenge the misrepresentations of racial "others" in Western discourses, while at the same time avoiding the suggestion that there *is* an authentic racial identity that the critic knows is being misrepresented. (pp. 46–47, emphasis in original)

In the case at hand, one must know something about conditions in Africa and the lives of African people in order to challenge the idea that they are inagentic, or that their agency is conditioned upon Western intervention, yet at the same time this must be achieved without pretending that there is a real identity that can be represented. As Appiah (1992) argues in relation to what counts as "African" writing, "the problem of authenticity [is] something distant and unengaging for most African writers" (p. 76). Instead of worrying about what is a real or accurate portrayal of Africanness, Appiah claims that scholars should be concerned primarily with what is most helpful to solving the pressing problems of contemporary Africans. Intercontexual hybridity provides one lens through which to do so.

Because "narrative about Africa is always a pretext for a comment about something else, some other place, some other people" (Mbembe, 2001, p. 3), addressing representations of agency in aid campaigns has a particular importance for Africans, as these

portrayals lead to certain conceptualizations of Africans, and influence the nature of the relations constructed between Westerners and Africans. Thus, by considering how portrayals of African agency in international aid campaign videos are represented in individualistic terms, and what that might reveal about Western political assumptions, I seek to express alternative paths that might allow for more equitable relations in the future. By analyzing how "*one* explanation and narrative of reality was established as the normative one" (Spivak, 1999, p. 267, emphasis in original), rather than focusing on whether or not this explanation is accurate, I consider what theoretical possibilities an alternate formulation of agency might create.

To do so, I employ a postcolonial approach to representation. A postcolonial approach moves the critic beyond unnuanced methodologies that are "not … equipped to deconstruct the subtle mechanisms of Othering that structure the neo-colonial discursive regimes of globalization" (Parameswaran, 2002, p. 312). Instead, this approach is sensitive to the careful positions one must construct in relation to representational politics. Alhuwalia (2001), taking an African view of postcolonialism, says that it "is the task of post-colonialism to confront the existence of difference, to bring together theory from both sides of the imperial divide and to make it relevant to the conditions that exist for all those who endure the post-colonial condition" (p. 8). Therefore, in this essay, I focus on representations of African agency as constructed by three aid organizations in order to analyze what current representations figure in terms of postcolonial politics, and offer alternative conceptualizations that may open paths to better relations from all sides of the postcolonial condition.

Humanitarian aid and viral video campaigns

Invisible Children, (RED), and Mama Hope are organizations founded and run by Westerners that offer aid to Sub-Saharan African communities. These organizations may use differing means to reach their divergent goals, but each partially relies on viral videos to gain widespread awareness and financial support. Looking at these videos offers a way to analyze the rhetorical devices aid campaigns use to gain support, and how these devices construct certain perspectives on African agency.

Aid organizations

The first organization, Invisible Children, was created in 2004 in order to "stop" Joseph Kony and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), a rebel group first seen in Northern Uganda (Invisible Children, 2014). The LRA is known for kidnapping children and forcing them to serve as soldiers and sex slaves. Invisible Children's activism has centered on documenting the lives of escaped child soldiers and initiating awareness campaigns in the United States. It recently moved from showing films at special screenings to online methods of video distribution.

(RED) is the second organization that I examine. The (RED) website states that "(RED) was created to help provide a sustainable flow of money from the private sector to fight AIDS" (RED, 2015). Created by "aid celebrities" Bono, Jeffery Sachs, and

Paul Farmer, (RED) refers to a partnership of over a dozen name-brands that offer products with a "(RED)" label (Richey & Ponte, 2008, p. 711). Up to 50% of the profits for each item purchased are donated to the Global Fund, a middle-man organization that distributes grants to various other organizations. In their analysis of how (RED) reconfigures the possibilities of developmental aid, Richey and Ponte (2008) describe the project as "consumption, trade and aid wed dying Africans with designer goods" (p. 711).

The third organization, Mama Hope, operates on a smaller scale than the others, but has garnered a remarkable amount of publicity for such a small nongovernmental organization. Mama Hope (2015b) describes its purpose as "Mama Hope works in close partnership with local African organizations to connect them with the resources required to transform their own communities." Working on a variety of projects in four different African countries, Mama Hope is most known in the Western world for its original viral videos. These videos operate under the tagline "Stop the pity. Unlock the potential" (Mama Hope, 2015c), and thus appeal to advocates of humanitarian aid who support the critique of typical African stereotypes in Western media.

Texts and methods

All three of these campaigns rely on online documentary films to represent Sub-Saharan African circumstances, portray the campaigns' work there, and elicit funding for further work from Western sources. Although Invisible Children's (2012) *KONY 2012* video was by far the most popular, Product (RED) and HBO's (2010) *The Lazarus Effect* and Mama Hope's (2011a, 2011b, 2012) collection of three short films, *Alex Presents: Commando*, *Call Me Hope*, and *African Men. Hollywood Stereotypes*, have also been viewed by millions.

These five videos are the primary texts that I analyze in this article. Additionally, I draw on the websites of the three organizations, press about the videos, criticism of the organizations, and criticism of the videos. Perhaps not surprisingly, *KONY 2012*—the most popular video of the group—has also generated the most backlash from African and Western popular critics (Kagumire, 2012; Oyston, 2012). (RED) and *The Lazarus Effect*, on the other hand, are warmly received in media and popular culture, but have been barraged with academic criticism (Bell, 2011; Repo & Yrjölä, 2011; Richey & Ponte, 2008). Mama Hope, thus far, has escaped the scathing indictment of neocolonialism and neoliberal capitalism leveled at the other two, with the exception of a lone blogger (Ross, 2012).

Using methods of rhetorical criticism (Black, 1978), specifically the methodological guidelines described by Campbell and Burkholder (1997), I first performed an intrinsic analysis of each of the five texts, focusing solely on the video texts themselves in vivid detail. From the descriptive data compiled by my intrinsic analysis, I then considered what external information would be necessary to understand these texts in their cultural contexts. Thus, I compiled an extrinsic analysis using organizational information and media regarding the video campaigns. Finally, using a theoretical lens sensitive to subaltern agency and a postcolonial approach to representation,

I brought the two sets of data together and examined them for patterns within the discourse. Throughout this process, my work was attuned to the following research questions: How do viral video aid campaigns for Sub-Saharan Africa rhetorically represent agency? What are the political ramifications of these representations relative to Western-African relations?

Representations of agency in aid campaigns for Africa

All of these organizations are based in the West, yet each represents agency differently. By examining each of these viral video campaigns in relation to the others, a complex portrait of Western assumptions in representing African agency begins to emerge. Unearthing what is taken for granted in international aid rhetoric, then, begins to reveal the spaces for alternative constructions and lines of thought that are addressed in the final section.

Invisible children: Agent versus victim

KONY 2012 opens with a soft chord played on a piano, as an image of Earth spins slowly on the screen. The unhurried pace continues as the narrator, Jason Russell, speaks over footage of people meeting and hugging, calling and talking, and using technological innovations such as video chat, smartphones, and Facebook. We watch his son being born, and as he grows before us we hear Russell talk about wanting to make the world a better place for the sake of his son.

In a parallel manner, we hear about another boy who was important to Russell. Jacob (no last name given) is shown sleeping in a structure in Uganda with a multitude of other children in order to stay out of the grasp of the LRA, a rebel group headed by Joseph Kony. Throughout the rest of the video, the audience is given narrative evidence and pleas to pathos attempting to inspire us to follow the step-by-step instructions offered that will "change the world" and stop Joseph Kony from terrorizing children.

KONY 2012 relies on a series of binary oppositions. Early in the film, we are first presented with one child—White, blonde, happy, laughing in the sun—and then another—Black, terrorized, sad, crying in the darkness. Like this one, many of the film's binary oppositions rely on neocolonial logics, creating a split between the West and Uganda that mirrors Orientalist thought. The film employs three binaries: Black and White, knowing and not knowing, action and the inability to act. Together, these polar positions produce a dichotomy between the U.S. "agent" and the Ugandan "victim."

First, as described above, *KONY 2012* constructs a binary opposition between black and white bodies in the movie. Throughout the film, Black people are shown dancing, laughing, crying, hugging, listening. Former child soldiers arrive in a U.S. airport, smiling, and excited. Although video footage is shown of some Ugandan youth giving speeches, we only hear a single sentence of one speaker's words. On the other hand, the disembodied (White) voice of Jason Russell narrates throughout the film,

and comments on all occurrences. More often, White U.S. Americans are shown giv-ing speeches about the plight of Ugandans in the video than the Ugandans themselves. The imagery that accompanies White bodies in the film is very different from that of black bodies. Rather than being shown laughing or crying, they are often presented as stoic. The message transmitted by the images is that there is work to be done, a fight to fight, and that laughter accompanies victory rather than simply occurring in life. Crowds of predominantly White youth flash on the screen, either yelling, or silently raising a single fist in the air. A gesture appropriated from the Black Power movement in the civil rights era of the United States, it is unnerving to see a crowd of raised white fists. As the camera pans across the faces, no one smiles. They are ostensibly presented as fighting a war against Joseph Kony, by raising their fists in the air, buying t-shirts, and hanging posters. The Black presence in the film seems almost to connote a necropolitical display of bare life (Mbembe, 2003), pure bodily experience without political agency, where the hands working to "change the world," for the most part, are White. Through this imagery, the ability to act, to be agentic, is connected to White bodies.

The film also invokes a figuratively black-and-white binary by denoting "good guys" versus "bad guys." In order to explain to the audience who Joseph Kony is and what Russell's work in the world is, Russell films himself speaking to his young son. When asked what his father does for a job, the child responds, "You stop the bad guys from being mean." His son is unable to name the "bad guys," so Russell states, "This is the guy, Joseph Kony," as he slides an 8×10 portrait across the table to the child. A black-and-white line is drawn here between "good" and "bad." There is no middle ground discussed or allowed.

However, the black-and-white approach serves a purpose in the video. Russell emphasizes repeatedly that he knows "exactly" what to do, and that it must be done *now*. In order to lay out a concrete plan of action, *KONY 2012* needed to present the situation as a simplistic battle between good and evil, a battle where Westerners can right their historical wrongs by fighting for good:

> It's hard to look back on some parts of human history. Because when we heard about injustice, we cared, but we didn't know what to do. Too often, we did nothing. But if we're going to change that, we have to start somewhere. So we're starting here with Joseph Kony. Because now we *know* what to do.

The hope that this situation can be corrected is entirely predicated on Russell's knowledge of what must be done. In the system of binaries that has already been established in the video, this implies that Ugandans do not know what to do about Joseph Kony. The film never asks how Russell came upon this knowledge, or why he has it when Ugandans do not. Instead, the film implies that U.S. ways of knowing are able to uncover knowledge that Ugandan ways of knowing are not.

These constructions clearly set up agency in the film as aligned solely with the West and its subjects, presenting a binary of "Western agent" against the "Ugandan victim." On the other hand, the Ugandans in this video are represented as having no way of

knowing what should be done. It then follows that they are portrayed as having no agentic capacity. Thus, the two previous binaries discussed create the groundwork for the agent–victim dichotomy. Agency in *KONY 2012* is located in (White) fists raised in the air, (White) men in suits petitioning U.S. Congresspeople, and (White) youth plastering walls with posters of Joseph Kony. Any (Black) Ugandan bodies taking part in the campaign are shown following the lead of the Americans, and engage in the situation on Western terms. In short, the impossibility of African agency is the basis for Western intervention in *KONY 2012*.

(RED): Drug versus disease in the battle for agency

(RED) and HBO's (2010) film *The Lazarus Effect* presents a much different perspective on agency. Here, rather than embodied by individuals or nations, agency is construed as the trait of HIV/AIDS and ARVs in *The Lazarus Effect*. In this representation of agency, the Zambian body is discursively constructed as the battleground over which the drug struggles against the disease for agency and control.

The Lazarus Effect is a 30-minute film documenting the effect that accessible ARVs have had on the population of Zambia. In a country where over one million people are HIV+ (UNAIDS, 2012), HIV/AIDS affects most people's lives. *The Lazarus Effect* differs greatly from *KONY 2012* by showing only black Zambian men, women, and children on camera, and using only their voices (as well as text printed on the screen) to narrate the film. The film follows four people infected with HIV — three adults, Constance, Concillia, and Paul; and one child, Bwalya — highlighting how access to ARVs has drastically changed their lives. The title refers to the Biblical story of Lazarus, who was raised from the dead by Jesus. In a similar manner, these people are raised from a deathlike state by the miraculous healing power of ARVs. Bell (2011) notes that Jesus purposefully *waited* those 3 days before raising Lazarus from the dead, in order that "his divine powers would be evident to all" (p. 169). The focus of the story was not Lazarus, but Jesus. In the same way, the focus of *The Lazarus Effect* is not the Africans, but the ARV drugs.

Concillia describes her state before the ARVs by saying, "The way I was feeling in me, it was like I was already dead. And I never had any hope that again I would come back to life. There was nothing that I could do for myself." This statement is an exemplar of the rhetorical perspective presented by the film. Here, Africans are again represented as agency-less, unable to act or change their own circumstances. However, rather than locating agency in the Western savior, *The Lazarus Effect* describes the disease and drug as having agentic power.

Even the text that begins the film sets the scene to focus on HIV/AIDS and ARVs:

> HIV/AIDS is preventable and treatable. Yet it has killed over 20 million people in Africa. In recent years, antiretroviral (ARV) medication has been helping people stay alive. In as few as 40 days, people on ARVs can undergo a remarkable transformation.

HIV/AIDS is the subject of the first two sentences, presented as the agentic villain unleashing its horrible crimes on the unwitting African masses. ARV medication is the subject of the following sentence: the agentic hero come to save the people from certain death. "People" are spoken of as passive in this text, as "being helped" and "undergoing transformations." Neither of these things are within their control or under their power. The Zambians in *The Lazarus Effect* are the setting in which the struggle for control plays out.

The disease is the first agent in this struggle. "3,800 people still die in Africa every day from AIDS," text across the screen reports. HIV/AIDS is described as an active murderer, taking the lives of people throughout the country and the continent. Constance tearfully informs the camera, "In my life, I've had three children. And I lost all three to HIV." The disease is represented as having the ability to take away life, health, and happiness from those that it comes in contact with, with no possibility that the Zambian affected can resist or fight back.

However, in the film, the ARV drugs *do* have the ability to fight back. "I'm alive today because of the ARVs," says Constance. ARVs act within Zambian bodies, physically fighting off the virus and rescuing the people. Bwalya, who intently wishes to go back to school and play with her friends, is excited when she first received ARVs. "Today I start taking the new drugs. They tell me that they are going to help me," she explains as she swallows the pills with a drink of water.

Without the agency of the ARVs to work against the disease, there is nothing the Zambian people here can do. In the film, this meant disaster not only for individuals but also for the country at large. Constance, for instance, fully expected to "sit back and wait for death" before she knew that ARVs existed. She saw no reason to be tested for HIV, because even if she knew her status there was nothing she could do to stop the disease's terrible progression within her body. She further elaborates the situation on a national scale, saying, "If the ARVs had not come, I believe this country would have been crippled to an extent which I don't know what would have happened." The health and safety of individuals and the nation are construed as resting on the shoulders of ARVs alone.

It may not be immediately clear how the Zambians in the video relate to the battle between HIV/AIDS and the ARVs. Although the fight is clearly taking place *within* their bodies, the connection to lived, day-to-day experience is not particularly evident. I argue that one might further see the agency of both the disease and the drug through the way that Zambians are discursively related to them in the film. Namely, the lives of the people must be attuned to either the drug or disease: The controlling agent in the body conditions and constrains the ways in which people may live.

At one point in the film, Constance explains the importance of maintaining a strict schedule of taking ARVs. She says, "Adherence to medication is very important, especially to ARVs. Because, as you know, these are drugs that are supposed to be taken for life. They only work for a few hours in the body. Meaning that, if the drugs run out in the body, the virus wakes up." The urgent importance of strict bodily regulation

begins to emerge in this statement, and becomes even more clear when she speaks to a new patient at the clinic about having a specific drug regimen.

"When do you take your drugs?"

"0700 hours and 1900 hours."

"How do you know it's time to take the drugs?"

"I normally look at my watch. I've got a wall-watch in my kitchen."

"But supposing you are not at home? How will you know it's time to take the drugs? What time is it now? Can you tell me?"

"It's about 11, around 11."

"Around, past, so you are not sure. We have to be very careful where time is concerned."

The patient's life is to some extent determined by the ARVs. ARVs make choices on behalf of the people. The patient is caught between two constraining paths: She must either succumb to the will of the drugs, or the will of the disease.

HIV/AIDS operates in a similar manner as agent, disciplining the lives of the people. Concillia describes, "Even after I started taking my medicine, I never had that courage to face other people about being HIV+. The first time that I went to Kanyanya, I couldn't believe that all people would be open just to talk about HIV freely." Even her voice is suppressed and constrained within the bounds set by the disease.

In *The Lazarus Effect*'s presentation of agency, the Zambian people filmed are shown as either living under the agency of the disease or the drug, with no option of freeing oneself from those constraints. This portrait of agency excludes the possibility of a Zambian agent.

Mama Hope: Developing agency

A small Tanzanian boy in a green t-shirt smiles at the camera (Mama Hope, 2011a). "My city which I like is the city of Arnold Schwarzenegger," he says. He's standing on a dirt road, and there's a building made of brick and clay in the background. He proceeds to excitedly, clearly, and succinctly describe the entire plot of Arnold Schwarzenegger's movie, *Commando*. This is the first of Mama Hope's three popular videos, intended to showcase a "positive" side of Africa. Based on the last seconds of the video, the implications meant to be drawn from the film have nothing to do with the violent plot of the movie that the boy, Alex, describes, but rather his curiosity and intelligence. Text across the screen at the end of the video reads: "Terminate the stereotype. Alex is not a child solider, AIDS victim, orphan. Alex is bright, curious, happy, hopeful … "

Mama Hope's tagline, "Stop the pity. Unlock the potential" (Mama Hope, 2015c), is the cornerstone of all its video-advocacy efforts. The second film (Mama Hope, 2011b) is split-screen for the entirety of the video: U.S. Americans on one side, Africans on

the other, all singing along with Paul Simon's song "Call Me Al." Each side mirrors the other, and sometimes the boundary is transgressed in order to give a high-five. A variety of types of people are shown—children, men, women, mothers holding babies—doing a variety of activities. It is fun, upbeat, and lively, and meant to show "the shared traits that make us all human" (Mama Hope, 2015a).

Mama Hope's third short film, *African Men. Hollywood Stereotypes*, has over a million views on YouTube (Mama Hope, 2012). In this video, four Kenyan men are shown gravely reciting stereotypical ideas of African men as portrayed in Hollywood films, interspersed with clips from these films. At the end, they burst out laughing and say, "But you don't really think of us that way, do you?" They then describe how they are "likeable and friendly guys."

For an aid organization, Mama Hope is impressively self-reflexive on the politics of representation, saying that the organization is "tired of the over-sensationalized, one-dimensional depictions of African men and the white savior messaging that permeates our media" (Mama Hope, 2015c). However, although Mama Hope's films are meant to disrupt problematic stereotypes of African people in Western media, I suggest that the issue of agency is unresolved. Although Mama Hope claims to be a magnification tool to make African voices more easily heard in the West, I argue that the portrayals are still attuned to Western standards in a problematic way. The representations of Africans in the films are disciplined and constrained by Western logics and thus present a hybridized version of African agency that is constructed to be palatable to the Western aid donor.

In the description regarding the making of *African Men. Hollywood Stereotypes*, the organization says, "They [the young men in the video] wanted to tell their own stories instead, so we handed them the mic and they made this video" (Mama Hope, 2015c). This begs the question of whether or not it is even possible for a Western aid campaign to present "their own stories." Can a movie designed, filmed, and edited by Westerners be truly African in origin? Some certainly think so. One blogger commented that "[i]t's quite refreshing, after all the controversy of Kony 2012, to hear Africans telling their own stories" (Megginson, 2012). Ultimately, as we have seen, questions of "real" and "authentic" representations lead only to a problematic assumption that there exists an essence which is truly African.

Instead, a more useful question is what type of hybridity is being constructed to portray these young men as "likeable and friendly guys?" In an interview, a Mama Hope representative said,

> The video contrasts the militant way Africans are often portrayed, with colorful, playful images of local medical students and human resource workers kicking around a soccer ball. "Using images that people can relate to," Rodgers told Philanthropy.com, "[and] showing people not at their worst but at their full potential, with creativity, is just as effective." (Huff Post Impact, 2012)

The idea of "images that people can relate to" is quite problematic in the way it is used here. The phrasing seems to equate "people" in general with the U.S. American

donors who are presumably the target of the campaign, effectively normalizing a Western viewpoint as universal. Such "people" can relate to young men playing sports, young men who are getting not simply a primary education, but a professional degree. These young men are disciplined in their representations by Western cultural norms. An appeal to "people" who can relate is made by emphasizing Westernized traits within the youth. The video tells you that you should not be scared of these young men, because they "are even on Facebook." Although the video may be allowing them to tell their own stories, it is doing so in such a way that is still acceptable to the Western observer. These are not "ordinary villagers," these are young men getting professional degrees, who know that a reference to "shirtless Matthew McConaughey" is humorous.

Similarly, according to the organization, the film *Call Me Hope* "sets out to show the energy and potential of Africa and the interconnectedness we share. It is only when people are no longer seen through the stereotypes of poverty that we can begin to see we are not so different from each other" (Mama Hope, 2015c). However, interconnectedness is again constructed on terms that appeal to the Western viewer. *Call Me Hope* connects disparate groups together through song, but the song chosen is sung in English by a U.S. American artist. Some of the African people singing along in the video are obviously not comfortable pronouncing the words in English. The representations of African agency in Mama Hope videos are disciplined to conform to standards that, despite making Africans uncomfortable, are the result of a certain Western/African hybridity that reinforces aspects of hegemony.

The problem with this hybridity is that it relies on Western-centric logics. Parameswaran (2002) has shown the problematic nature of how positive images of non-Western peoples are often only seen when such peoples are associated with Western culture or ideals. As Spivak (1999) describes in relation to Kant's foreclosure of non-Western subjects, such portrayals can be made to "justify the imperialist project by producing the following formula: make the heathen into a human so that he can be treated as an end in himself; … yesterday's imperialism, today's Development" (pp. 123–124). By basing their representations of African agency in the foundation of Western music, technology, sport, and ideals such as educational achievement, Mama Hope creates a hybridity that "obscure[s] the vast economic, political and technological inequities between nations" (Kraidy, 2002, p. 334). In doing so, a version of African agency is constructed that implies Africans must be taken and "developed" into a Western perspective in order to be treated as agentic in themselves.

Moving beyond agents: Toward collective representations of agency

Invisible Children, (RED), and Mama Hope each present a different conceptualization of agency through online videos for mass consumption. In this section, I address how these representations of agency relate to one another, tracing the various ways that agency is conditioned in each campaign by Western logics relying to some degree

on individualistic assumptions. Finally, I propose how representations of collective agency might disturb traditional ways of considering aid projects and representation, and offer trajectories for future research.

Portrayals of agency

KONY 2012 is the clearest example of an imperial representation of agency. In this text, agency is conferred upon (mostly) White bodies living in the Western world, and Ugandans are portrayed as being unable to act to address their situation without Western assistance. However, the Zambians shown in *The Lazarus Effect* are also portrayed as unable to act. Although their agency has not been stolen by the "brave Western protagonist" (Mama Hope, 2012), in the text it is conferred solely upon the disease of HIV/AIDS and the drugs used to fight it. As the Zambians are discursively made into the battlegrounds over which these two agentic figures engage, they do not even figure as agentic. However, *The Lazarus Effect* garnered mostly positive attention from critics. One even praised the director for "allowing the African people to tell their own story without the intrusion of well-meaning Western interlopers or melodramatic narrators" (Hall, 2010). Why is it that *KONY 2012* was met with a barrage of anti-imperialist criticism, while *The Lazarus Effect* escaped mostly unscathed?

There are a number of reasons that this could be the case. First, there were no Americans or white bodies shown on screen in *The Lazarus Effect*. With the Western presence hidden behind screen, the video may not have seemed as overtly interventionist as *KONY 2012*. Additionally, attributing agency to the disease or drug is not as threatening as the placement of agency solely in the Western person. One may naturalize more readily the behavior of a disease or drug than a human being. That is, when the enemy is a disease, it is easier to believe that people have no agency to act against it.

Similar to *The Lazarus Effect*, Mama Hope shows solely Africans in two out of three videos, but rather than assigning agency to another construct, the Africans are shown to perform agency in a manner that corresponds to Western expectations. Mama Hope's films discipline African agency into a Western path of agentic development.

Assumptions of individualism

In all three cases, the African subjects of the videos are represented to some extent in ways that support Western-centric logics. I argue that the main factor constraining the portrayals of African agency is the individualistic nature of agency in these texts. First, in *KONY 2012*, it was Russell's promise to a boy named Jacob that brought this campaign into existence, and the agency behind it is placed on Russell throughout the film—as well as the individuals watching the video. Although the film advocates for people to stand together against Joseph Kony, it does so through individuals: Each individual watches the film on her own personal computer screen, purchases her own personal action kit, and does her part to change the world. Rather than figured as a collective construct, agency is located in each individual.

Second, *The Lazarus Effect* draws a similar warlike portrait of individualistic agency. However, in this case the hero and villain are not people, but things. HIV/AIDS and ARVs are personified in the language of battle that constantly surrounds them. Exemplifying a Western, mythic notion of the epic battle, HIV/AIDS and ARVs are represented as fighting to the death.

Finally, even Mama Hope showcases individuals who are "not so different from us" after all. However, Mama Hope achieves such portrayals by constructing a African/Western hybridity that can be embodied only by certain individuals. In the *Commando* video, Alex represents all African children. By focusing on this one intelligent and curious individual, the video disputes stereotypical representations of poor, starving, silent African children. However, this is achieved through an individual sympathetic to Western viewers. Similarly, the young men in *African Men. Hollywood Stereotypes* all have certain characteristics such as high levels of education, good English skills, and a familiarity with Western culture and technology that are not representative of African men writ large. These individuals are used to represent all Africans particularly *because of* their atypical, Western-appreciable aspects. Mama Hope brings peoples together, but only through certain individuals.

Representing collective agency

As this essay has demonstrated, the way that agency is presented in these three international aid campaigns assumes an individualistic perspective. However, subaltern studies offer another view in which agency is considered a collective capacity, rather than an individualistic one. In this formulation, agency is inseparable from the relations that constitute it: that is, from the collectivity. Collective understandings figure heavily in African scholarship, as it is from a collective perspective that African scholars constitute an identity out of their differences (Alhuwalia, 2001; Appiah, 1992; Asante, 1988). However, perhaps more importantly, a collective focus could allow for the construction of alternative hybridities in humanitarian aid campaigns—hybrid portrayals of African agency that do not reinforce Western-centric hegemonies.

The concept of collective agency in representation has important implications, both for portrayals of African agency in humanitarian aid campaigns and theories of representational politics. In aid campaigns, thinking through representations of collective agency could shift aid portrayals in three main ways: by representing people or agents as members of collectives; by offering alternatives to the hero/villain epic configuration; and by moving away from agonistic battles that must be won or divides that must be bridged. My contention is that current individualistic portrayals of African agency in aid campaign videos result in problematic assumptions among Western audiences about Africans, who they are, and of what they are capable. What collective representations would mean for the financial "success" of an organization, and whether or not they should be implemented in aid campaigns is not my concern. Rather, I wish to question the assumptions grounding most aid campaigns, whether successful or not. Through the concept of representations of collective agency, I wish

to offer a means by which agentic representations can be rethought and their outcomes shifted.

First, in representations of collective agency, agents need no longer be conceptualized or portrayed solely as individuals. The idea of a collective as agentic could open different perspectives regarding identity and action. Rather than choosing singular individuals to represent a cultural identity or group like the videos of Mama Hope, collective portrayals of agency could move away from tokenism toward solidarity. Similarly, instead of locating change in an individual decision like Invisible Children, change could become the act of a collective being, centered in culture, community, or coalition. In addition, all agentic acts would then be considered in relation to other acts, communities, and peoples (Carillo Rowe, 2008).

Second, representing agency as collective rather than individual could offer alternatives to the "good guy" versus "bad guy" rhetoric found within the (RED) and Invisible Children campaigns. These campaigns currently pit the good Westerner against the evil Joseph Kony, or the miraculous ARV drug against the horror of HIV/AIDS in an epic struggle. Although not all collective portrayals do so, a collective understanding of agency could imagine other ways of conceptualizing struggle that operate outside of the black/white binary of good and evil, hero and villain. In a collective view, struggles have the potential to become more complex, more intricate, and more detailed, as concepts of hero and villain blur and seemingly epic interactions cannot be separated from the historical relations of which they are a part. In the case of *The Lazarus Effect*, this move might displace the individual struggle between drug and disease, and allow for the centering of more complex interactions, such as the way that community support figures into maintaining consistent treatment.

Finally, collective agency could shift rhetorical focus away from themes of war and division. The assumption of "sides" to the struggle, and enemies that must be defeated, is based in the same individualistic rhetoric of "good" versus "evil" described above. An idea of collective agency could open different means of understanding problems themselves, and not just different ways of solving those problems. By considering multifaceted communities in relation to one another, problems such as those presented simplistically by Invisible Children or (RED) become more complex and difficult to solve. Yet, at the same time, agency is also disperse, spread throughout multiple positions rather than located on one "side" or another.

In representational politics, collective agency could help reframe representations in a way that alleviates the tension between the essentialism entailed in representational correctness and the imperialism of problematic portrayals by challenging the individualistic assumptions above. Representation is both inescapable (Spivak, 1999) and imperfectable (Schiappa, 2008), but current iterations of the debate on how to address this tension often lead only to accusations of essentialism on one hand, or political ignorance on the other. By introducing a new way to think about representation, theoretical debates may be enlivened, opening paths to unforeseen political maneuvers. Collective agency has always been an important part of social movements, organizing, and struggle. By bringing questions of collectivity

to representational politics, scholars may contribute to shifting problematic configurations of Western-African relations engendered by current aid discourses, and theoretical constructions of representation itself. Rather than delineate what collective agentic representation should look like, I hope to inspire further conversations regarding what this concept could mean, how it could be enacted, and its possible ramifications.

Acknowledgments

References

Alhuwalia, P. (2001). *Politics and post-colonial theory: African inflections*. London, England: Routledge.

Appiah, K. A. (1992). *In my father's house: Africa in the philosophy of culture*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Asante, M. K. (1988). *Afrocentricity*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.

Bell, K. (2011). "A delicious way to help save lives": Race, commodification, and celebrity in Product (RED). *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, **4**(3), 163–180. doi: 10.1080/17513057.2011.569972.

Black, E. (1978). *Rhetorical criticism: A study in method*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Bose, P. (2003). *Organizing empire: Individualism, collective agency, & India*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Campbell, K., & Burkholder, T. R. (1997). *Critiques of contemporary rhetoric*. New York, NY: Wadsworth.

Carillo Rowe, A. (2008). *Power lines: On the subject of feminist alliances*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Chakrabarty, D. (2002). *Habitations of modernity: Essays in the wake of subaltern studies*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Dempsey, S. E. (2009). NGOs, communicative labor, and the work of grassroots representation. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, **6**(4), 328–345. doi: 10.1080/14791420903348625.

Dutta, M. J., & Pal, M. (2010). Dialog theory in marginalized settings: A subaltern studies approach. *Communication Theory*, **20**(4), 363–386. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-2885.2010.01367.x.

Goodwin, J., & Jasper, J. M. (Eds.) (2003). *The social movements reader: Cases and concepts*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

Guha, R. (1988). On some aspects of the historiography of colonial India. In R. Guha & G. C. Spivak (Eds.), *Selected subaltern studies* (pp. 37–44). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Guha, R., & Spivak, G. C. (Eds.) (1988). *Selected subaltern studies*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Hall, P. (2010, August 5). The Lazarus effect. *Film Threat*. Retrieved from http://www.filmthreat.com/reviews/24012/

Huff Post Impact. (2012). Mama Hope, African nonprofit, addresses Africa stereotypes with 'stop the pity' campaign. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/04/30/kony-2012-mama-hope_n_1464139.html

Invisible Children. (2012, March 5). KONY 2012. Retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y4MnpzG5Sqc

Invisible Children. (2014). Our story. Retrieved from http://invisiblechildren.com/our-story/

Kagumire, R. (2012, March 7). My response to KONY 2012. Retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KLVY5jBnD-E&feature=share

Kapoor, I. (2008). *The postcolonial politics of development*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Kraidy, M. (2002). Hybridity in cultural globalization. *Communication Theory*, **12**(3), 316–339. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-2885.2002.tb00272.x.

Mama Hope. (2011a, February 8). Alex presents: Commando—mamahope.org. Retrieved from www.youtube.com/watch?v=pLix4QPL3tY&feature=relmfu

Mama Hope. (2011b, November 7). Call me hope—mamahope.org. Retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OzQfFcy3KJg

Mama Hope. (2012, April 25). African men. Hollywood stereotypes. [mamahope.org]. Retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=qSElmEmEjb4

Mama Hope. (2015a). Why stop the pity? Retrieved from http://www.mamahope.org/unlockpotential/why-stop-the-pity/

Mama Hope. (2015b). Mission and vision. Retrieved from http://www.mamahope.org/mission-and-vision/

Mama Hope (2015c). Stop the pity. Unlock the potential. Retrieved from http://www.mamahope.org/unlock-potential/

Mbembe, A. (2001). *On the postcolony*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Mbembe, J. A. (2003). Necropolitics. (L. Meintjes, Trans.). *Public Culture*, **15**(1), 11–40. doi: 10.1215/08992363-15-1-11.

Megginson, T. (2012). *African men would like you to stop pitying them*. osocio. Retrieved from http://osocio.org/message/african-men-would-like-you-to-stop-pitying-them/

Moyo, D. (2009). *Dead aid: Why aid is not working and how there is a better way for Africa*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Oyston, G. (2012, March 8). We got trouble. Retrieved from http://visiblechildren.tumblr.com/post/18890947431/we-got-trouble

Parameswaran, R. (2002). Local culture in global media: Excavating colonial and material discourses in National Geographic. *Communication Theory*, **12**(3), 287–315. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-2885.2002.tb00271.x.

(RED). (2015). About. Retrieved from http://www.red.org/en/about

(RED) & HBO. (2012). The Lazarus effect. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l16YH6xCN4c

Repo, J., & Yrjölä, R. (2011). The gender politics of celebrity humanitarianism in Africa. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, **13**(1), 44–62. doi: 10.1080/14616742.2011.534661.

Richey, L. A., & Ponte, S. (2008). Better (Red)^{TM} than dead? Celebrities, consumption and international aid. *Third World Quarterly*, **29**(4), 711–729. doi: 10.1080/01436590802052649.

Ross, E. (2012, April 26). The "African Men-Hollywood stereotypes" video, positive news and "Brand Africa." *Africa is a country*. Retrieved from http://africasacountry.com/positivenews-from-africa/

Sachs, J. (2005). *The end of poverty: Economic possibilities for our time*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.

Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.

Schiappa, E. (2008). *Beyond representational correctness: Rethinking criticism of popular media*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Shome, R. (1996). Postcolonial interventions in the rhetorical canon: An "Other" view. *Communication Theory*, **6**(1), 40–59. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-2885.1996.tb00119.x.

Spivak, G. C. (1988). Subaltern studies: Deconstructing historiography. In R. Guha & G. C. Spivak (Eds.), *Selected subaltern studies* (pp. 3–34). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Spivak, G. C. (1999). *A critique of postcolonial reason: Toward a history of the vanishing present*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

UNAIDS. (2012). Zambia: HIV and AIDS estimates. *UNAIDS*. Retrieved from http://www.unaids.org/en/regionscountries/countries/zambia