Reframing the Present: Mock Aid Videos and the Foreclosure of African Epistemologies

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Abstract: Drawing from Afrofuturist and African theories that demonstrate the importance of reinterpreting the *past* in order to imagine (im)possible positions and relationships for women of color in the *future*, I look to reframings of the *present* in rhetorics of international aid work with Sub-Saharan Africa. I examine six mock aid videos produced by the aid "solidarity" organization SAIH Norway (2018c) to reveal ways that these videos ask the audience to reconceptualize Western relationships to Sub-Saharan Africa by reframing environments, agencies, and knowledges. I argue that these videos set a foundation for reframing present international aid relations in ways currently considered impossible, yet still do so by foreclosing African epistemologies. I conclude by comparing the foreclosure of African perspectives from Afrofuturist texts with the foreclosure of African perspectives on aid in the present, arguing that decolonizing aid and theoretical relations to Africa in the future requires delinking from Western epistemological hegemony.

Keywords: African epistemologies, Afrofuturism, decolonial theory, international aid, women of color feminisms

A FEW LIGHT CHORDS PLAY ON a piano as musical artists step out of their cars and filter into a studio. The camera cuts among their entrance, a lit soundboard, and a Black man with dark sunglasses who is tickling the ivories. The music builds and then recedes, beckoning a powerful vocal entrance. One at a time, the singers bring their unique imprints to the song, closing their eyes or raising their arms as each of their voices adds a line about the suffering experienced by people in other parts of the world, suffering that can only be alleviated by us and the vast resources we have by luck of our birth. We must all pitch in and help— by donating our radiators.

The "we" in this video (SAIH Norway, 2012a) is Africans, and they are singing about the wealth of heat that they have compared to the poor, freezing Norwegians. Although they can't distribute sunlight, they can provide radiators to those in need to "spread some warmth, spread some light, and spread some smiles." All Africans are called to "say yes to Radi-Aid."

This video is one of six mock aid videos produced by the Norwegian Students and Academics International Assistance Fund (SAIH Norway), a self-defined "solidarity organization" that works to "improve the conditions for education and development globally"

(SAIH Norway, 2018c). The six videos satirize aid media by portraying: an African celebrity fundraising concert to benefit Norway (SAIH Norway, 2012a); an appeal to the sad plight of Norwegian women and children that asks Africans to donate radiators for them at Christmas (SAIH Norway, 2012b); an inside look into the life of an African child actor who works in development media (SAIH Norway, 2013); the finale of the reality television show *Who Wants to be a Volunteer?* (SAIH Norway, 2014); a commercial for the Radi-Aid App, which makes it simple for any African to click, swipe, and change the life of a poor, cold Norwegian (SAIH Norway, 2016); and a cartoon that demonstrates the utility of sick and/or starving African children for making your social media accounts more popular (SAIH Norway, 2017). According to the organization, the videos are meant to raise "critical debate concerning aid communication and the media's portrayal of development in the global South" (SAIH Norway, 2018b). By flipping, exaggerating, and generally poking fun at common tropes of aid and development communication, SAIH Norway (2018a) hopes to undermine stereotypes in aid communication that reinforce ideologies of white saviorism (Bell, 2013; Cole, 2012; Hanchey, 2018) and assumptions that Africans are without agency (Bell, 2011; Hanchey, 2016; Steeves, 2008).

SAIH Norway was started in 1961 in order to boost global educational access and quality through partnerships between Norwegian academics and people in the Global South. In 1999 they started to turn their attention toward the way the Global South was portrayed in aid media (SAIH Norway, 2018a). Their first video satirizing aid media quickly garnered viral attention and now has approximately 3.4 million views (SAIH Norway, 2012a), demonstrating, in their words, "that we had hit a nerve" (SAIH Norway, 2018a). SAIH Norway pioneered viral aid satire, opening the floodgates for aid critiques such as Humanitarians of Tinder (2017) and Barbie Savior (2018). Satires of aid are now so popular that one can assume aid workers have some familiarity with their critiques (Hanchey, 2018). Therefore, it is important to examine what kind of critiques are being virally popularized by this satire. What stereotypes do these videos challenge or uphold, and what ways of thinking about aid are opened or closed by these particular representations?

In this essay, I examine how these videos are used to produce alternative visions of African aid in the present and how such visions are intimately tied with seeing both the past and future differently (Cruz et al., 2016; Womack, 2013). In doing so, I draw upon Black feminist and Afrofuturist work that has struggled with the (im)possibility of reading

new considerations into the past (Hartman, 2007; 2008) and of creating liberatory visions of the future (Hong, 2008; Imarisha, 2015; Womack, 2013), putting them in conversation with African epistemological perspectives on re-membering the past (Basu, 2007; Holsey, 2008; Shaw, 2002) and constructing African-centered futures (Mashigo, 2018; Okorafor, 2009; Samatar, 2017). I stage these conversations in order to draw out how Africa is often used as an imaginative staging ground for refigurations of the past and future in academic work and to investigate to what extent African epistemologies contribute substantively to such imaginings.

By analyzing these mock aid videos through a lens that asks how figurings of the present are related to both pasts and futures, we enter the world of time-travel: "planes of existence where the past, present, and future shift seamlessly in and out" (Imarisha, 2015, p. 5). Following the Afro-feminist Ekwe Collective (Cruz et al., 2016), this analysis requires an "ethos [that] is not linear, nor is it concerned with periodization. Rather, it carries forward a sense of accumulated knowledge and action, inherited and extended by each successive generation" (p. 90). This reading activates a palimpsestic view of memory often found in African contexts (Basu, 2007; Shaw, 2002), layering past, present, and future together to imbue our presents with the (in)visible agencies of the subaltern past as well as the (im)possible visions of liberatory futures. A time-travel epistemology is vitally important to reading the past in ways that inaugurate work in the present that may constitute more just futures (Samatar, 2017).

However, struggles over the meaning of past, present, and future in Africa often occur without regard for African experiences and epistemological frameworks (Holsey, 2008; Mashigo, 2018; Samatar, 2017; Shaw, 2002). In this essay, I argue that ultimately what the SAIH Norway videos reveal is an unflattering mirror reflecting Western academics' tendencies to have debates about Africa *without regard to Africans*. That is, I map the logics of aid satire's foreclosure of African epistemologies to Afrofuturism's foreclosure of African futuristic imaginings (Samatar, 2017). African populations have always reframed development, creating their own interpretive schema and mimetic engagements, from the times of direct colonial invasion and subjugation (Hunt, 2016; Lyons, 1992) to the neocolonial aid work of today (Smith, 2008; Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994). These videos act as if they are engaging with the reinterpretive logics that are already present in African contexts, yet instead provide a repackaged Western view of development that

does not engage with African epistemologies. Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) articulated this problem of "the so-called voicelessness of African women. We neither look for their voices where they utter them[,] nor do we think it worthwhile to listen to their voices" (p. 10). Both aid and Western academic discussions about Africa structurally ignore African voices.

By examining SAIH Norway's six mock aid videos, *Africa For Norway – New charity single out now!* (SAIH Norway, 2012a), *Africa for Norway – New video! Radi-aid – Warmth for Xmas* (SAIH Norway, 2012b), *Let's Save Africa! – Gone wrong* (SAIH Norway, 2013), *Who wants to be a volunteer?* (SAIH Norway, 2014), *The Radi-Add App: Change a life with just one swipe* (SAIH Norway, 2016), and *How to get more likes on social media* (SAIH Norway, 2017), I reveal ways that these videos ask the audience to reconceptualize Western relationships to Africa in (im)possible ways. Although I highlight three ways in which these videos reconfigure international aid relationships in an (im)possible fashion—by reframing environments, agencies, and knowledges—I aver that this (im)possible read, though useful in some ways, still acts by foreclosing African knowledges. I conclude by arguing that the foreclosure of African epistemologies in aid reflects similar tendencies in Western academic work. Finally, I call for more attention to African theory.

Though the goal of this essay is to decenter white, patriarchal, Western perspectives on the present, any attempt I make will necessarily be constrained by my own imbrication in relational politics (Carrillo Rowe, 2008). I speak as one of those of us in the academy who wish to be allies in feminist anti-racist and decolonial work, and yet often leave the assumptions of Western colonial-modernity undisturbed in our scholarship. I challenge allies in particular to remember, reframe, and reimagine by letting women of color voices lead where past, present, and future reconceptualizations should go. By structuring reflexivity through a politics of relation rather than location (Carrillo Rowe, 2008), women of color feminist thought should pervade and reform our politics and writing in what Lugones (2003) calls an interactive engagement with difference. In terms of location only, it would be enough for me to state my positionality as a white, Western woman, engaging in lip service to reflexivity. On the other hand, a politics of relation calls for understanding how my subjectivity shifts and changes in relation to my contemporary context and connections. For instance, the original version of this essay in many ways perpetuated the same structural erasure of African voices that I wished to critique, and I

required a reviewer's challenge in order to revise the argument in ways that substantively address African epistemologies. My relation with that reviewer reformed the politics of my authorial subjectivity in vitally important ways. As Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) argued, white feminists "have to work on their own endemic and insidious racism which seems to be ever-present" (p. 208).

In order to engage with the ever-presence of my own insidious racism in its shifting forms, I time-travel through reflexivity as well, examining the politics of my subjectivity as it changes temporally. I thus weave remembrances of my experiences as an international aid worker throughout the piece, reflecting on how I consider their meaning very differently now than I did then. As Samatar (2017) wrote, "To propose an alternate history is to propose that history can be altered, to change directions, to inaugurate an alternate future" (p. 187). By reinterpreting my experiences living and working as a Peace Corps teacher in a rural Tanzanian village, I open paths to re-membering them in ways that call for decolonial responses in the present and future.

The remainder of the essay unfolds as a conversation between past, present, and future. I first explore how Black feminist and Afrofuturist traditions have taken up questions regarding the politics of memory and imagination, often in a way that uses Africa as a background rather than participant. In the analytic body of the essay, I iteratively return to the past, remembering myself in other worlds (Lugones, 2003), before turning to analysis of the SAIH Norway videos in the present. These rememberings and reframings occur on three fronts in relation to aid to Africa: portrayal of environments, figuring of African agencies, and demonstration of knowledge ownership. Finally, I then turn to the future, discussing how the aid videos' reframing of the present is dependent upon a foreclosure of African epistemologies and how a similar foreclosure exists in academic work imagining African futures.

Impossibility in Three Tenses

I focus on "impossibility" in a manner similar to that of Gopinath (2005)—as a means of "signaling the unthinkability" (p. 15) of certain subjects within given environments. In particular, I draw on the "unthinkability" in aid media of the agentic African subject, living in a positive environment, endowed with the knowledge to understand, choose, and change her own circumstances. As Mbembe (2017) explained, the word "Africa" appended to any subject in Western thought "identifies a certain litigious figure of the human as an emptiness

of being, walled within absolute precariousness" (p. 49). Delinking aid from coloniality necessitates signaling Africans in unthinkable ways. Under the current paradigm,

> the African politics of our world cannot be a *politics of the similar*. It can only be a politics of difference—the politics of the Good Samaritan, nourished by a sense of guilt, resentment, or pity, but never by an obligation to justice or responsibility. (Mbembe, 2017, p. 50)

To delink means to disengage from epistemic and material systems that constitute and support the coloniality of Western modernity (Mignolo, 2007). Wanzer-Serrano (2015) explained that "*delinking can be any practice, discursive or otherwise, that facilitates a divestment from modernity/coloniality and invents openings through which decolonial epistemic shifts can emerge*" (p. 25, emphasis in original). Delinking requires centering indigenous knowledges in order to reveal how the present could be thought differently, *impossibly*, and set us on different trajectories for the future. Importantly, delinking does not challenge Western knowledge per se, but rather its claim to universalism. (Im)possible futures where liberation is achieved require a reckoning with contemporary coloniality; it takes the unthinkable to create a world where aid serves justice in Africa rather than Western capitalistic interests (Cole, 2012). The idea of reconceptualizing through a lens of unthinkability has a rich history in women of color feminisms. Here, I examine that history— investigations of (un)knowable pasts, imaginings of (im)possible futures, and configurations of alternative presents—taking particular note of how they relate to African frameworks.

Remembering the Past

Western Black feminists have typically engaged the past as a project of recovery—attempting to read through the silences, gaps, and holes in the archive produced through the trauma of the slave trade (Hartman, 2007; 2008). In this vein, engaging with the past requires looking for knowledge in what cannot be seen or read, what has been silenced and erased. Although this may seem an impossible task, it is precisely that impossibility that Hartman (2008) sees as necessary: "The necessity of trying to represent what we cannot, rather than leading to pessimism or despair[,] must be embraced as the impossibility that conditions our knowledge of the past and animates our desire for a liberated future"

(p. 13). Thus conceptualized, *impossibility* is what leads to the *possibility* of a liberated future. Constructing free futures requires engaging with the impossible. Re-membering the past in its totality is impossible, but the efforts of attempting to do so lead to the possibility of vibrant futures.

However, the past does not figure in the same way for African subjects. As Basu (2007) argued, in order to understand African relations to memory, "the very nature of 'pastness'" must be contested (p. 254). African readings of the past are better conceptualized as palimpsests that continue into the present than as structured by erasure. The trauma of the slave trade certainly affects African memory, but it must be considered in layered relation to colonialism, resistance, connivance, and the banal continuity of everyday life (Holsey, 2008).

Thinking from an African perspective reframes the impossibility of understanding the past in totality as an inability to resurrect all the decaying layers that underlie present remembrances or to disentangle past outside influences from present local epistemologies (Basu, 2007). African epistemologies are concerned with holistic relations, rather than oppositions of past to present or interior to exterior (Cruz, 2015). There can never be a pure African epistemology of the past (Holsey, 2008; Smith, 2008), but struggles over re-membering African pasts must center African contributions to history and meaning-making in order to avoid the tendency toward their structural exclusion. In her study of memory in Ghana, Schramm (2009) found that public conflicts over memory often pitted white aid workers attempting to speak on behalf of the local population against Black diasporic visitors coming to Ghana to look for a romanticized homeland—effectively drowning out African concerns. The past is thus an important "contested ground" for decolonial politics in relation to Africa in general (Basu, 2007, p. 254) and to African aid in particular (Smith, 2008). Holsey (2008) explained how Western understandings of Africa's past—as a primitivity from which Africa "has yet to escape" (p. 3)—structure relations with Africa in the present and encode predictions of the future. For similar reasons, Lugones (2003) argued that the genesis of liberatory futures is in "the memory" (p. 58).

In this essay, I look particularly to my own past as an aid worker in Tanzania, reframing my experiences in ways that attempt to call out my "insidious racism" (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994, p. 28) through what Lugones (2003) called world-traveling. World-traveling, or remembering across realities constituted by different subjection positions, is necessary for white women to understand how they enact oppression: "As a

self-deceiving multiple self, the oppressor does not remember across realities" (p. 14). The act of failing to remember, to Lugones, is the basis of oppression. Similarly, Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) argued that often white feminists are "not educable" (p. 4), perpetrating the same insidious acts over and over, unable to learn from their past mistakes. Re-membering my past mistakes means figuring memories alternatively through world-traveling; by digging up the dirt-covered palimpsests underlying my current work and study, examining them, and reframing them in ways that delink from Western-centric logics, I hope to open paths for myself and other white feminists to become educable subjects. Conditions for better futures emerge from re-membering these pasts and acting to challenge their continuation in present structures.

Reimagining the Future

Afrofuturist filmmaker Womack (2013) wrote that Afrofuturist envisionings of futures where Blackness is undefined by contemporary constraints provide hope and an impetus for social justice movements in the present. "Afrofuturism unchains the mind" (p. 15) and in doing so unleashes "a tool of resistance" (Womack, 2013, p. 24). There is resistant power in the act of imagining futures. For Hong (2008), "the work of imagination is not a frivolous or superficial activity, but rather a material and social practice" (p. 108). This practice of imagining impossible futures does not stop in fantasy but proceeds into action, as "the work […] of imagining is revolutionary" (p. 108). When all seems already lost, imagining the (im)possible provides something to hold onto, a reason to continue to live and act. Hartman (2007) described the power of alternate, unthinkable worlds for the enslaved: "[A]n imagined place might afford you a vision of freedom, an imagined place might provide an alternative to your defeat, an imagined place might save your life" (p. 97). In the darkest moments, imagining flight, escape, freedom, liberation—even if it will only be experienced by those who have not yet been born (Imarisha, 2015)—generates the ability to persevere. In addition, imaginative creations are part-and-parcel of day-to-day social justice work (Imarisha, 2015). When women, and particularly women of color, write themselves into their visions of the future, imagination opens doors that society has seemingly closed and provides the power to construct futures premised on liberation. Womack (2013) reminds us that "[j]ust as the actions of the present dictate the future, imagining the future can change the present" (p. 44).

Yet Afrofuturist remimaginings of the future do not inspire the same quality of hope in African audiences as they do in diasporic ones, even though they often center African characters or depictions of the future dependent upon African traditions. Holsey (2008) argued that stories about Africa that are aimed at the diaspora rather than Africans themselves are "largely romantic," disregarding day-to-day circumstances (p. 233). For many African thinkers, this is the primary problem with Afrofuturism: It is not grounded in African epistemologies or material conditions. As Nigerian filmmaker Tchidi Chikere explained, "Africans are bothered about food, roads, electricity, water wars, famine, etc., not spacecrafts and spaceships. Only stories that explore *these* everyday realities are considered relevant to us for now" (Okorafor, 2009, emphasis in original). That does not mean that Africans do not need or have (im)possible visions of the future to strive for, just that they must look structurally different. For South African author Mohale Mashigo (2018), this will mean something no less fantastic than Afrofuturism:

> Our needs, when it comes to imagining futures, or even reimagining a fantasy present, are different from elsewhere on the globe; we actually live on this continent, as opposed to using it as a costume or stage to play out our ideas. We need a project that predicts […] Africa's future "postcolonialism."

For Africans, (im)possible imaginations of the future must grapple with contemporary realities and materialities of life on the continent and produce visions that answer those concerns. This echoes the African epistemological facet that Cruz (2015) described as situationality: Relationships and meaning are radically contingent in African epistemologies and require deep contextualization. For this reason, Samatar (2017) proposed a "planetary" vision of Afrofuturism that emphasizes "local ways of imagining and navigating world space" (p. 188). Afrofuturism can be thus be repurposed in meaningful ways for Africans, but its (im)possible visions of Africa's future postcolonialism will necessarily differ for different contexts, spaces, and peoples (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994; Mashigo, 2018).

Reframing the Present
For both Afrofuturists and African thinkers, the present is the moment of potentiality as it is only ever in the present that subjects may act. In the language of Keeling (2007), "[e]ach present, or any-instant-

whatever, contains the possibility for the [B]lack's liberation because that present tends toward an indeterminate action, the future" (p. 71). However, our actions in the present are always already conditioned by our interpretations of the past and imaginations of the future. Smith (2008) noted that "work to transform the present [...] always involves envisioning and modeling the future based on conflicted and contradictory understandings of the past and of other places" (p. 4).

The present is also the moment of justice. Johnson, an Afrofuturist artist, argued that "staying in the present tense reemphasizes responsibility" (Womack, 2013, p. 161). By considering the present tense as the momentary overlay where both past and future may be reformed through action, subjects hold immense responsibility to do right by the present. Here I mean responsibility not in the paternalistic manner of the white savior in aid (Cole, 2012; Hanchey, 2018), but rather the responsibility of the politics of relation, which sees "subject formation as a function of belonging" (Carillo Rowe, 2008, p. 6). When we see our very selves as dependent on our relations with those around us—and how those relations are steeped in racial-colonial politics—we find we are responsible to others as a part of their *becoming*. Thinking through a politics of relation provides a means to escape the "politics of difference" that Mbembe (2017) articulated as based in "guilt, resentment, or pity" by providing avenues to see ourselves as intimately connected to the social processes that constrain and oppress us and those around us (p. 50). The responsibility that comes out of such awareness is a responsibility that aims toward justice—the responsibility not of the savior, but of the ally.

Moving toward future justice often means reframing the present in ways considered unthinkable under hegemonic structures. In her preface to Ogundipe-Leslie's book, Davies (1994) explored how Ogundipe-Leslie's transformative work was often perceived as outside the limits of Western knowledge structures and thus "mad." She reminds us that "it is in the nature of oppression to define all those who resist as 'mad'" (p. xvi). Liberatory futures may seem impossible, even within critical Western epistemologies (e.g., Foucauldian thought). However, that which seeks to delink from colonial-modernity and challenge the epistemological foundations of Western thought will always seem "mad" or impossible within dominant logics (Mignolo, 2007). Unthinkable renderings of the present have the potential to transform our futures.

SAIH Norway and (Im)Possible Presents

In this section, I analyze how the SAIH Norway videos render the present in alternative ways and to what extent their (im)possible representations of the present delink from Western-centric logics and engage with African epistemologies. Alternating between the videos and my own memories, I examine three contexts: environments, agencies, and knowledges.

(Im)Possible Environments

Remembering. I watched as Tiffany's phone slammed into the wall and shattered into pieces, flying in all directions across the room. It happened so fast that I couldn't reach out to stop it. Now, in my mind's eye, it replays in slow motion. Tiffany and I had arrived in Tanzania together, and two years later we had scraped together enough money for a vacation to Zambia. We had gone on a sunset cruise of the Zambezi River and had just come back to the hostel room to get ready for bed. Tiffany looked around intently and soon realized that she couldn't find her purse. I told her that everything would be okay, even though we both knew that if she had left her purse somewhere outside the room there was almost no chance we would ever see it again. The longer she looked, the more despondent she became. "I would never have done this in the US," she cried. "I would never have been so careless! It's this place. What has this place done to me?" In frustration at what she perceived that Tanzania had turned her into, she threw her phone against the wall.

As the pieces flew, I remember feeling awed. I was awed by how perfectly her feelings and actions seemed to capture feelings that I had, too, and hadn't been able to express. We had both lived under the constant pressure of a culture we didn't quite understand, the constant scrutiny of everyone around us, and the constant knowledge of our presence as not-quite-wanted outsiders. The environment of living in Tanzania, in Africa, seemed deterministic. It had, we thought, turned us into people we were, supposedly, not.

It strikes me as interesting, looking back, that we used the same framework aid media do to validate Western paternalism in Africa as a means to avoid responsibility for our carelessness. Figuring Africa as a deterministic environment provides a means for Westerners to avoid culpability. If Africans are completely constrained by their environments, then Westerners may claim both that their interventions

and leadership are necessary, and that their lack of effectiveness—what we felt as volunteers—is not their own fault or responsibility.

We found her purse under the bed a few minutes later.

Reframing. *Africa For Norway—New charity single out now!* (SAIH Norway, 2012a) opens on a Black, African man clothed in a t-shirt that says "Radi-Aid." He's wearing sunglasses and a beanie, and he explains that he is getting Africans together to help "in this time of need for Norway." We see teams of Black men and women wearing the same t-shirts, going door-to-door, collecting heaters and carrying them down the streets. The narrator says, "People don't ignore starving people, so why should we ignore cold people? Frostbite kills, too. Africa, we need to make a difference in Norway." When he finishes this call for Africans to give, we hear a piano begin to play in the background. The camera cuts to a recording studio where Black African men and women enter and begin to sing in the style of "We Are the World."

This video is the first of SAIH Norway's six mock aid shorts. The music video never gives a hint that it is not a serious campaign, ending on a link to the website www.africafornorway.com and rolling production credits. By placing cold on the same level as poverty, *Africa For Norway—New charity single out now!* (SAIH Norway, 2012a) calls into question the normative value structure in aid rhetorics that speaks of poverty as necessarily an evil, something that is not only difficult to address, but cannot be fixed by the people it influences most. Additionally, speaking of Africa often automatically raises "poverty" as a companion term. Thus, Africa itself is seen—as an entire continent—to be necessarily afflicted by the devastating effects of poverty, which Africans themselves cannot fix. By addressing cold in the same manner, *Africa For Norway* begins to reveal how the associative chain that links poverty to a universal negative valuation operates to represent African peoples as inagentic as well as to refigure these associations.

Here, cold takes on the position of a problem that Norwegians cannot fix for themselves, as their relationship to their environment is partially determined by the temperature. Africans are shown as needing to step in to help save the sad, cold Norwegians. This logic may seem ridiculous to the audience: Why would Norway need help solving their problem with cold if they are perfectly capable of constructing heaters themselves? Of course, this question is the linchpin of the video's impossible imagining. It forces the audience to recognize that a similar logic underlies aid campaigns to Africa. Many formulations of

international aid to Africa assume that Africans cannot help themselves (Hanchey, 2016; Muspratt & Steeves, 2012).

The video also calls the automatic negative valence of poverty into question. This is seen more clearly in another of SAIH Norway's (2013) short films, *Let's save Africa!—Gone wrong*. In this video, we follow an African child actor on the set of a charity appeal filming. In one segment, calming piano music plays in the background as a white woman kneels down to talk to the young African boy. We hear her voice narrate over the picture as she crouches down, saying, "The gifts we bring don't mean anything to us. But their faces light up like nothing I've ever seen before." To the young boy, she says slowly, "Michael, do you have danishes in Africa?" The boy shakes his head and says no. "Well, I've got a surprise for you," she says melodically as she pulls a danish out of her pocket. The boy's face lights up as he says, "Thank you." The piano music rises in anticipation as he takes a bite—and immediately spits the pastry out. His voice narrates over the picture: "Tastes like shit!"

This humorous segment highlights the way in which being poor is often taken as a determination of people's ability to have pleasurable experiences. Michael is expected to love the danish because it is assumed to surpass in flavor any food to which he would have access. Aid videos often portray poverty as all-encompassing and deterministic, negatively valencing all aspects of a person's life. The boy's reaction to the danish highlights an impossible read of pleasure: that pleasure can be found in impoverished circumstances, and that often a Western read of poverty assumes a Western-centric logic of what is pleasurable. Thus, the danish is, impossibly, disgusting.

The video that perhaps disturbs the Western adventure narrative the most is *How To Get More Likes on Social Media* (SAIH Norway, 2017). The cartoon opens on a white woman who clicks through pictures on what appears to be Instagram, each one featuring a white person surrounded by Black children. One muscle-bound man is even posed like Hercules, holding children on his arms. All of these photos have been given thousands of "hearts," the equivalent of "likes." Then we hear a record-scratching noise as she finds her own self-portrait only has three likes. She falls back on her bed in despair until she realizes that getting more likes on social media is simple*:* All she has to do to get more likes on social media is travel to Africa and take selfies with Black children and add the proper hashtags. In Africa, the video shows her taking selfies in various places with children with whom she does not

seem to have a relationship. In the final scene, the animation lingers over her posing with a child in a hospital bed for an uncomfortably long time, taking photo after photo on her phone, trying to find the best one to post, as an African doctor and nurse look on aghast.

By taking the problematic representations of white voluntourism on social media to an extreme, *How To Get More Likes on Social Media* (SAIH Norway, 2017) forces Western volunteers to reflect on the meanings they attach to African environments—as well as how African children are turned into objects by being emplaced as part of that environment. The video posits the ability to take pictures in Africa as *the main reason* for travel to Africa. Since Africa is considered to be "the one place where modernization has utterly failed and that is therefore in greatest need of Western aid" (Steeves, 2008, p. 436), it offers the perfect place to enact white, Western heroism. However, by demonstrating how the underlying impetus of such demonstrations of white saviorism is only to show off to other Westerners on social media, the video deconstructs the idea that white saviorism is actually about *saving* at all, instead showing the Western self-centeredness at the heart of voluntourist aid.

(Im)Possible Agencies

Remembering. As an international aid worker, I came in thinking I had something to give. Of course, I did have certain skills for which I was selected as a Peace Corps volunteer, as I was a licensed secondary physics and mathematics teacher. However, these small qualifications grew in my mind into something much bigger: to ability as a totality, as something I had that Tanzanians did not. My attitude was not exceptional as an aid worker or volunteer. I saw people who came in to the country—stayed a few days, three weeks, three months—and left just as convinced as when they came in that they had something to give, that they had "made a difference," that their Western agency had fixed something Tanzanians had broken.

It took me over a year to begin to question this mindset. And still, when I left after more than two years working with Tanzanians, I continued to rely on performative posturing that emphasized—or tried to recuperate—my agency at the expense of theirs. On my way back to the United States, I traveled with other Peace Corps volunteer friends to Uganda. We took a bus from Moshi, through Kenya, to Kampala. I got on with a backpack and an overstuffed duffel bag. I got off with nothing but my purse.

I felt that "Africa" had stolen my bags from me. I went to file a report with the bus company, with the police, and all I got were smirks and laughter. Eventually, my tears morphed into anger, and I exploded at the bus company manager: "I gave two years of my life to you people, I taught hundreds of your kids, and this is how you repay me?"

He just smiled.

Please, Lugones (2003), do I have to remember myself in this world? It would be easier to forget, easier to "block identification with that self" (p. 73). Recognizing my multiplicity means recognizing that when my agency felt threatened, I resorted to gross generalizations and false universalizations that attempted to recuperate my agency through the construct of the white savior, a formulation that implicitly constitutes Africans as without agency of their own (Cole, 2012; Hanchey, 2018). I had spent over two years in Tanzania and returned as "not educable" (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994, p. 4) as when I started.

Reframing. A sad violin plays in the background as the camera opens on a cabin in the middle of snow-covered woods. Two white, blonde women and a little blonde girl huddle around a fireplace. We see Breezy, the same narrator from *Africa For Norway—New charity single out now!* (SAIH Norway, 2012a) gaze through the window. The camera moves outside, and Breezy addresses the audience:

> Breaks your heart, doesn't it? You see this [match]? It isn't enough to keep Norwegian people warm this Christmas. In Norway, many people suffer from the cold. Families just like this one […] As an African, you may think, "What can I do to help?" (SAIH Norway, 2012b)

This video, *Africa for Norway – New Video! Radi-Aid – Warmth for Xmas*, again appeals for Africans to collect their radiators to send to the freezing Norwegians. Both this and the *Africa For Norway—New charity single out now!* video draw on common framings of aid appeals: the collaborative celebrity ballad and the pathetic images of those in need. Here, the customary pictures of starving African children are replaced with freezing Norwegian women. Following the typical gendering of rhetorics of aid to Africa, only women and children are shown; just as African men are often absent, the Norwegian men are also absent in this mock appeal. Notably, the African man takes the place of the Western

man narrator, holding the spot of masculinity normally reserved for the West in international aid videos.

By imagining an unthinkable version of the present, this video both reframes gender and agency. First, instead of feminizing and infantilizing Africans—as is typical in aid discourse (Bell, 2011)—the video feminizes Norwegians and attaches a savior-masculinity to the African man. Although it regrettably also attaches the inability to change their own circumstances to the feminine, the regenderings are still notable. Placing masculinity and power to affect change in the body of the African man disrupts the common image of the African man as violent and enraged, if present at all. Here, instead, we see an agentic African man acting in a positive manner as a caring, compassionate person.

The final segment of the excerpt above also speaks to the way these videos portray agency as an impossible present. Here, the narrator assumes that Africans will be asking themselves what they can do to help. Olesen (2012) refers to this sort of aid appeal as the construction of national (here, continental) community, which encompasses two simultaneous processes: "Assigning to the viewer a comfortable position from where to donate and creating a social reward for allowing and enabling" them to do so (p. 103). In this example, the particular phrasing of the appeal to continental community is important: "As an African, you may think, 'What can I do to help?'" This wording stands out as it places emphasis on what it means to be an African. First, it is clearly taking the place of a Western nationality in an appeal for aid to Africa, such as: "As an American, you may think, 'What can I do to help?'" The phrasing of the appeal reveals the assumptions that underlie many aid rhetorics and thus conceptualizations of the present: Aid rhetorics are often founded on the idea that U.S. Americans or other Western peoples have something to give by virtue of their very being as U.S. American or Western. The comfort in this appeal is that it portrays Western people as ontologically endowed with special blessings—ignoring the immense segments of Western society that are impoverished or oppressed, as well as the way these "blessings" are the result of colonial violence.

Second, by figuring Africans as the ones with automatic gifts to give, naturally placed in a privileged position from which they look on the freezing Norwegians in pity, the video also pokes fun at the common trope in Western discourse of considering Africa to be a singular country (Muspratt & Steeves, 2012; Steeves, 2008). Here, "Africa" stands in for national community building in the aid appeal (Olesen, 2012), slyly pointing to the way Africa is often misrepresented. Setting

the video at Christmastime adds a further dimension to the critique of national community construction by reminding Western viewers of that ubiquitous radio hit, "Do they know it's Christmas?" by the celebrity super-group Band Aid, first released in 1984. The construction of us vs. them required in charity appeals is painfully apparent in the song. The lyrics explicitly universalize the entire continent of Africa as dark and doomed until Western saviors bring hope. Yet SAIH Norway creates a foundation for building agency in what has typically been used to deny it—that is, homogenization of the continent into a singular country (Muspratt & Steeves, 2012)—by taking this trope and (im)possibly turning it into the grounds for building community and collective consciousness.

Another video further explores the trope of Africa as a country and its connections to agency. *Who Wants To Be A Volunteer?* (SAIH Norway, 2014) stages a show that is a mix between *Survivor* and *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?*, incorporating flashback shots of the contestant, Lilly, a white European woman completing the on-the-ground "Feed Africa Challenge," "Educate Africa Challenge," and "Promote Africa Challenge." After throwing food at unsuspecting people, training children to play soccer, and putting up a Facebook profile picture of her with a crew of African children, Lilly has advanced to the final stage of *Who Wants to be a Volunteer?* If she wins, she will gain the chance to "save Africa."

Who Wants To Be A Volunteer? (SAIH Norway, 2014) draws from reality TV adventure-tourism exploits in Africa to point to the ways Western conceptualizations of volunteering are undergirded by popular culture tropes of neocolonial adventure and white saviorism, to which the heroine's Lilly-white name alludes. In a study of *Survivor* and *The Amazing Race* reality competitions in Africa, Steeves (2008) demonstrated that these shows support "both an imperial discourse of power and a corporate one emphasizing the individual and whatever it takes to win the grand prize" (p. 435). In other words, reality competitions act to accentuate an imperial or neocolonial narrative that reinforces Western paternalism over Africa while at the same time promoting the neoliberal individualism of the contestants. Like the SAIH Norway video demonstrates, contestants are rewarded for completing aid work. The reward for completing humanitarian tasks doubles as a reward for configuring agency in a way that promotes Western agency at the expense of African agency: Westerners are viewed as exceptional agents

and rewarded for completing banal African tasks while the everyday labor of Africans is simultaneously erased.

Who Wants To Be A Volunteer? (SAIH Norway, 2014) challenges these common representations by highlighting and exaggerating the ways in which volunteers engage in imperial discourses of power. In the "Feed Africa Challenge" flashback, drums pound as white people in white tanktops flood out of the back of a pickup truck in what initially seems to be the bush. However, as the camera pans to follow the running Westerners, we see that though the truck is parked in savanna grass, they are actually in the middle of a city with large buildings, parking garages, and a mall. Lilly passionately yells, "I'm going to feed you!" and then proceeds to throw food at people she passes, most of whom are already eating something of their own which is knocked out of their hands by the flying food of the white savior. This video not only posits that Africans have agency of their own when it comes to issues of development, but clearly demonstrates how Western configurations of aid and volunteering erase African agency: Lilly is able to "save Africa" only by obscuring what Africans have already done for themselves.

(Im)Possible Knowledges

Remembering. The older volunteers introduced to me Paul, the Tanzanian owner of a nice hotel in the town nearest to my village area. We rarely stayed at Paul's hotel, but we sometimes dropped by the hotel bar and had drinks with him. I don't remember what we talked about, but I know that I felt awkward when the U.S. Americans would go off on a U.S. pop culture topic that Paul didn't really know about. I worried he was often lost in our conversations.

The only time we did stay at Paul's hotel is when we had large parties and invited Peace Corps volunteers from all over the country to come. One year we managed to plan a celebration on the weekend of Halloween and incorporated a talent show and costume contest into the festivities. The costumes were amazingly creative—well, not mine, I was just a pirate—but others had sought out, or even made, articles of clothing to make their costumes fabulous.

As the day of celebration stretched into the evening, a Muslim man in very traditional clothing walked into the hotel bar. The wine and beer had been flowing for hours, and those of us who were still socially aware began to worry about whether our group's behavior would be offensive or disrespectful. My heart beat a little faster when he approached the table where I was sitting with a few friends and took a seat to have

dinner. I avoided making eye contact, concerned for what he thought about the party. When I did glance up, something about the eyes under the kufi caught my attention. He looked familiar. It took me longer than it should have to realize that it was Paul! He had been sporting a stern, disapproving expression, but when he saw my eyes light up with understanding, he couldn't hold the mask anymore and started laughing uproariously. He had caught on to the idea of the costume party and one-upped us all.

Thinking back on this story that I have repeated to friends multiple times in a humorous fashion makes me grimace. Why was I surprised that Paul understood Halloween? And perhaps more pointedly, why did I not tell him we were having a costume party? Why did I assume no one else had included him? I was shocked that Paul had figured out the game—a game that we associate with *children* in the United States.

Reframing. In one scene of *Let's save Africa!—Gone wrong* (SAIH Norway, 2013), soft piano music plays as a white woman sits down across from a young African boy and asks him, "Your father, where is he?" The young man replies, "My father left when I was two years old. He went to look for a job, and he never returned ever since. So I've been the man of the house." As he finishes his story, the woman bows her head and starts crying. The young man reaches over and gently places his hand on top of hers. The piano music abruptly stops, and he says, "Is this your first charity appeal?" She looks at him, shocked, as we hear a director yell from off-camera, "Cut! Michael, you must stick to the script!"

The video reframes the present in an impossible manner by representing the young Black African as the one who understands reality and the white European woman as the naïve idealist who does not. The cynicism typically attached to a critical read of the world is placed in the young African child rather than the adult European subject. This flips the typical portrayal of the politics of knowledge on its head. At the end of the video, this read is reinforced when Michael explains, "So you see, it's tough business, you know? Sometimes I think about quitting. But then again, it's for a good cause." Here, Michael is portrayed as having carefully thought through all aspects of his situation. He has decided to keep working in the aid appeals, even though he has his problems with them, because it's "for a good cause."

The ignorance of Westerners is further emphasized in the second half of *Who Wants To Be A Volunteer?* (SAIH Norway, 2014). The camera

slowly lowers to focus on Lilly and our host, Breezy, the narrator from the first two SAIH Norway videos, sitting on a raised dais in the center of a crowded theater. The audience cheers, welcoming Lilly, as Breezy explains that she is one question away from winning "the chance to save Africa." The question is: "How many countries are there in Africa?" It's a multiple choice question, so Lilly is provided the options (A) 1, (B) 2, (C) 5, and (D) 54. Uncertain, she decides to use her "Call an African child" lifeline. She calls Michael, the knowledgeable and cynical kid from *Let's Save Africa!—Gone wrong* (SAIH Norway, 2013) over Skype. Unfortunately, as she is reading the question to Michael, the call freezes. She must find the answer on her own. Breathing audibly and thinking hard, Lilly eventually decides: "One." After the proper pause to build anticipation, Breezy lets her know that she has answered correctly and won the chance to go "save Africa!"

The video not only emphasizes how little Westerners know and understand about Africa, but also how their ignorance is often rewarded rather than punished because of systemic power dynamics. Lilly doesn't know the answer to the question and even attempts to use a lifeline before answering in a way that is absolutely wrong. That her wrong answer is labeled correct and provides her "a chance to save Africa" as a prize mimics the way that dominant systems reinforce myths about Africa and reward Westerners for acting on those myths. The video implicitly asks Westerners to interrogate such systems and their continual reinforcement through media representations as well as volunteer actions.

Similarly, *The Radi-Aid App: Change A Life With Just One Swipe* (SAIH Norway, 2016) flips the script on aid knowledge by presenting a mock advertisement for a smart phone application that can be used by Africans to donate to poor Norwegians with just a swipe of their finger. The video is narrated by a Black man who is clearly emulating the spokesperson of the Old Spice (2010) commercial *The Man Your Man Could Smell Like*. He is poised, confident, and striding quickly through a city on the beach. "Hey you. Yes, you. I'm going to tell you something that's going to change your life and the lives of so many suffering people out there," he says assertively. Pausing his narration for a moment, he hands a beautiful woman in a bathing suit a Santa hat as he walks by her on the sidewalk, turning back to chastise her, "Don't you know it's Christmas at all?" He continues walking and talking to the camera: "It's become difficult to find a meaningful gift that your loved one can appreciate. Your granny wasn't pleased with the goat she received last year from Europe"—he

pauses and looks meaningfully at the camera—"was she?" The camera then cuts to Granny, sitting on her couch looking frustrated while a goat relieves itself in her living room and munches on her potted flowers. Luckily, the narrator has the solution: the Radi-Aid App.

This video takes what *Africa For Norway—New charity single out now!* (SAIH Norway, 2012a) and *Africa for Norway – New Video! Radi-Aid – Warmth for Xmas* (SAIH Norway, 2012b) started—the project of replacing Western donors with African ones—and extends it. The first two videos focus on African agency, situating Africans as those with the desire and ability to help the freezing Norwegians. *The Radi-Aid App: Change A Life With Just One Swipe* (SAIH Norway, 2016) adds that Africans have the technological expertise and knowledge as well. Knowledge is centered in this video not just in the development of the app itself, but also in the video's callbacks to ways African knowledge has been elided in other aid media. For one, the narrator references the Band Aid song described earlier in this essay, "Do They Know It's Christmas?," and its lyrics that suggest that Africans cannot possibly know when Christmas is because of the lack of snow and general despair. By handing the Santa hat to a woman presumably enjoying herself on the beach in the Southern hemisphere's summer season, the video makes fun of the premise that Western epistemologies—based in the Northern climate, on particular religious beliefs, and on certain cultural traditions—are the only ways of knowing the world.

Another more implicit callback is to the general schema of donating an animal to someone in Africa in the name of a friend or family member as a Christmas present. On the one hand, this type of gift giving is meant to alleviate wealthy materialism by giving to those who "really need it" rather than privileged Westerners. However, the idea that livestock make the best gift to, say, an African grandmother, is not only based in the recipient's perceived need for food, but also Western distrust that Africans know how to handle money (Murphy & Dixon, 2012; Hanchey, 2018). The video undermines this distrust in two ways. First, the grandmother who received the goat is clearly not happy about her present. She gives the camera a glare that provides the feeling that she is very disappointed in the audience for giving her this terrible gift. Granny, older and wiser, would have had a much better idea of what to do with the money herself. Second, the video concludes with Africans donating ridiculous things to Norwegians through the Radi-Aid App, which highlights how our best ideas of what people in other countries and circumstances need may turn out to be laughable. For instance,

Granny decides to give a pale Norwegian man named Per the gift of a spray tan. As a notification pops up saying, "Congratulations! You just saved a Norwegian," the video cuts to a dream sequence where an elated Granny is spraying tanner on Per in front of majestic mountain scenery. The dream sequence exemplifies how giving Per the spray tan is primarily for Granny's benefit—and by analogy how the gifts given to Africans by Westerners are more for making them feel good than based in any knowledge of what Africans actually need and desire.

Imagining (Im)Possible Futures

If the present is the time of justice (Womack, 2013), the phase where grounds are set for moving toward (im)possible futures that imagine truly postcolonial African conditions, then the stories of the present must be evaluated for the kinds of futures they can catalyze. To what extent do the questions and perceptions raised by these videos allow us to think differently about the global South, and Africa in particular? And to what extent do they maintain Western-centric epistemologies detrimental to imagining liberatory futures or that foreclose African epistemological perspectives?

On the one hand, these videos work to figure (im)possible presents by representing Africans as agentic subjects, questioning the determinism of African environments, and presenting Africans as knowledgeable even to the point of cynicism. As detailed above, these aspects of the videos undermine many problematic aid logics: that of the white savior (Bell, 2013; Cole, 2012; Hanchey, 2018), the homogenization of the African continent (Muspratt & Steeves, 2012; Steeves, 2008), and African lack of agency (Bell, 2011; Hanchey, 2016; Steeves, 2008). In my memory vignettes, I sought to infuse these critiques of the present with re-memberings of the past and demonstrate how aid logics are structured by understandings of how Africa has developed through history. I first read Africa as a deterministic environment, allowing me to avoid responsibility for my failures as a volunteer. I then used gross, historically constructed stereotypes of Africans to try to cover over my own felt loss of agency as a white subject. Finally, I was shocked at African ingenuity, revealing how surface-level my idea of partnership must have been as a volunteer. By connecting each of these vignettes to the analysis of the videos, I demonstrate how colonial understandings of the past become solidified in aid work in the present. The version of the present constructed through these videos in conjunction with

my re-membering thereby opens up new ways of configuring agencies, environments, and knowledges more justly.

However, the videos still act to figure a present that, though impossible under current Western framings, maintains Western epistemological universalism. That is, these (im)possible presents still foreclose African perspectives. There are two important ways that the SAIH Norway videos, for all that they achieve, occlude Afrian epistemologies and fail to delink from modernity-coloniality. First, the videos maintain the supremacy of Western dualistic logics and thus foreclose African logics of holism. Much of the videos' critique of aid logics stems from flipping or exaggerating the binary oppositions often used by aid media: agent/victim, deterministic environment/deterministic agent, cynicism/naiveté. African epistemologies fundamentally challenge Western ways of knowing by delinking from such binarization and dualistic thinking. African epistemologies operate holistically, eschewing binary oppositions for sensemaking "in relation to the whole" (Cruz, 2015, p. 26). Decolonizing both academic and aid work requires representations of Africans that explode Western binaries and act to produce holistic understandings.

Second, the videos fail to delink by maintaining a universalistic and decontextualized perspective on Africa rather than engaging in situationality (Cruz, 2015). For all the jokes made about those who envision Africa as a singular nation, little work is done in any of the videos to contextualize the people, their surroundings, and their actions. Both *Let's Save Africa!—Gone Wrong* (SAIH Norway, 2013) and *The Radi-Aid App: Change A Life With Just One Swipe* (SAIH Norway, 2016) start with the words "Somewhere in Africa…" over the opening shot. Though this is meant to be ironic, it still upholds the Western logic that it does not matter where or when these videos are taking place specifically. Thus, even in clearly challenging the trope of Africa as one country, the videos reinforce a homogenous view of Africa. The videos thus act to foreclose African epistemologies of situationality, as context is radically important to African-centric visions of the future.

In sum, the videos simply exaggerate and flip Western standards without incorporating African ones. African epistemological perspectives are holistic, tracing layers and contradictions without resorting to binaries or oppositions. They also require a deep engagement with African material circumstances and patterns of day-to-day life through situating representations and knowledges in their local contexts. Right now, the videos' representations maintain the primacy of Western

epistemologies even when challenging some colonial aspects of those logics. Aid must engage in practices of centering African epistemologies. Otherwise, Africa is backgrounded, becoming simply the terrain over which Westerners debate with other Westerners about African pasts, presents, and futures.

In this manner, the SAIH Norway videos present an uncomplimentary reflection of our own tendency in the academy to have debates over the meaning of Africa's past and the legacies written into Africa's futures without regard to African material or epistemological concerns. In the same way that the videos foreclose African epistemologies and background African voices, scholarship that attempts to rethink pasts in relation to Africa and posits radical African futures still often does so with little to no reference to African thought. I count myself as part of this problem; the first version of this essay engaged in this very erasure.

Diasporic returns and Afrofuturist imaginings use Africa in romanticized ways that do not attend to African realities. Although "African" epistemology should not be essentialized, failing to recognize the African epistemological contributions to history or meaning-making is problematic. SAIH Norway's attempts to reframe aid do not account for the potential of African epistemologies. Similarly, Afrofuturism is not reflective of the visions Africans have for their own futures, visions that are grounded in day-to-day life on a continent that others see as either a playground for adventure (often white travelers) or a nostalgic homeland (often diasporic travelers).

Yet, though Afrofuturist and Black feminist work holds problematic relations to African thought and materialities, thinkers in these traditions are still laboring with African pasts and futures in ways that meaningfully challenge racial and colonial structures of power. The same cannot be said for feminist communication work. With the exception of the few scholars who focus on Africa, African pasts, presents, and futures are given little attention in our discipline. Even when lip service is paid to African epistemologies, scholars are more likely to cite a diasporic thinker than an African one, often pointing only to Asante (1988). It is not only those who study African contexts who need to engage with African thought. For Westerners in particular, part of delinking is recognizing when we have universalized our epistemic perspectives, thus obscuring other knowledges. Wanzer-Serrano (2015) called for all of us to delink, regardless of our research focus, and engage with alternative ways of knowing. For instance, Cruz (2015) argued that African epistemologies are useful to understand organizational contexts

of any sort in innovative ways. But more broadly, every time we make a theoretical argument as if it were universal, without regard to other ways of knowing, we continue to reparticipate in the coloniality that undermines African epistemologies. I encourage all of us to consider how delinking from Western universalism and centering African knowledges could meaningfully restructure our scholarship and our politics.

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