

COMPOSING THE 'NATIVE'

*The American Media Image of
Africa and the Colonial
Discourse*

Kevin DuMouchelle

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Discourse

by

Kevin DuMouchelle

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“Africa proper, as far as History goes back, has remained-for all purposes of connection with the rest of the World-shut up; it is the Gold-land compressed within itself-the land of childhood, which lying beyond the day of history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of Night. Its isolated character originates, not merely in its tropical nature, but essentially in its geographical condition.”

-Friedrich Hegel

Introduction:

Out of Africa

American reporters in Africa have not developed much beyond the example of Henry Morton Stanley. The late-nineteenth century ‘explorer’/self-promoter’s accounts of his journeys across Central Africa in the search of missionary Dr. David Livingstone in the *New York Herald* remain one of the first major examples of American mass media reporting of Africa. Keeping American audiences abreast of his destructive expedition down the Congo river, he “cannily sprinkled his tale with picturesque chiefs, exotic sultans and faithful servants and he introduced it with sweeping generalizations that allowed his readers to feel at home in an unfamiliar world.”¹ “The blacks give me an immense amount of trouble; they are too ungrateful to suit my fancy,” he wrote, “When mud and wet sapped the physical energy of the lazily-inclined, a dog-whip became their backs, restoring them to a sound – sometimes too extravagant activity.”² Stanley popularized the tradition of applying America’s racist ideology to the contemporary situation inscribed on the African continent.

He also helped to establish a tradition of inspiring, through his simplistic and racist portrayals of the region, grave political consequences for Africa. Africa remained “unpeopled country... What a settlement one could have in this valley!... There are plenty of... Pilgrim Fathers among the descendants of the Anglo-Saxon race yet, and when America is filled up with their descendants, who shall say that Africa... shall not be their next resting place?”³ Seeing such descriptions in the paper, a grandiloquent Belgian monarch, Léopold II, saw an opportunity

¹Hochschild, Adam. *King Leopold’s Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa*. New York: First Mariner Books, 1999. 30.

²Ibid., 31.

³Ibid.

for economic largesse and imperial self-indulgence. Stanley's stories⁴ gave birth to an imperial project, the Belgian Congo (later, the 'Congo Free State'), whose rapacious consequences continue to haunt the Congo basin to this very day. Reporting remains an inherently political act.

Contemporary American media coverage of Africa too remains marked by a number of potential sources of trouble for those seeking an accurate portrayal of the continent. American coverage of Africa (perhaps more than any other region) remains stained with considerations of national political or economic interest. Additionally, much reporting of Africa participates in a pattern, most often unrecognized, of essentializing and denigrating the institutions and peoples of the continent. Such powerful and unrecognized discourses infiltrate into media reporting and, via their very presence, in turn perpetuate themselves among the consuming public. In this discourse, all of Africa (implicitly) remains a place in which "governments are corrupt, rebels are pitiless and borders are porous", where "slave labour, murder, dismemberment, mass homelessness and wholesale economic collapse" run wild.⁵ Africa remains a land of bewildering complexity, diversity and natural, cultural and political richness, but one might never recognize this fact by simply consuming American media representations of the continent.

Warped Lenses

America's scarce and prejudiced media coverage of Africa belies its complex relationship with the continent.⁶ America maintains with the continent a history loaded with memories of European colonialism, slavery and assorted exploratory, missionary and commercial ventures. In spite (or perhaps because) of this history, for many Americans Africa remains a land of almost impenetrable 'otherness.' "Americans' knowledge of Africa is formed by messages from many sources", Beverly Hawk offers, yet "among these sources, the media hold special importance for

⁴Indeed, Stanley was later secretly contacted and tapped by Léopold to serve as a Belgian imperial agent in the country.

⁵Harden, Blaine. "Diamond Wars: A special report. Africa's Gems: Warfare's Best Friend." *New York Times*, Thursday, April 6, 2000. Foreign Desk.

⁶Nevertheless, this investigation remains wholly one of American culture.

it is to the media that individuals look to be informed. The media holds responsibility for the interpretation of the events they report and their interpretations, in turn, define the understanding of events by readers and viewers.”⁷ The media in fact reflect and reinforce public perceptions conceived through lenses of racism, slavery, colonialism, ‘primordialism’ and economic dependence. As primary sources of information for the American public, a warped presentation of Africa in the mass media thus works to preclude a greater sense of understanding and interest in the region. The pattern of disengagement and misconceptions then perpetuates itself.

The U.S. media presents few, and almost predominantly negative and/or culturally misinformed images of Africa, at once reflecting and reinforcing popular stereotypes of the continent. The political (given America’s adoption of the European “imperial mantle”⁸ in Africa), commercial and cultural reasons for this pattern thus lend themselves to questions of how to more accurately craft these messages. This thesis seeks to expose these representational links as a means of more comprehensively understanding current reporting of Africa and of suggesting a theoretical basis for further discourse analysis of American reporting of Africa. After all, as Philippa Atkinson argues in her examination of the reporting of the case of Liberia, “the importance of the media in terms of their role in shaping perceptions, and thus policies, does assign to them a moral responsibility to represent the realities of such wars in a careful manner, and to avoid adding to stereotyped misrepresentations.”⁹

Reporting is, despite the myth of ‘journalistic objectivity’, an inherently political act. American mass media coverage presents a discourse marked politically by colonialism, culturally by racism and by a focus on extracting economic benefits. As the key subject and

⁷ Hawk, Beverly. “Metaphors of African Coverage.” *Africa’s Media Image*. New York: Praeger, 1992. 3.

⁸Newsom, David D. *The Imperial Mantle : the United States, Decolonization, and the Third World*. Bloomington : IN, Indiana University Press, 2001.

⁹Atkinson, Philippa. “Deconstructing Media Mythologies on Ethnic War in Liberia.” *The Media of Conflict: War Reporting and Representations of Ethnic Violence*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, Inc, 1999. 209.

distributor of contemporary ideology, the media perpetuate a naïve and racist American understanding of Africa.

Culture and Politics

Central to a nuanced understanding and reading of foreign reporting remains a consideration of culture and politics at work in the stories presented. While inherently difficult to pin down and rarely explicit in the coverage itself, these concepts nevertheless strongly affect both the crafting and reading of such stories. Culture remains a key concept in unlocking these messages. Culture operates primarily as to “cultivate attitudes and behaviour that predispose people to consent to established ways of thought and conduct, thus integrating individuals into a specific socioeconomic system.”¹⁰

On the face of things, there exist few more loaded words in the English lexicon than ‘culture.’ Used to varyingly define an essentialist positivism (“civilization”) and a relational relativism (many “cultures”), the word epitomizes the phrase ‘ambiguity of meaning.’ It need not, however; provided one stick to a clear definition. Taken from the introduction to Tracey Skelton and Tim Allen’s Culture and Global Change, ‘culture’ remains “the over-arching context in which development and all forms of social change occur. [It is] the product of ongoing human interaction.”¹¹ It thus encompasses the more traditional associations of ‘values, ideas and institutions’, while at the same time transcending them as well. Peter Worsley adds in the same text that “we need to avoid...[both] the overly simplistic assumption that the ‘cultural’ is a separate sphere [and] that it is causally secondary. It is, in fact, the realm of those crucial

¹⁰Kellner, Douglas M. and Meenakshi Gigi Durham. “Adventures in Media and Cultural Studies: Introducing the KeyWorks.” Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks. Meenakshi Gigi Durhman and Douglas M. Kellner, eds. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd. 2001. 1.

¹¹ “This means that we accept the term as ambiguous and suggestive rather than as analytically precise. It reflects or encapsulates the muddles of living. We recognise that there are ideas and practices which may be maintained over long periods of time...but culture is always contingent upon historical processes...It is also influenced by, influences and generally interacts with, contemporary social, economic and political factors. Geography too is significant...Moreover, any one individual’s experience of culture will be affected by the multiple aspects of their identity – ‘race’, gender, age, sexuality, class, caste position, religion, geography and so forth – and it is likely to alter in various circumstances.” Skelton, Tracey and Tim Allen. “Culture and Global Change: An Introduction.” Culture and Global Change. Tracey Skelton and Tim Allen, eds. New York: Routledge, 2000.4-5.

institutions in which the ideas we live by are produced and through which they are communicated – and penetrate even the economy.”¹² One might also add, even the political realm.

In critically examining Marxism, Antonio Gramsci, renowned Italian Marxist theorist of the early 20th century, most clearly articulated the link between culture and politics. In his view, ruling classes consolidated their hegemony (their power and influence over a particular society) through the elaboration of an ‘ideology’, or discourse, which legitimates their rule.¹³ At the political level a single ideology eventually prevails “bringing about not only a unison of economic and political aims, but also intellectual and moral unity, posing all the questions around which the struggle rages not on a corporate but on a ‘universal’ plane, and thus creating the hegemony of a fundamental social group over a series of subordinate groups.”¹⁴ People internalize this ideology, this culture, when they accept the rule of the hegemonic group. Gramsci points this out so as to more effectively analyze and critique modern capitalism.

Gramsci looks at intellectuals specifically as the ‘vanguard class’, as the creators and boosters of ideologies, with an eye at once critical toward their role and hopeful in regard to their power. Intellectuals, labouring in the “trenches” of civil society work together to promote and defend the hegemony of the ruling power.¹⁵ In Gramsci’s Italy, the Catholic Church leaders still articulated and defended the ruling ideology of the time. Seventy years later, Worsley notes that “intellectuals, then, mediate in varying and complex ways, between the ruling class and those they rule and exploit. [However] in modern times, it is ‘the media’, not the Church, which are the

¹² Worsley, Peter. “Classic Conceptions of Culture.” *Culture and Global Change*. Tracey Skelton and Tim Allen, eds. New York: Routledge, 2000. 21.

¹³ “In other words, one could say that ideologies for the governed are mere illusions, a deception to which they are subject, while for the governing they constitute a willed and knowing deception.... They are real, historical facts which must be combated and their nature as instruments for domination revealed.” Gramsci, Antonio. *A Gramsci Reader*. David Forgacs, ed. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1988, 196.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 205.

¹⁵ “‘State’ should be understood not only [as] the apparatus of government but also [as] the ‘private’ apparatus of hegemony or civil society.” Gramsci, Antonio. *A Gramsci Reader*. David Forgacs, ed. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1988, 234.

main producers and disseminators of ideas.”¹⁶ Culture and power are thus linked. Attempts by intellectuals to ‘culturally’ describe other peoples remain thus at least suspect.

Building on these concepts, Edward W. Said, in his infamous and discourse-altering 1978 work Orientalism, demonstrates how European imperial ambitions informed the creation of a culturally inferior (and thus politically impotent) ‘other’ in the form of the North African and Levantine Muslim, opening the door to colonial domination. With historically political and cultural roots stretching back at least as far the Battle of Poitiers, through the Crusades and the era of Empire and mandates, into a highly charged and topical contemporary context, Europe saw Islam as its competitor, its ‘Other.’ In casting Islam thus, European intellectuals created a body of work, orientalism, which created the image of an ‘Oriental’ fundamentally backward or developmentally retarded, incapable of self-government. Importantly, orientalists addressed only Europeans; the very nature of their work precluded them from properly observing and understanding the Muslim world. Orientalist work existed in a clear dialectic with the imperial project, one reinforcing the other.

Tellingly, Said suggests that this dialectic tendency may be fundamental to the construction of an identity (or, in Gramsci’s words, to the propagation of a hegemonic ideology). “The development and maintenance of every culture”, Said offers in his afterword, “require the existence of another different and competing *alter ego*...The construction of identity...involves establishing opposites and ‘others’ whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of their differences from ‘us.’”¹⁷ At its heart, “the

¹⁶ Worsley, Peter. “Classic Conceptions of Culture.” Culture and Global Change. Tracey Skelton and Tim Allen, eds. New York: Routledge, 2000, 19.

¹⁷ “Each age and society recreates its ‘Others.’ Far from a static thing then, identity of self or of ‘other’ is a much worked-over historical, social, intellectual and political process that takes place as a contest involving individuals and institutions in all societies...It should be obvious in all cases that these processes are not mental exercises but urgent social contests involving such concrete political issues as immigration laws, the legislation of personal conduct, the construction of orthodoxy, the legitimization of violence and/or insurrection, the character and content of education and the direction of foreign policy, which very often has to do with the designation of official enemies.” Said, Edward W. Orientalism. New York: Vintage Books, 1979, 332.

construction of identity is bound up with the disposition of power and powerlessness in each society.”¹⁸ The cultural pattern thus remains relevant, even if the imperial project has taken on new forms.

While many scholars have read Said’s work as the apotheosis of multicultural relativism, Orientalism nonetheless provides a crucial step in understanding the link between cultural artifacts (travelogues, explorers’ accounts, country assessments or media reports) and the disposition of power.¹⁹ The creation of a discourse that has as its fundamental assumption the superiority of one’s own culture and the inferiority of a subject population certainly helps to justify and sustain imperial and colonial rule. It creates a self-perpetuating intellectual atmosphere in the imperial heartland, and a parallel perpetuation of inferiority in the colonial metropole.

Reflecting directly upon the African experience of this parallel movement, revolutionary Martiniquais theorist Frantz Fanon describes the process through which colonized Africans both internalized and reacted against specifically racist ideology. The colonial world, in his view, remained a world of black and white, “a Manichean world. It is not enough for the settler to delimit physically...the place of the native. As if to show the totalitarian character of colonial exploitation, the settler paints the native as a sort of quintessence of evil...The native is declared insensible to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values, but also the negation of values.”²⁰ In thus dehumanizing the ‘native’, colonialism represents for Fanon the institutionalization of violence.²¹ He goes so far as to link violence in post-colonial Algeria with

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Whether or not it remains possible for a Western ‘outsider’ to understand other cultures, as much of the debate surrounding Orientalism revolves, remains a moot point in this case as our project remains merely an investigation of Western attempts in this regard. The problem arises later when attempting to revise descriptions of the ‘Other.’

²⁰ Fanon, Frantz. The Wretched of the Earth. New York: Grove Press, 1963, 41.

²¹ Interestingly, Fanon also turns this discourse against many ‘native’ independence-era leaders. “The people who, at the beginning of the struggle, had adopted the primitive Manicheism of the settler – Blacks and Whites, Arabs and Christians – realize as they go along that it

the ingrained effects of institutionalized violence at the hands of the French colonizers. “The Algerian criminality...[is] the direct result of the colonial situation...The objective of the native who fights against himself is to bring about the end of domination. But he ought equally to pay attention to the liquidation of all untruths implanted in his being by oppression.”²² The imperial ‘oriental’ project here reaches its height. Not only has it reinforced for the colonizing intellectual the rightness of his nation’s imperial projects, but through the absorption of the prevailing discourse, it has rendered the ‘native’ a complete ‘outsider’: a criminal. Hegemony, discourse, ideology, ‘otherness’, race, culture and politics; they are all intricately linked.

Of course this link between culture and politics can work in either direction, as seen in the work of certain African intellectuals like Cheikh Anta Diop and Léopold Sédar Senghor. These writers attempt to construct their own ideologies, centred in concepts like black historicism and *négritude*, in reaction to colonial and imperial racial discourses. Senghor, poet and long-term president of Sénégal created a body of work entitled ‘*négritude*’ (“The totality of the cultural values of the Black world”) which sought to defend and promote African identity in the wake of the struggle for independence.²³ At the same time, Diop writes in Civilization or Barbarism: An Authentic Anthropology that Egypt, with all of its profound cultural influence, remains an outpost of and testimony to the capabilities and creativity of the Black world. Diop echoes the other cultural theorists when he writes that “the Egyptological ideology {that Egyptians were white, or certainly not black)...reinforced the theoretical bases of imperial ideology...Thus imperialism... first killed the being spiritually and culturally, before trying to eliminate it physically. The negation of the history and intellectual accomplishments of Black Africans was cultural, mental murder, which preceded and paved the way for their genocide here

sometimes happens that you get Blacks...[who] seem to make use of the war [for liberation] in order to strengthen their material situation and their growing power.” Power remains fundamentally more important than race in approaching representations of the other. Ibid., 144.

²² Ibid, 309.

²³ Liukkoken, Petri. “Léopold Sédar Senghor.” <http://kirjasto.sci.fi/senghor.htm>.2000.

and there in the world.”²⁴ Regardless of their merit in debating archaeology, Senghor and Diop demonstrate the pervasive power of the concept of hegemonic discourse by attempting to turn it against the imperial project. Not only are culture and politics linked, they remain intertwined with fundamental questions of power and powerlessness, of life and death.

In short, reading culture remains a political event. In doing so, one looks “for negative or positive representations, learn[s] how narratives [are] constructed and discern[s] how image and ideology function with media and culture to reproduce either social domination and discrimination, or more positive social change.”²⁵ In doing so (to quote the distinguished media analyst Stuart Hall) “the struggle in discourse is joined.”²⁶

An Historical Primer

The story of America’s involvement with Africa actually begins across the Atlantic and to the north, in Europe. America inherited (among other things) a long history of reporting Africa from the Europeans, as well as a political agenda on the continent. These accounts date back at least to the Greeks, with stories about Africans offered by Herodotus, Pliny the Elder and Ptolemy, to name the most prominent examples. “Emphasis,” Michael McCarthy notes in Dark Continent: Africa as Seen by Americans, in these accounts “was placed on the strange and exotic. This proclivity suggests that ancient writers felt a need to create a chasm, one that separated their own civilized world from the primitive domain of their subjects. The implications were obvious: Africans lacked the accepted forms of civilization...they were a cruel and promiscuous race of people, freaks who were more akin to animals than humans.”²⁷ Throughout the Middle Ages, travelogues (often informed by second-hand accounts, and certainly in

²⁴ Diop, Cheikh Anta. *Civilization or barbarism : an authentic anthropology*. translated from the French by Yaa-Lengi Meema Ngemi. eds. Harold J. Salemson and Marjolijn de Jager. Brooklyn, N.Y. : Lawrence Hill Books, 1991, 1-2.

²⁵ Kellner and Durham, 25.

²⁶ Hall, Stuart. “Encoding/Decoding.” Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, eds. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd. 2001. 176.

²⁷ McCarthy, Michael. Dark Continent: Africa as Seen by Americans. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983, 6-7.

dialogue with earlier writers) appeared which furthered this image of an exotic, uncivilized world in which men practiced cannibalism, grew to unnatural proportions, lived in a state unheard-of promiscuity, even walked on their hands.²⁸ In short, by the time of European exploration in the continent, there existed “a cultural formula of expression [which] became the accepted form of analysis for dealing with Africa.”²⁹

In the ‘settled’ colonial world on the western edge of the Atlantic, early America experienced a twofold understanding of Africa: one tied to slavery and the unavoidable presence of Africans in American life, and another rooted in America’s economic and, later, political interests in the continent itself. Both experiences participated in creation of a discourse which denied Africans the possibility of independence of thought or action. “As enterprising Yankee merchants began to seek out new markets to exploit,” McCarthy notes, “and as the demand for the labour of Africans grew, American relations with Africa expanded.”³⁰ The two principal American interests in Africa at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century remained mercantile and missionary. In both cases, “American responses to Africa were influenced by a body of racial thought about the dark-skinned people of the world that had been developing in America and Europe throughout the nineteenth century.”³¹ These views held that, “since black people were seen as threats to order and stability, they needed to be controlled, studied and made more predictable. The threat of race war and insurrection was never really distant. A sense of cultural inferiority subordinated blacks to whites, and skin colour, as a permanent sign of origin, precluded social equality.”³² This discourse existed in conversation with a similar story of racial

²⁸ Other such instances include the fictitious *Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, the Prester John myth, *Leo Africanus’ History and Description of Africa*, Richard Hakluyt’s *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation* and the mix of accounts, legend and ancient sources found in William Watermann’s *The Fardle of Fashions*. *Ibid.*, 7-11.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

³² Thus “Americans, in good conscience, could take up the ‘white man’s burden’ of uplifting the inferior peoples of the world, a proposition that supported the missionary and commercial spirit of the time.” *Ibid.*

inferiority historically tied to American domestic politics. McCarthy affirms that “the case against black people in America was advanced by showing that their African ancestors had failed to develop a fully civilized way of life.”³³ (The evolution and historical longevity of this discourse is examined more completely in Part One.)

After the Second World War and with the coming of decolonization, the United States, in an unparalleled position of power and influence, inherited not only the cultural legacy of Europe but much of its political and economic hegemony as well. This remains rooted both in the perceptions of the newly independent states and the sociopolitical realities of the post-war world. Indeed, former undersecretary of State and US Ambassador to Libya, Indonesia and the Philippines David D. Newsom argues that, almost throughout the Third World, the US is “seen as the inheritor of the imperial mantle in much of the world.”³⁴ Reflecting on the parallel process seen in Said and Fanon’s examinations, the presence of a ‘native’ reading of imperial ambitions in American overseas enterprises in turn further implicates the ‘imperial’ nature of American reporting of Africa at home. This perception in the newly liberated world arose directly and indirectly from the course of the history of twentieth-century US foreign relations.

Beginning in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the US became an imperial power. America demonstrated its new might both implicitly and explicitly. In 1904, for example, President Theodore Roosevelt offered his ‘Roosevelt Corollary’ to the Monroe Doctrine (which had previously demarcated the ‘New World’ as America’s hegemonic sphere of influence). “Chronic wrongdoing which results in a general loosening of the ties to civilized society,” he stated, “may force the United States, however reluctantly, in flagrant cases of such wrongdoing or impotence, to the exercise of an international police power.” Four years later, he

³³ Ibid., 28.

³⁴4.

sent the ‘Great White Fleet’ of the US Navy to ‘show the flag’ in a demonstration of American naval might.³⁵ In the same era, the US fought a late nineteenth-century war against Spain with the underlying intent of acquiring colonial possessions. Indeed, the US essentially incorporated the Philippines as an American colony. The imperial experience initiated a more explicit American use of the colonial discourse formulated in Europe. Colonial powers, as established, inherently looked down upon their ‘native’ subjects.³⁶ It also laid some of the foundation for post-independence trauma. “If corruption and favoritism became common in the post-colonial states,” Newsom offers, “the roots of such practices were planted during imperial rule.”³⁷ Yet this newfound power did not sit well with America’s self-proclaimed and globally internalized, historic anti-colonial rhetoric.

In the wake of the rapid European de-colonization of Africa in the early 1960’s, the US found itself in an increasingly precarious position. “Rather than emerge as the champion of independence – as its early history and much of its rhetoric might have suggested- the United States, in the view of many, became the new imperialist,” Newsom relates. On one hand, “the overwhelming power of the United States at the end of the war made it a natural candidate to inherit the imperial mantle. [Yet] that very power also lessened the outward manifestations of hostility as independence movements and the newly freed nations looked to Washington for material help and political support”³⁸ Indeed, Newsom recalls from his own experience in Indonesia that “to the peoples of the colonial world the rhetoric from America provided hope, but it also led to disappointment.”³⁹ Rather than support, for example, the Bandung Conference of ‘Non-Aligned’ nations, many Third World leaders expressed distress that the US regarded such

³⁵ Ibid. 27-8

³⁶ Ibid. 33.

³⁷ Ibid. 37.

³⁸ Ibid., 47.

³⁹ Ibid.

gatherings with anxiety and censure. President John F. Kennedy, president during the height of the African independence movement, acquired great popularity and prestige in the Third World by cultivating the de-colonization movement. As early as July 2, 1957, he (as Senator from Massachusetts) declared on the Senate floor that US support of France in the Algerian war for independence had “damaged our leadership and prestige.”⁴⁰ Yet, he as much as any other Cold War president found any theoretical support for African independence thwarted by larger geopolitical ambitions.

The US role in fighting and perpetuating the Cold war served to further reinforce the nation’s imperialist image in the Third World, while in a parallel fashion further establishing its actual ‘neo-imperial’ or ‘neo-colonial’ status. As a result of its entrenched rivalry with the Soviet Union, the US had “security commitments and a network of bases in an arc from the Mediterranean to Japan that inevitably involved the United States in the internal affairs of states. It drew the United States into direct conflict in Vietnam and surrogate conflicts in the Horn of Africa, Angola and Afghanistan.” However, Newsom notes, “to the frustration of many in America, few Third World nations shared the concept of a ‘free world’ matched against an ‘evil empire.’”⁴¹ Particularly highlighted by the US involvement in Vietnam (against an essentially anti-colonial opponent), the US faced greater difficulty in relating to the ‘non-aligned’ Third World. Newsom recounts the memo of former US Ambassador to India Loy Henderson to Washington explaining current Indian perceptions of the US, which included:

“our treatment of American Negroes, our tendency to support colonialism and to strive for continued world supremacy of white peoples, our economic imperialism, superficiality of our culture, our lack of emotional balance evidenced by our present hysteria in combating Communism and our cynical use of ‘witch hunting method’ in promoting domestic political ends, our practice of giving economic and other assistance to foreign peoples only when we believe such assistance will aid our struggle against Communism, our assumption of superiority merely because we have higher standards of living, our hypocrisy, etc.”⁴²

⁴⁰ Ibid. 53.

⁴¹ Ibid., 147.

⁴² Ibid., 155.

These sentiments remained especially visceral in American relations with Africa.

American policymakers failed to separate the new realities in Africa from their own prevailing Cold War concerns and European lenses. “Despite Kennedy’s enthusiasm for Africa, [US] policy towards the [newly-independent] continent competed with preoccupation with over Vietnam and the Cold War. The overriding American concern with the confrontation with Soviet Union and its allies came at the same time as the independence of the African states and, to a large extent, shaped U.S. responses to that independence.”⁴³ Additionally, “Washington continued to see Africa as a *European responsibility* and to view the continent through *European eyes* [emphasis added].”⁴⁴

Domestic American politics also played a complex role in forming both American policy toward Africa and African perceptions of the US. Indeed, even in the wake of the civil rights movement of the mid-1960’s, “many [in Africa] still saw the United States as a racist nation.”⁴⁵ With regard to American Africa policy, former Reagan assistant Secretary of State Chester Crocker remarked that:

“Remote from the American experience, Africa was the stuff of legends and stereotypes: it was the last remaining land of white hats and black hats, a Manichean playground for underemployed Western activists on the right and on the left... Conservative Republicans viewed Africa as elephant country – a place to hunt for anti-Communist trophies to hang on the wall and to demonstrate doctrinal manhood in support of freedom fighters... Democrats badly needed issues and causes to rally around. If the mounting violence in South African townships could be pinned on Reagan and his policies, this would open up a new ‘civil rights’ front.”⁴⁶

While Crocker certainly speaks from a position of justifying Reagan’s controversial and detrimental Africa policies (including continued craven support for the apartheid regime of South Africa in the face of mounting domestic and international pressure), the perceived lack of a domestic ‘Africa constituency’ had a direct effect on foreign policy. Newsom offers a personal

⁴³ Ibid., 161.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 159.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 162.

anecdote in which he tried to convince Patrick Buchanan, then a special assistant to Nixon, that the US should work toward majority rule in Rhodesia. According to Newsom, Buchanan replied: “Why should we support the Africans? We got only eight percent of the black votes.”⁴⁷ Only in the face of widespread criticism, protest and condemnation did the Reagan administration eventually cave and place a boycott on racist South Africa. It remained too little, too late for many convinced that the US viewed Africa through imperial lenses.

In the contemporary world, these patterns remain relatively unchanged, especially in regard to Africa, even with the end of the Cold War. President Bill Clinton, upon achieving office in 1993, initially indicated an interest similar to that of Kennedy’s in the continent. However, the American experience in Somalia, underscored by images of American servicemen being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu, worked to stymie any further policy shifts in terms of direct American involvement on the continent, (allowing for an incoherent and disengaged response to later African crises such as the Liberian civil war and the Rwandan genocide). Following his 1997 trek across Africa, Clinton returned to foment several projects seeking to expand America’s role on the continent in a more indirect fashion. Through efforts such as the African Crisis Response Initiative (ACRI) and the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), the Clinton administration claimed to be responding to expressed African desires for cooperation and creativity in creating sustainable domestic development. The National Summit on Africa, founded to investigate and raise Africa’s profile in the U.S., found a public that, while “eager to learn more...[about] the peoples and countries of Africa” nevertheless maintained a decidedly “limited knowledge” of current situations.⁴⁸ Nonetheless, thwarted in

⁴⁷ Ibid., 166.

⁴⁸ The National Summit on Africa. American’s Perceptions of Africa: A Nationwide Survey. Washington, D.C., 1998. 1.

Somalia, the US has generally returned to its Cold War, ingrained understandings of and responses to Africa.⁴⁹

Newsom stresses the current need for the US to express its power through a campaign of understanding and attempting to relate to Third World attitudes toward the US.⁵⁰ In facing up to the reality of the late twentieth century, one must understand that “race was a major factor in forming Third World attitudes. Discrimination against the indigenous peoples took many forms. Much of it was manifested through sheer brutality; in every empire massacres, enslavement and physical humiliation were common. In its less brutal forms, discrimination was social and economic.”⁵¹ Newsom suggests that current Third World (and particularly African) attitudes toward the West remain marked by: the ‘sacredness of sovereignty’, a sensitivity to criticism, a search for identity, resentment against the West, a sense of betrayal, recurring suspicion of manipulation, and continuing economic disadvantage.⁵² Fundamentally, “at the heart of the problem of relationships between Third World countries and the West lies rhetoric. On both sides of the divide statements may represent genuine hopes and fears but they also reflect peer and political pressures on leaders.”⁵³ Recounting the response of a Nigerian foreign minister to violence between Hutus and Tutsis in Burundi in the late 1960’s, Newsom quotes the official: “If we call attention to them [the Hutus and Tutsis], they are seen in Europe and America as reflecting what Africans – not Burundis – do. They reflect on all of us. When you criticize events in Northern Ireland, you do not say they are typical of what Europeans do.”⁵⁴ Newly independent Africans remained highly sensitive to anything approaching criticism from the ‘imperial

⁴⁹ It remains left to be seen whether or not George W. Bush’s international ‘war on terrorism’ will alter or further this pattern. Pandering to the sympathies of Muslim allies and the ‘Arab street’, one is left to wonder if similar efforts will be made to ‘understand’ a culture with fewer strategic fossil fuel resources in the event of a retaliatory attack upon Somalia or Sudan, for example.

⁵⁰ A call made only the more pressing by recent terrorist attacks on the United States and the retaliatory US attacks upon Afghanistan. Ibid. 7.

⁵¹ Ibid. 124.

⁵² Ibid. 124-6.

⁵³ Ibid. 132-3.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

powers.’⁵⁵ (Which is not to say that some criticism of leaders such as Idi Amin of Uganda wasn’t warranted.) However, this remains the area in which the role of the American media is crucial in forming and reflecting such opinions. (Amin, for example, while unscrupulously brutal and callous, did not, as some argued at the time, epitomize the ‘typically African’ leader.)

Newsom argues that America’s ‘imperial mantle’ in Africa remains, in part, the province of Third World perception. Yet at the same time, the actions upon which these perceptions rest duly implicate the US as an imperial presence in Africa as well. The perceptions and reality of American political relations with Africa work in a self-reinforcing manner, and find themselves echoed in media stories from the continent. As Gramsci, Said, and company established, both reality and the perception of reality remain crucial to understanding the socio-political world.

Composing the ‘Native’

The investigation of the articulation of a particular discourse necessarily remains an interdisciplinary project. As a result, this thesis will attempt to investigate fields ranging from politics and history to literature, travel narratives, media studies and actual media stories. It is the author’s hope that the following layout will make this quite diverse subject coherent and tangible.

Part One investigates the American socio-cultural experience and understanding of Africa. Building from Newsom’s portrayal of America’s political role on the continent, this chapter will explore race discourse as a primary American means of articulating and classifying Africans. Along with a political ‘mantle’, Americans also inherited from Europe a discourse describing an ‘empty’ continent and a ‘childlike’ people. Despite the end of both slavery and

⁵⁵ Phillip Gourevitch describes in *We wish to inform you that tomorrow we shall be killed with our families: Stories from Rwanda* that in July of 1995 esteemed Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa delivered an address in a Kigali stadium in reaction to the recent atrocities in that country. “Please, please, please, our sisters and brothers, please, please, keep quiet. Please, please stop crying”, he intoned. “Hey? Hey? Hey? Hey? Do you want to tell me that blacks are stupid? Eh? Are you stupid?,” he asked. The sensitivity to a Western tendency to categorize all unfortunate events in Africa as inherent in its peoples’ character informed the world view of even this most respected and distinguished African patriot. Gourevitch, Philip. *We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families: Stories from Rwanda*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1998. 177-8.

colonialism, these theories remain surprisingly conventional instruments of reporting Africa. Indeed, this ideology's continuity in turn attests to the fact that the imperial relationship, in fact, continues to exist.

Part Two goes on to describe the economic, political and cultural factors underlying current American media coverage of Africa. This section surveys the link between America's political and economic interests in the continent and the media presentation of Africa to the American public. Making particular use of Noam Chomsky's model of the media as a propaganda system, the chapter attempts to specifically link the cultural discourses of racism, colonialism and primordialism to recent and current American media reporting of Africa. It ends with the brief investigation of two cases (Liberia and Rwanda) of coverage as an example for and invitation to further research upon the subject.

The thesis concludes with an admonition that the cultural and political links established therein serve at least two purposes: as an invitation to a critical reading of media coverage by the American public and as a call for a more engaged and just reporting of Africa by the American media. It also suggests the need for increased public involvement and opposition to the images they are being fed. Africa is not inherently 'dark.' It's just made to look that way.

Part One:

Mythologizing the 'Heart of Darkness': Race and Power

Intellectual history remains intimately connected with its seemingly disparate economic and political counterparts. Gramsci's reading of civil society and his description of the production of a hegemonic, co-opted ideological discourse provide enough objects of inquiry (not to mention enough intellectual jargon) to satisfy purists in the rigidly independent realms of political science, political economy, economics, history, literature, art history and cultural and media studies. Indeed, the interplay and historical longevity of ideas concerned with the question of race demonstrate this quality in a particularly compelling manner. Ill-bred hypotheses and conjecture, born of social distance and basic ignorance, grew over time in the European popular imagination into an accepted manner of understanding the African other.⁵⁶ Increased contact and technological development later required refinement of some of these stories, but as contact remained mediated through an elite few, these new concepts in turn had more to do with their authors than their intended African subjects. At the turn of the nineteenth century, thinkers placed greater emphasis upon applying the rigours and methods of science to a reading of the 'human condition.' At the same time, European political and economic powers began to develop greater interest, through their colonial agents, in the African continent. After Darwin, science finally appeared to 'prove' the validity of the popular conception of the continent as a land of 'noble savagery' or 'arrested development.' Appealing to the omnipotence of 'reason', European political and economic powers quickly worked to apply that sanction to their own ever more aggressive colonial exploits on the continent. All this suggests that the discourse on race

⁵⁶ The first two thirds of this chapter will primarily examine the European understanding of Africa. Most, if not all, American thought on Africa has its origin in such thinking.

remained linked in a dynamic manner with the European (and later, North American) socioeconomic relationship with the continent.

The exploration of such a concept requires reference to many fields, particularly in this case to that of sociology and intellectual history. Michael Banton, in his influential sociological text Race Relations, maintains that there remain three basic models for understanding social relations and race. A basic model remains one grounded in a reading of social relationships, particularly *discrimination*, what he calls the “differential treatment of persons ascribed to particular social categories” and which “can be generalized to form a measure of social distance.”⁵⁷ However, this system looks more at necessarily quotidian and interpersonal considerations within comparatively pluralistic societies.⁵⁸ A second model considers attitude, investigating the concept of *prejudice*, “a generalization prior to the situation in which it is invoked, directed toward people, groups or social institutions which is accepted and defended as a guide to action in spite of discrepancies of objective facts.”⁵⁹ A third and final model approaches the problem through a decidedly Gramscian lens, examining the ideology of *racism*. Banton defines racism as “the doctrine that a man’s behaviour is determined by stable, inherited characters deriving from separate racial stocks having distinctive attributes and usually considered to stand to one another in relations of superiority and inferiority.”⁶⁰ The history of European involvement in Africa suggests that, from an initial model ascribing prejudice to the individual agents on the continent, racial thought soon developed into an ever more systemized and accepted means of reporting about Africans. Social distance and prejudice gave way to a

⁵⁷ Banton, Michael. Race Relations. New York: Basic Books, Inc. Publishers, 1967. 8.

⁵⁸ For the purpose of simplification, it will be argued that Europe and Africa, until at least the mid to late nineteenth century constituted more or less distinct, mono-racial societies. This is a necessarily gross oversimplification of the actual conditions in either region, and remains an area potentially requiring further study.

⁵⁹ Banton, Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

racist ideology for describing Africa, an ideology so powerful that it often emerged even when the previously requisite social distance narrowed or disappeared.

This chapter will explore the connections between intellectual history and socioeconomic power in three basic parts. The first section explores the basic history of European racial thought about Africa. This thus fleshes out the story of how relatively simple prejudice and ignorance turned into an organized intellectual system of promoting European superiority and justifying the colonial/imperial project. The second section portion steps back briefly and re-investigates the connections between sociological theory and this basic history of reporting Africa and Africans. The final third then turns to America's particular historical relationship with Africa and its own manner of representing Africans. Americans inherited most of Europe's racist ideology with regard to their own economic and missionary activities in Africa. Indeed, the ideology remained even stronger and more crucial in the American context due to the large numbers of Africans living in the 'homeland' itself. Such historical deliberation and inquiry remains crucial because, as the eminent scholar of Africa Basil Davidson argues, such ideas maintain "a kind of underground existence."⁶¹

An Idea Upon Which the Sun Never Set

Like so much else in the realm, one can trace the origins of European thought on Africa to Greek thought and its influence upon the medieval imagination. Plato, in his Republic, divided men into natural (and, one implies) unalterable categories of social and economic power, the lowest of which remains slavery. This concept is refined further by Aristotle, who conceived of slavery as a "natural state of affairs."⁶² Ptolemy in turn sparked a recurring geographic interest in the continent by suggesting that it remained connected geographically to southern Asia.

⁶¹ McCarthy, Michael. Dark Continent: Africa as Seen by Americans. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983. 149.

⁶² Banton, 12.

Generally speaking, such accounts placed emphasis upon “the strange and the exotic. This proclivity suggests that ancient writers felt a need to create a chasm, one that separated their own civilized world from the primitive domain of their subjects.”⁶³ These grotesque portrayals remained in the popular imagination throughout much of the Middle Ages, due to travelogues such as the The Travels of Sir John Mandeville or Leo Africanus’ History and Description of Africa, as well as the unshakable ‘Prester John’ myth. “Africa,” Michael McCarthy writes in Dark Continent: Africa as Seen by Americans, “was seen as a mirror image of what Greece, Rome or Europe never should be: a land where nature had gone wild, where chaos and anarchy reigned, where people were deformed both in mind and spirit, and where gross excesses of behaviour were not the exception but the rule.”⁶⁴ Succinctly summing up European thought on Africa prior to the sixteenth century, McCarthy notes that “in short, a cultural formula of expression became the accepted form of analysis for dealing with Africa.”⁶⁵ This formula, informed by little more than prejudice and the basic ignorance resulting from an as-yet generally unbroken social distance, soon took on a more systemic and dire nature after Europe’s scientific revolution and ‘Enlightenment.’

This cultural formula came loaded with its own scientific assumptions, of course; assumptions soon undermined by Europe’s growing scientific understanding of the world. Augustine began the tradition of *monogenesis*, the concept that humans descended from one descendent (Adam), and that it remains absurd to consider that there may be human life beyond the known world. Columbus’ later rediscovery of the Americas and its native Aztecs, Incas and

⁶³ Many of these descriptions remain shocking in their imagination of bizarre deformities of biology and personality. They do place the development of a systemized manner of describing African ‘inferiority’ in context, however. For further description, consult the primary texts listed or Dark Continent. McCarthy, 7.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

others left this theory in considerable peril. The struggle took on added significance due to the debate's obvious theological implications.

A Scottish professor in Paris in 1510, John Major, "first applied to the Indians the Aristotelian doctrine of natural slavery."⁶⁶ This led to a heated political battle between church officials like Bartolomé de Las Casas, who objected to such a policy, and colonial officials such as Juan de Sepulvéda who favoured a brutal application of the *encomienda* slave labour system. The discovery of the American Indian, above all, severely hurt the reputation of the Catholic Church and sparked an increased turn to science in understanding human difference.

A number of different theories arose to account for the increasingly perceived differences between Europeans, Asians, Americans and Africans. One such proposal held to the innate immutability of human 'species.' The "true culprits" for such a model, Banton argues, remain "Milton, Ray and Linnaeus. Milton's description in *Paradise Lost* of creatures emerging fully-formed had been especially influential."⁶⁷ Linnaeus in turn "recognized four varieties of the human species: (a) *Americanus*—reddish, choleric, erect; (b) *Europaeus*—white, ruddy, muscular; (c) *Asiaticus*—yellow, melancholic, inflexible; (d) *Afer*—black, phlegmatic, indulgent; in addition, he created a fifth division, *monstrous*, to accommodate certain supposedly abnormal forms."⁶⁸

At the same time, the monogenist argument received the added support of several sixteenth and seventeenth century 'rational' thinkers. Lord Kames argued in 1774 in Scotland that "God had created only one pair of the human species....The confusion of Babel had scattered men over the face of the earth, depriving them of society and rendering them savages." In doing so, "Kames placed the nature of racial differences beyond human inquiry."⁶⁹ Even the great philosophical thinkers of the age couldn't help but to contribute as well. Immanuel Kant,

⁶⁶ Banton, 14.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 17-8.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

for example, “in 1785 expounded a monogenist theory holding that the ancestral human stock had been endowed with a range of latent powers which could be evoked or suppressed as new conditions of life required.” “Thus,” Banton notes, “the monogenist theory was freed from any assertion of the immutability of types.”⁷⁰ This in turn also played into the Elizabethan-era concept of the ‘Great Chain of Being’ that *natura non facit saltum* (nature makes no leaps).”If natural phenomena were to be seen as developing in a long sequence,” Banton states, “it was an obvious inference that the different races of men represented stages of development.”⁷¹

Concurrent with these developments grew a slightly different take on human difference, one which seems to still participate in Davidson’s “underground existence” and has thus outlived all of its contemporary theories. Banton describes the rise of the Romantic concept of the *noble savage* through the writings of theorists like Montaigne and Rousseau. Historically, this notion lost much of its contemporary appeal as the French Revolution began to spin out of control. Nevertheless, reflecting on the ‘noble savage’s’ historical longevity, Banton observes that:

Bernard Smith has shown how this image caused the progressive distortion of visual representation of savage life; how later –as mission activity in the Pacific increased - it was replaced by the ‘evangelistic picture of an ignoble and degraded brute’, and later still it gave way to a new conception of the romantic savage ‘representative of the childhood of man’...During the high noon of imperialism it was not the revolutionary who extolled the nobility of the unacculturated tribesman but the conservative who deplored the mixing of cultures. The notion that savagery is, in Rousseau’s words, ‘the real youth of the world’, and its innocence too, still has a firm grip on the Western imagination.⁷²

Nineteenth century abolitionists in Britain picked up this strand in a cause through which “the Negro is object of philanthropy...[the main difference being that] missionary groups in the churches were inclined to present him as a benighted rather than a noble savage.”⁷³ In short, late

⁷⁰ Ibid., 19.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., 22.

⁷³ Ibid., 24.

“eighteenth century thought about the Negro was often diffuse”, and while abolitionism divided some opinion, “even abolitionists [thought] Negroes slower [and] less capable.”⁷⁴

Relatively simultaneously, a number of theorists also began to expound upon possible ‘scientific’ connections between race and culture. Men like the French writer Comte de Gobineau maintained that race mixing leads to the rise and fall of civilizations. While such a proposition appears neutral in terms of racial superiority, it was his implied statement of the natural authority of whites that made him famous in his increasingly imperial nineteenth century. Perhaps most well-known, or infamous, of these theoreticians however remains Dr. Robert Knox, of Edinburgh. Knox “believed that race determined culture, and described his theory as...transcendental anatomy.” He had considerable influence throughout both Britain and Europe’s imperial capitals, and gave a series of ‘Saturday lectures’ on the issue of Race.⁷⁵

Sven Lindqvist, in his semi-literary investigation into the roots of genocide and the ‘hearts of European darkness’ Exterminate All the Brutes, considered Knox in particular the pioneer of racism as an ideology. He writes that Knox’s “The Races of Man: A fragment (1850) reveals racism at the actual moment of birth, just as it takes the leap from popular prejudice via Knox’s conceded ignorance to ‘scientific’ conviction.”⁷⁶ By means of example, Knox wrote that: “To me, race, or hereditary descent, is everything; it stamps the man...Race is everything: literature, science, art, in word, civilization depends on it.”⁷⁷ Africans, clearly deficient to a European mind in all the listed attributes of a successful race, were therefore predestined, doomed to failure. However the Europeans, clear masters in all fields of civilization, were in turn ordained to ‘civilize’ and control the lower populations of the world. Knox found proof in his

⁷⁴ This, of course, is not a wholly inclusive picture of nineteenth century Britain. Indeed, as Sir George Stephen noted, “while there was anti-Negro sentiment among ‘good society’ in Britain, ‘yet men whom business or colonial connection has brought into familiar intercourse with the black or coloured races, know well that the educated among them are not inferior to whites.’” Such men had a comparatively negligible effect upon the prevailing imagination toward Africa, however. *Ibid.*, 25, 30.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

⁷⁶ Lindqvist, Sven. Exterminate All the Brutes. (1992)transl.Joan Tate. New York: The New Press, 1996. 124.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 125.

theories through scientific examination of the physical features of the bodies and skeletons of members of various races. Knox, however, took this inquiry a bit too far and nearly relegated his theories to historical oblivion. Lindqvist writes that:

All anatomists at that time bought specimens from grave robbers, but Knox was suspected of having turned to professional assassins to ensure suitable corpses. That was the end of his scientific career. He saw himself as a voice crying in the wilderness. He and he alone had discovered a great truth, the truth of race, which only numskulls and hypocrites could deny. Origin of Species meant a turning point for Knox's ideas. Darwin neither confirmed nor denied them, but his theory of evolution was clearly useful for the racists. Knox was restored to favour and shortly before his death he became a member of the Ethnographical Society.⁷⁸

His thoughts soon however outran even his own conflicted image as other writers picked up on the subject of race and culture where Knox left off. W. Winwood Reade in Savage Africa (1860) predicted the eventual extinction of the African. "Africa will be shared between England and France. Under European rule, the Africans will dig the ditches and water the deserts. It will be hard work, and the Africans themselves will probably become extinct. 'We must learn,'" he wrote, "to look at this result with composure. It illustrates the beneficent law of nature, that the weak must be devoured by the strong."⁷⁹ Indeed, even the British Prime Minister Lord Salisbury noted in a speech in Albert Hall on 4 May 1898 that "One can roughly divide the nations of the world into the living and the dying."⁸⁰ Intellectually, Lindqvist offers, Europe began to increasingly exist during the nineteenth century in a 'racist fog.'

As our inquiry into the strange life of Dr. Knox revealed, the publication of Charles Darwin's On the Origin of Species in 1859 proved a substantial turning point in European racial discourse. Banton notes that "Darwin's theory ultimately favoured the monogenists, for it held that all the races of man were descended from a single primitive stock; but it upset any belief in particular creation and, by denying purpose or design in the development of species, seemed to threaten the authority of the Christian revelation which was a fundamental assumption for many

⁷⁸ Ibid., 129.

⁷⁹ Ibid. 131.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 140.

monogenists.”⁸¹ Darwin was thus the unintentional progenitor of a number of intellectual crises and conflicts including, of course, a particular movement dubbed ‘social Darwinism.’ This very loose school of thought held that “variations [in racial characteristics and national ‘character’ were] transmitted by heredity, which were subject to a process of selection.”⁸² In other words, social Darwinists applied the idea of a ‘struggle for life’ and the ‘victory of the adabtable’ to human social life. They built a tautological web whereby European civilization remained naturally higher and thus was in turn destined to overcome or dominate the other peoples of the world. This occurred through a linkage made by a number of writers in the mid-nineteenth century between national mythologies and historiographies, prevalent views of national superiority and inferiority and the burgeoning concept of social Darwinism.

Darwin’s work was thus incorporated to further the nationalistic furor sweeping Europe at the time. Intellectuals like Karl Pearson, a professor at London University, maintained that “‘the nation was a unity evolved by the struggle of one living type under the same laws as applied to other phases of life’ and that thus ‘the theory of the state became biological.’”⁸³ “Darwin had destroyed the view of races as immutable units. To maintain that an original set of pure races was degenerating because of miscegenation was becoming increasingly difficult,” nevertheless, Banton argues, “it was possible to rescue the racist position by arguing that races were in the process of formation and that seperateness was therefore to be encourages.”⁸⁴ Sir Arthur Keith argued in *Ethnos* (1931) that “‘the essential potency of race lies not in outward characters, but in the manifestation of these inward feelings known as ‘national spirit’ ...A nation always represents an attempt to become a race; nation and race are but different degrees of the

⁸¹ Banton, 36.

⁸² Ibid., 37.

⁸³ At the same time, other thinkers like Sir Francis Galton attempted equally nationalistic and intellectually questionable projects, such as attempting to make a science of eugenics. Ibid., 40.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 42.

same evolutionary movement.”⁸⁵ This struggle, of course, ultimately favoured the white European who’s level of civilization displayed her inherent superiority. Charles H. Pearson, an Australian writer and politician, argued in the very late nineteenth century that the ‘Aryan’ races remained destined to open up the world. However, their pioneering finished, they then risked being cast aside by the newly self-aware other races. This “pessimism and racial fear complemented the more dominant belief in racial superiority, justifying the claim that white privileges had to be actively defended.”⁸⁶ These individual trends reached a particular coherence in the speeches given by John Adam Cramb in London during the Boer War. Even as the British Empire passed from full daylight into dusk through that conflict, Cramb maintained that the state is the ““embodiment in living immaterial substance of the creative purpose of the race, of the individual and ultimately of the Divine.’ From this it was but a short step to pronounce that imperialism ‘is patriotism transfigured by a light from the aspirations of universal humanity...in a race dowered with the genius for empire. Imperialism is the supreme, crowning form, which in this process of evolution it attains.”⁸⁷ Such a prevailing ideology in the imperialist heartland perfectly justifies the actions of one’s agents in the metropolitan hinterlands, no matter how horrific. After all, the imperialist agents were not really culpable themselves. They were simply agents of fate or, better yet, of science.

Pith Helmets, Gatling Guns; Microphones and Cameras: Race as a ‘Role

Sign⁸⁸

There remain a number of different sociological models for understanding situations of individual interaction marked by racial difference. These systems shed particular light upon the European colonial/imperial experience of Africa and the means by which a racist ideology was

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 46.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 47.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

perpetuated and then maintained by the imperial elites ordained to actually interact with the subject 'Other.'⁸⁹ It remains important to reassert that, for the most part, the European and American experience of Africa was almost entirely mediated by the reports of a small number of these select agents. Indeed, for the purpose of later investigation (Part Two) one will discover that, through the contemporary mass media system of reporting Africa, the patterns themselves have not drastically changed. Instead of wearing pith helmets and khaki fatigues, however, our current imperial agents sport microphones, cameras and satellite linkups.

Banton suggests that race be considered a "role sign" in understanding interactions marked by racial difference. He elaborates: "When racial differences are used as a way of dividing up a population and different sets of rights and obligations (roles) are ascribed to the divisions, then these outward differences serve as signs telling others the sorts of privileges and facilities to which the person in question is conventionally entitled."⁹⁰ However, "race is a role sign only in multiracial societies or in situations of racial contact in which the expectations of behaviour have crystallized into patterns of some sort."⁹¹ He then goes on to lay out six basic models, or orders, of how such interactions may occur. For the purpose of understanding imperial and neo-imperialist relations, two models in particular stand out.

Black-white relations in Africa prior to World War II and the independence movement (and even later in 'settler societies' like South Africa and Rhodesia) were primarily marked by a model of either "domination" or "paternalism." Domination describes a situation "in which members of the two categories meet [and] are not acquainted with one another; they therefore

⁹⁰ Ibid., 57.

⁹¹ This assertion depends heavily upon the use of George C. Homans' concept of social behaviour as a 'transaction' (1961). "The transactional model sees interaction between persons as an exchange of goods, material and non-material, and assumes that every actor will seek to maximize his net advantages. People continue as parties to a relation only so long as they thin it preferable to such alternative courses as they can conceive. They may be unaware of the alternatives or they may be coerced into submission; they may be willing to continue an established relation for a while, even though the benefits it brings them do not equal the trouble it entails, because in the long run it seems likely to be to their advantage. What is one man's gain is not necessarily another's loss, for many social relations resemble an exchange of goods or services advantageous to both parties." It hardly remains necessary, however, to note that colonial and imperial relations nevertheless remained decidedly more one-sided than the mean or ideal situation described here. Ibid., 58, 67.

respond to each other not as individuals, but as representatives of a category... Whatever their personal qualities, individuals are ascribed to one or the other category, and those in the lower are prevented from claiming the privileges of those in the upper category.”⁹² A paternalist order, on the other hand, describes a special form of institutionalized contact depending, unlike domination, upon maintaining the distinctiveness of the interacting societies... In the pure form of paternalism, the only representatives of the metropolitan society who have dealings with the indigenous society are approved agents responsible for their actions to authorities in the homeland.”⁹³ However, Banton continues, “whether contact gives way to domination or paternalism depends upon the extent to which those who build up relations with the indigenous people can operate as an independent political power. In a paternalist order it is probable that the power of the metropolitan country will be weakened after a time, and that this will be reflected in the changes in the skills of the personnel that country sends out and in the definition of their roles.”⁹⁴ This paternalist order particularly matches the prevailing form of contact between Europe (and later, America) and Africa, with a small ‘colonial’ society mediating between the indigenous African population and the metropolitan population back ‘home.’ Imperialism is, at heart, an intellectual program that is maintained at home and abroad by such elites.⁹⁵

These models, however, describe interactions on a broad, social level. When one looks closer, at the point of individual contact, one must revert to slightly more subtle readings (though still centered in a structural understanding).⁹⁶ Banton offers an examination of the concept of stereotype as one means of reading these interactions. One can interpret the term *stereotype* in

⁹² What’s more, “when race relations show a pattern of domination, the two categories are differentiated by other attributes than those of race: income, education, religion, norms of family relations, etc. Differentiation by these means complicates the picture, but, as will be shown later, is often essential to it, for it makes the gap between the categories greater and more difficult to bridge.” Ibid., 71.

⁹³ Ibid., 72.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 74.

⁹⁵ This established, one is then left with important political questions about the mass media and current reporting.

⁹⁶ Indeed, “the degree of significance ascribed to any given physical distinction depends upon the structure of the society in question and how it brings particular categories of people into opposition or competition.” Ibid., 262.

two senses: as “a tendency for a given belief to be widespread in a society; and to denote a tendency for a belief to be oversimplified in context and unresponsive to the objective facts.”⁹⁷ Another important factor remains that of *social distance*, the measure between people “of their influence over one another as expressed in the relative intimacy of their relations.”⁹⁸ Robert E. Park, in his Introduction to the Science of Sociology (1921), noted in particular that the concept of social ritual, and the roles one plays in said rituals, play an important factor in controlling this distance. What’s more, “social distance is determined by a combination of individual sentiment and shared norms about what constitutes proper behaviour in a particular society.”⁹⁹ In this manner, colonial agents were doubly prone to treat blacks as inferior beings, both with regard to their respective social positions as well as the prevailing European racist ideology. They then returned to Europe, reporting experiences in Africa in large part pre-determined by these two powerful factors.

These factors are generally strong enough to override contrary individual sentiment. Banton notes a number of studies in which people reacted in negative ways to an individual of a different race in a given ‘ritualized’ situation, even while purporting to express no hostility toward the group in question in other situations. “Interracial behavior,” Banton describes, “may be determined by the roles the parties are playing rather than by their sentiments as individuals.”¹⁰⁰ He then goes on to propose three cases in which the ‘ego’ (for our purposes, the agent/reporter in question) will maintain the gap in social distance, individual sentiment notwithstanding. Essentially, the ego will maintain greater social distance:

- i. the more alter [ie, the African] is thought to be unaware of the norms governing social relations in ego’s group

⁹⁷ Ibid., 299-300.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 306.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 320.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 326.

- ii. the more the relationship in question is regulated by implicit modes of communication
- iii. the weaker the sanctions are for bringing the stranger into line if he behaves inappropriately¹⁰¹

All three possibilities governed the relations between colonial agent and African in the pre-independence era. The especially remarkable point remains the extent to which they continue to govern contemporary reporting of a very different African continent for a quite different metropolitan audience.

The American Rediscovery of Africa

To properly investigate Americans' understanding of Africa (particularly with respect to the authors of its prevailing discourses, white America), it remains important first to consider the colonial/imperial European ideological heritage that was largely imported intact. In fact, its message of black inferiority perhaps resonated even stronger on the western side of the Atlantic, given the country's deep historical involvement in and commitment to the slave trade. At the same time, Americans in the mid to late nineteenth century began to venture abroad in increasingly larger scope and numbers. As a result, America experienced a twofold understanding of Africa: one tied to slavery and the unavoidable presence of Africans in American life, and another rooted in America's economic and, later, political interests in the continent itself. Both experiences participated in the creation of a modified discourse which denied Africans the possibility of independence of thought or action which, in turn, existed in conversation with a similar story of racial inferiority historically tied to American domestic politics.

Newsom offers a concise summation of the slave trade which, more than any other factor, inalterably linked the histories of Africa and the Americas. "From the fifteenth to the early nineteenth centuries," he writes, "Europeans shipped an estimate 12 million black slaves from

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 333.

Africa to America...About 6 percent went to North America...Traders obtained slaves in large measure directly from African rulers, who provided criminals, domestic slaves, victims of raid...or prisoners of war.”¹⁰² This African culpability notwithstanding, he goes on to note that:

The slave trade forever weakened major African political and social structures...The disintegration of these societies opened the way for European colonization. Colonization proceeded in a pattern. A European nation would open a trading post, often by agreement with a local ruler. As the demands for slaves increased, the European traders advanced more and more inland. Ultimately the traders’ demands for protection led to colonization by a European power. Ironically, efforts to stop slavery as well as slavery itself hastened the European intervention. Missionaries and antislavery elements came; they too demanded the help and protection of their governments.¹⁰³

In addition to receiving slaves and the European discourse that justified their bondage in the New World, America participated strongly in the final phase Newsom described: missionary work and anti-slavery activity. It is in the reports of these entrepreneurial, decidedly American imperialists (as well as the occasional prospecting businessman) that one can witness the adoption, adaptation and continuation of the European cultural formula for reporting Africa. One may also begin to compare in one’s mind these mid to late nineteenth century American reporters with their current fin-de-siècle compatriots.

The case of Africans in America undoubtedly remains the better documented and more initially compelling side of relations between the United States and Africa. “When the adventurous and ambitious traders from Holland deposited their cargo of twenty African slaves on the shores of Jamestown, Virginia in 1619,” Michael McCarthy writes, “a relationship of unforeseen significance...was dramatically established.”¹⁰⁴ For several centuries from that period, the defining intellectual discourse of the time originated in the original metropole. Thus, Americans adopted the burgeoning racist ideology of pre, present and post-Enlightenment Europe. This played quite well in the States, particularly in the American South (though it certainly maintained at the very least its “underground existence” elsewhere”). Indeed, this

¹⁰² Newsom, 20.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ McCarthy, 19.

discourse became fully rooted Southern culture (as any basic reading of Southern history and literature, or cultural conceits like black minstrelsy and ‘Jim Crow’, demonstrate). Thus, “the case against black people in America was advanced by showing that their African ancestors had failed to develop a fully civilized way of life.”¹⁰⁵ What’s more, “since black people were seen as threats to order and stability, they needed to be controlled, studied and made more predictable. The threat of race war and insurrection was never really distant. A sense of cultural inferiority subordinated blacks to whites, and skin colour, as a permanent sign of origin, precluded social equality.”¹⁰⁶ Arguments used eventually to justify European imperialism just as easily validated American slavery and discrimination. It is a testament to the subtle power of the ideas that they moved so straightforwardly from one context to another.

Indeed, one needed only to make the smallest of intellectual leaps to see that Americans, too, had a scientifically/divine right to undertake their own economic missions in Africa as well. Comparing the mutability of these ideas to the divergent European and American political interests in the continent, McCarthy argues that “although there was no actual annexation of territory in Africa by Americans, the argument provided a racist rationale for intervention in the affairs of African peoples. Americans, in good conscience, could take up the ‘white man’s burden’ of uplifting the inferior peoples of the world, a proposition that supported the missionary and commercial spirit of the time.”¹⁰⁷ Per usual, however, the American businessman’s understanding of Africa says more about America than about the actual conditions on the continent. Economic ‘missionaries’ in particular adopted the ‘Romantic vision’ of Africa; indeed they “defined the continent intellectually as an undeveloped wilderness of great potential

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 27.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 27-8.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 29.

wealth that needed to be exploited commercially by the West.”¹⁰⁸ One example above all shines in its display of this sort of obtuseness. Samuel P. Verner traveled to Africa in the late nineteenth century seeking commercial opportunity. He predicted that:

At Victoria Falls, there will be another Buffalo; near the southern end of Tanganika will be a city as large as Detroit, one third of whose inhabitants will be whites. Stanleyville, the present metropolis of the center of the Congo, will be a black St. Louis. On the shores of Lake Albert, there will be an African Cleveland. Khartoum will rival Memphis; and Cairo and Alexandria together will have the present population of New York. Somewhere in the highlands of Abyssinia, on the Blue Nile, there will have arisen the Black Pittsburg; a black New Orleans, somewhere on the Lower Niger, will be shipping palm oil to its prototype across Atlantic.

“Verner’s vision of Africa,” McCarthy elaborates, “was typically American: the continent was prized not for what it presently was but for what it might eventually be.”¹⁰⁹ The exploitation of these ‘noble savages’ might very well have become the next proof of America’s manifest destiny.

Spiritual missionaries, too, took on the ‘white man’s burden’ but also brought with them a fair deal of the more overtly racist prevailing ideas of the time as well. On the one hand, like the businessmen and adventurers who often accompanied them on their crusades, “Africa appeared as an exciting alternative to civilization.”¹¹⁰ Some Northern missionaries may have even seen proselytizing in Africa as a means of spiritual reparation, a manner of alleviating accountability for the situations of blacks back at home.¹¹¹ McCarthy notes the popularity of missionary accounts by writers like Horace Bushnell and Josiah Strong (who argued that “the nonwhite races were varieties of a species that was in a relatively primitive stage of evolution”) to demonstrate the power that circulating European theories (such as the interpretation of Darwin’s) had upon their activities.¹¹² Such accounts focused upon the inherent inferiority and ‘savagery’ of African cultural practices, particularly sexual relations and religion. William R.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 99.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 23.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 25.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 100.

¹¹² Ibid., 103.

Hotchkiss, for example, traveled to West Central Africa in the 1890's with the Society of Friends and then returned in 1901 to publish Sketches from the Dark Continent. Comparing Africa to a “great giant that had fallen asleep”, he wrote that:

Lying, stealing, polygamy, slavery and promiscuous living have the countenance and approbation of Pagan religion. Drunkenness, gluttony, every form of licentious debauchery, and even murder are features of the festivals of Pagan religion. The unspeakable, unthinkable horrors of witchcraft, human sacrifice, burial alive and cannibalism are inextricably intertwined with Pagan religion. The reflex influence is inevitably a callousness to suffering and a fiendish gloating in brutalities.¹¹³

Of course, one could just as easily accuse Hotchkiss of a ‘callous’ disregard for the variety of “Pagan religion” on the continent, or of a ‘fiendish’ misrepresentation of his own theological rivals. On a more basic level, however, one might also note that “the need for continuing financial support also made it imperative to evoke constantly the moral degradation of the heathen African through extensive descriptions of subjects prized by missionaries for their power to excite: cannibalism, nudity and the status of women in Africa.”¹¹⁴ White missionaries¹¹⁵, then, provide the first example of American reporters in Africa given more to the purported ‘confirmation’ of racist ideology than a genuine, factual reporting of the continent.

These reports in turn reinforced the popular thoughts of a wild, savage and inherently inferior African other. One finds in numerous secondary sources evidence of the power these ideas held over the American imagination; they appear from geography texts and travel books to pieces of children’s literature! In his 1874 Guyot’s Grammar-School Geography, esteemed Princeton writer Arnold Guyot suggested to generations of American schoolchildren that “Africans were incapable of establishing the effective controls to regulate the affairs of their cities and governments.”¹¹⁶ Alexis E. Frye, similarly, offered in his Elements of Geography that “parts of the African countryside at night [were] dark, foreboding and inhabited by any number

¹¹³ Ibid., 105.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 107.

¹¹⁵ In a rather interesting side note, it turns out that black missionaries in Africa generally appeared to share in the “pejorative feelings” of their white counterparts.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 126.

of dangerous animals. Because it was so overrun by wild creatures, the environment caused Africans to behave unusually.”¹¹⁷ In travelogues, too, one saw the proliferation of this discourse. ...”Writing in the *North American Review*... Gilbert Haven pointed out that even by 1877 Africa had entered ‘the realm of romance’ and was rapidly becoming the ‘central fascination’ of a diverse group of people, including explorers, adventurers and scholars.” McCarthy continues, “It was, as Haven claimed, a land that ‘draws all eyes and hearts to its majestic mysteries,’ with the result that ‘books of travel, voluminous and costly, are pouring constantly from the presses of Europe and America.’”¹¹⁸ Other writers, such as Barnard Taylor, followed the exploits of particular white ‘adventures’, like Stanley, across the continent, thereby further encouraging the proliferation of reports purportedly ‘proving’ the exact misconceptions with which such drifters came. One recalls Said’s earlier discussion of the need for every culture to create its own ‘Other’; the African appears to serve in this role for Americans.¹¹⁹ This American reporting of Africa established yet another tautological circle by which Americans spoke to other Americans, reassuring them that their conceptions about the African remained validated by actual ‘experience.’ Unfortunately (and in the tradition of many a white ‘explorer/adventurer’), most failed to actually speak with Africans themselves.¹²⁰

That said, there nevertheless existed a strong (if by and large unnoticed in its own time) tradition of black American reporting of Africa as well. The fact that such reports remained wildly divergent in their tone and conclusions no doubt further damaged their wider credibility

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 127.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 131.

¹¹⁹ Indeed, in assessing American cultural values, Arsenberg and Niehoff assert that “action in all situations is fostered by such judgements. They assign an event or situation to a category believed high in value and thus a basis for positive action; or to one low in value and a basis for rejection, avoidance or other negative action. Twofold judgements are the rule in American and Western life: moral-immoral, legal-illegal, right-wrong, success-failure, clean-dirty, modern-outmoded, civilized-primitive, developed-underdeveloped, practical-impractical, introvert-extrovert, secular-religious, Christian-pagan.” One might add, in our context of an evolving, institutional racism: ‘white-black.’ Arsenberg, Conrad M. and Arthur H. Niehoff. *Introducing Social Change*. Chicago, IL: Aldine Publishing Company, 1964.

¹²⁰ Scholars like James W. Fernandez have gone to great lengths to explore how this absence of an ‘emic voice’ with regard to European interaction with Africans contributed to the imperial project. See, for example, Fernandez, James W. “In search of meaningful methods.” *Handbook of Methods in Cultural Anthropology*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1998.

(aside from the obvious fact of their authors' skin colour). For example, the *Freeman, An Illustrated Colored Newspaper* of Indianapolis provided a steady stream of negative black commentary on Africa at the turn of the century. Indeed, "it presented excerpts from the writings of famous explorers just as retailers did; it printed eyewitness accounts from the less celebrated who had been to Africa and returned; and it offered its readers biting attempts at humour."¹²¹ At the same time, other writers attempted to rescue African history and achievement from the rigid mold in which they were cast. William Wells Brown, in *The Rising Son; or the Antecedents and Advancements of the Coloured Race*, "compared the creative abilities of Africans 'with the best workmanship of English and American manufacturers.'" At the same time, thinkers like George Washington Williams, and particularly W.E.B. DuBois, sought to correct nothing less than the entire contemporary image of the African and her civilization.¹²² Unfortunately, their voices remained generally lost (especially in their contemporary context) in the face of initially contradictory black reporting and a dominant racist ideology prevalent in white American culture.¹²³

Conclusion

An intellectual history of the racist reading of Africa thus demonstrates the theoretical power of the connection between culture and politics, as well as the manner in which such linkages can become self-fulfilling insights. While the exact causal relationship remains almost inextricably complex (as prejudice gave way to racism), a racist ideology both explains early European contact with Africa as well as justifying later imperial projects on the continent. Sven

¹²¹ Ibid., 135.

¹²² Ibid., 139-40.

¹²³ This should not, however, be interpreted as suggesting a monolithic white culture. Indeed, scholars like Melville B. Herskovits have gone to great lengths to demonstrate the extent to which white culture contains remnants of uniquely 'African' culture. At the same time, especially in a contemporary context in which the political (and to a much lesser extent, social and economic) distinctions between black and white resonate with comparatively lesser force, one could argue that it no longer remains appropriate in the present day to speak of 'white' and 'black' American culture. That debate notwithstanding, the history of black *and* white reporting of Africa suggests that elements of the racist ideology linger for both communities. For further investigation, consult Holloway, Joseph E. *Africanisms in American Culture*. Joseph Holloway, ed. Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991, particularly the chapter by John Edward Phillips entitled "The African Heritage of White America."

Lindqvist, in considering Hannah Arendt's On the Origins of Totalitarianism (1951) suggests that "imperialism necessitated racism as the only possible excuse for its deeds. 'Lying under anybody's nose were many of the elements which gathered together could create a totalitarian government on the basis of racism.'"¹²⁴ Americans, as inheritors to this ideology, reinterpreted in their own domestically conflicted, yet economically and spiritually confident manner. Of course it turns out that, even within the context of their one-sided conversation, they may not have had the facts quite right. American missionaries, McCarthy writes, "confronted the outside world with a self-image borne of confidence in their country's identity...It was a conception not so much of what America actually was but of what they thought it to be: a living model of spiritual enlightenment for the rest of the world to emulate."¹²⁵

Thus through this brief examination of white perceptions of the black 'other', one sees how a concept born of ignorance and social distance developed into a self-fulfilling manner of representing a less-enfranchised subject to one's own in-group. When Europeans, and then Americans, spoke of Africa, they spoke to whites (as demonstrated in the nature of their misconceptions) about themselves. Africa was merely the subject of their conversations; it had little if nothing to do with the actual manner of their reporting. As Paul Bohannan and Philip Curtin wrote in Africa and Africans: "that Africa is a 'Dark Continent' is a subject-object confusion...that Africa is 'savage' is actually the result of a need to justify a number of commercial, philosophical and religious movements which were begun both in Europe and America."¹²⁶ Nevertheless, these myths, due in large part to their "underground existence" have a strange yet persistent way of resurfacing in current American reporting of the continent.

¹²⁴ Lindqvist, ix.

¹²⁵ McCarthy, 119.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 150.

Part Two:

‘Dr. Livingstone, I Presume?’: Reporting as Neo-imperial Activity

The basic colonial tradition of reporting Africa appears to have outlived its original authors, if not their intentions as well. Indeed, the basic picture of Africa elaborated in the colonial/imperial period, that of a wild, ‘savage’, overgrown continent rife with strangely exotic, though ‘horrible’ and clearly inferior, natives and customs, continues to resonate in the popular American imagination today. The media play a central role in perpetuating and reinforcing these stereotypes. Beverly Hawk, writing in her introduction to *Africa’s Media Image*, notes that Americans receive these ideas through many of the sources discussed in Part One, including textbooks, missionaries and the entertainment industry. However, “among these sources, the media hold special importance, for it is to the media that individuals look to be informed. The media hold responsibility for the interpretation of the events they report, and their interpretations, in turn, define the understanding of events by readers and viewers... There are no such things as facts without interpretation.”¹²⁷ Mass media thus has tremendous power over the American imagination. Todd Gitlin, writing on the international mass media, notes that “they name the world’s parts, they certify reality *as* reality... To put it simply: the mass media have become the core system for the distribution of ideology. That is to say, every day, directly or indirectly, by statement and omission, in pictures and in words... the mass media produce fields of definition and association, symbol and rhetoric, through which ideology becomes manifest and

¹²⁷ Hawk, Beverly G. “Introduction: Metaphors of African Coverage.” *Africa’s Media Image*. New York: Praeger, 1992. 3.

concrete.”¹²⁸ Any attempt to understand the means by which the media acquire, maintain and perpetuate this power must again turn to a number of fields, including cultural studies, sociology and political economy.¹²⁹ One must understand how the media operate at home and abroad in order to begin to question the social and political role they play with regard to a dominant racist ideology. Indeed, “inserting texts into the system of culture within which they are produced and distributed can help elucidate features and effects of the texts that textual analysis alone might miss or downplay.”¹³⁰ This established, one can then begin to analyze the manner in which the media’s witting or unwitting use of the dominant ideology thus outlined, combined with the media’s economic, commercial, political and technical position, work together to produce images of Africa reflecting the old colonial and imperial themes.

A primary consideration remains the manner in which dominant ideologies enter the media discourse on Africa. Certainly most, if not all, American reporters dealing with Africa do not believe that they are participating in perpetuating racist pictures and ideas. Yet, broadly speaking, the relationship exists (albeit in varying degrees of complexity and subtlety.) Stuart Hall, a prominent British scholar of media studies, offers one means of accessing and then deconstructing media discourse in his article “Encoding/Decoding.” Initially, one notes that “reality exists outside language, but it is constantly mediated by and through language: and what we can know and say has to be produced in and through discourse. Discursive ‘knowledge’,” then, “is the product not of the transparent representation of the ‘real’ in language but of the articulation of language on real relations and conditions.”¹³¹ In this vein, he states that our language remains governed by a number of accepted, constructed and (often) unconscious

¹²⁸ Ibid., 5-6.

¹²⁹ “Political economy highlights that capitalist societies are organized according to a dominant mode of production that structures institutions and practices according to the logic of commodification and capital accumulation.” Kellner, Douglas M. and Meenakshi Gigi Durham. “Adventures in Media and Cultural Studies: Introducing the KeyWorks.” *Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks*. Meenakshi Gigi Durhman and Douglas M. Kellner, eds. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd. 2001. 18.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 19.

¹³¹ Hall, 169.

‘codes.’ “Certain codes may, of course, be so widely distributed in a specific language community or culture, and be learned at so early an age that they appear,” he argues, “not to be constructed – the effect of an articulation between sign and referent – but to be ‘naturally’ given.”¹³² However, “this does not mean that no codes have intervened; rather that the codes have been profoundly *naturalized*. The operation of naturalized codes reveals not the transparency and ‘naturalness’ of language but the depth, the habituation and the near-universality of the codes in use.”¹³³ For the purposes of this investigation the different images and metaphors used to describe Africa and the African, “wild”, “barbaric”, “ungovernable” (or, indeed, any undue reference to Conrad) may be considered naturalized codes within the prevailing racist ideology.

Hall essentially furthered the insights of scholars like Gramsci in deconstructing media discourse. He developed his own definition of the ‘hegemonic viewpoint’ which “defines within its terms the society or culture...it carries with it the stamp of legitimacy – it appears coterminous with what is ‘natural’, ‘inevitable’, ‘taken for granted.’”¹³⁴ Reacting to the presence of this hegemonic viewpoint in the media consumer, he then proposes three basic means of reading a media report. One could take the *dominant-hegemonic position*, a stance which “decodes the message in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded... We might say that [this] viewer is operating *inside the dominant code*.”¹³⁵ A slightly more discriminating individual might yet take the *negotiated position*. This perspective in turn “acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make the grand significations (abstract) while, at a more restricted, situational level, it makes its own ground rules – it operates with exceptions to

¹³²Ibid., 170.

¹³³Ibid.

¹³⁴Ibid., 175.

¹³⁵Ibid., 174.

the rule.”¹³⁶ A consumer adequately versed in an understanding, and subsequent rejection, of the hegemonic position elaborated before her may instead decide to operate through an *oppositional code*. “One of the most significant political moments,” Hall offers, “is the point when events which are normally signified and decoded in a negotiated way begin to be given an oppositional reading. Here the ‘politics of signification’- the struggle in discourse – is joined.”¹³⁷ It is the expressed goal of this investigation to operate from this oppositional position, resisting the hegemonic racist position on Africa by exploring its operation in the media more fully.

This chapter will begin by surveying the creation and functioning of media discourse in three parts. The first section explores how television, in particular, participates in the creation and maintenance of media authority. This occurs both through the medium’s framing function, as well as its wholly pervasive sociological position in contemporary American life. The next segment carefully outlines Noam Chomsky’s influential ‘propaganda model’ of the mass media. Here the discussion focuses upon the role the media play in distributing an ideology dictated by the dominant socioeconomic and political interests, which now own and control the system. The third section then turns the investigation to the actual role of American reporters in Africa. This broad survey examines the means by which racist ideology (‘mythologies’ of Africa), business and political concerns and basic infrastructural barriers work to produce and reproduce distorted images of the continent. The chapter concludes with two case studies, American reporting of the conflicts in Liberia and Rwanda, as recent examples of the trend which this paper suggests to pervade American reporting of Africa. Though brief, they may be considered invitations to further research on those and similar subjects (e.g., Angola, Ethiopia/Eritrea, Algeria, South

¹³⁶Ibid., 175.

¹³⁷Ibid., 175-6.

Africa, Zimbabwe, etc.) “The confusing barrage” of disjointed and distorted images coming out of Africa have, however, “a common theme: Africa is a failure and needs our help.”¹³⁸

Imperialism! As Seen on T.V!: Analyzing Media Authority

Nick Couldry, in his work The Place of Media Power, analyses questions with regard to the source and reproduction of media authority. One of his chief finds remains the idea that much of the media’s authority appears to stem from their separation from the consuming public, including (particularly in terms of foreign reporting) physical distance. This should not come as a great surprise if one recalls the discussion in the previous chapter of colonial officials perpetuating their dominant or paternalist orders via the social distance perceived both between themselves, the natives and the metropolitan audience at home. He notes that there remains a hidden, seemingly natural character to media power. (Hall’s three positions of deconstructive analysis then become quite convenient.) However, his overwhelming concern remains with the “*asymmetrical* connection they [the media] establish between different sites of discourse: between public places of media production and private sites of reception. Seen in this light, contemporary media may have important features in common with earlier discursive hierarchies such as the medieval Catholic church.”¹³⁹ They also share with these hierarchies a great deal of power, the fundamental form of which “is the power to define, allocate and display this resource.”¹⁴⁰ With reference to his chosen medium of television, Couldry highlights the “paradoxical relationship between its familiarity (its inescapable ordinariness) and its pervasive cultural and social significance. It is the former that makes the latter’s effects so hard to

¹³⁸ Hawk, 7.

¹³⁹ Couldry, Nick. The Place of Media Power: Pilgrims and Witnesses of the Media Age. London: Routledge, 2000. 6-7.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

analyze... The institution of television... connects our 'mundane' everyday world to a wider world."¹⁴¹ It does so in a rather complex fashion, however.

There thus exists a divide between the 'media world' and the 'ordinary world.'¹⁴² Television maintains a "permanent position as the frame through which private worlds face the social."¹⁴³ Given the media's 'colonization of everyday life' (a phrase Couldry attributes to John Corner) this pattern occurs in nearly all the ways that an individual learns of the world, short of direct personal experience. Yet, the difference between these two worlds remains wholly constructed. (Though "there is a real difference in terms of ability to make yourself heard and have your account of social reality accepted.")¹⁴⁴ "By allowing us to see into distant situations and obtain information previously only available face-to-face," Couldry argues, "television collapses what were previously segregated sets of encounters... into translocal mediated 'situations.'"¹⁴⁵ With reference to the 'inevitable complexity' of the media's impact on social space, Couldry adds that "in fact, even if we consider the material aspects of special organization, they involve the coordination not just of presences but also of *absences*."¹⁴⁶ This concept has particular resonance in relation to American reporting of Africa, often an unfortunate study in the absence of informed presentation or, indeed, of presentation at all. In sum, "the media's symbolic authority depends, in part, on their framing function, and this in turn depends on the fact that they can address an audience formed across the whole social range."¹⁴⁷ As the delineators of the 'reality' of distant lands, the American media thus have great power. It is unfortunately an authority commonly used to less-than-desirable ends.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 12.

¹⁴² Couldry approaches television with reference to Emile Durkheim's model of the 'totemic object', a suggestion that, for our purposes, adds unnecessary complexity to an already multifarious problem.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 14.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 20.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 42.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 24.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 42.

Gold, Glory and...General Electric

Most self-respecting members of the American mass media would likely not refer to or consider themselves propagandists (at least, primarily.) However, this remains the lens through which activist and intellectual Noam Chomsky considers their role, to rather devastating effect. Outlining his argument, Chomsky begins “A Propaganda Model” by asserting that “the mass media serve as a system for communicating messages and symbols to the general populace. It is their function to amuse and...inform, and to inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs and codes of behaviour that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society. In a world of concentrated wealth and major conflicts of class interest,” Chomsky believes, “to fulfill this role requires systematic propaganda.”¹⁴⁸ But wait, an individual reporter might counter. “An unsatisfactory quality,” such a reporter could state (echoing the initial objection), “of the term ‘the media’ as a term is that ‘media’ is a plural noun, which in this connotation cannot be used in the singular.”¹⁴⁹ However, while Chomsky outlines a model considering ‘the media’ in the plural usage, one finds later that its concerns nevertheless apply to individual instances of reporting as well.

This propaganda model of the media provides useful insight into the manner in which socioeconomic and political power are translated, through the lens of the media, into the distribution and bolstering of a dominant ideology. It “traces the routes by which money and power are able to filter out the news fit to print, marginalize dissent, and allow the government and dominant private interests to get their messages across to the public.”¹⁵⁰ The model focuses upon five main *filters* by which the institutionalized media ‘decide’ what is news. “The raw

¹⁴⁸ Chomsky, Noam and Edward Herman. “A Propaganda Model.” Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks. Meenakshi Gigi Durhman and Douglas M. Kellner, eds. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd. 2001. 280.

¹⁴⁹ Allen, Tim. “Perceiving Contemporary Wars.” The Media of Conflict: War Reporting and Representations of Ethnic Violence. New York: St. Martin’s Press, Inc, 1999. 36.

¹⁵⁰Chomsky, 280.

material of news must pass through successive filters,” Chomsky offers, “leaving only the cleansed residue fit to print. They [the media] fix the premises of discourse and interpretation, and the definition of what is newsworthy in the first place, and they explain the basis and operations of what amount to propaganda campaigns.”¹⁵¹ These five filters include: (1) the size, ownership and profit orientation of the media, (2) advertising, (3) sourcing, (4) flak (criticism) and (5) anti-communist ideology. Chomsky has, in short, adapted the traditional media studies ‘gatekeeper’ model of the media to a Gramscian agenda. These five filters in turn have grave implications for American reporting of Africa.

The first and certainly most apparent filter today remains the size, ownership and profit orientation of today’s corporate media. This filter has a long history in capitalist societies of mediating and censoring popular dissent. As far back as the early nineteenth century, conservative British leaders discovered that the popular press could be effectively smothered through a strict adherence to the market mechanism.¹⁵² The rise of corporate media conglomerates in the early 1980’s (fueled by a rush of speculative deregulation) accompanied a rightward turn in mass media discourse. Full integration into the American market “has encouraged the entry of speculators and increased the pressure and temptation to focus more intensively on profitability.”¹⁵³ Thus one finds principal sources of popular American news consumption like ABC, NBC, CBS, CNN and Fox owned in turn by the Disney Corporation, General Electric, Westinghouse, AOL Time Warner and the Murdoch News Corp. empire. Chomsky cites G.E. as a particularly compelling example of the danger of this trend. G.E.

¹⁵¹Ibid., 281.

¹⁵² Chomsky notes that “the expansion of the free market was accompanied by an ‘industrialization of the press.’ The total cost of establishing a national weekly on a profitable basis in 1837 [in London] was under a thousand pounds, with a break-even circulation of 6,200 copies. By 1867, the estimated start-up cost of a new London daily was 50,000 pounds. The *Sunday Express*, launched in 1918, spent over two million pounds before it broke even with a circulation of over 250,000. Similar processes were at work in the United States, where the start-up cost of a new paper in New York City in 1851 was \$69,000; the public sale of the *St. Louis Democrat* in 1872 yielded \$456,000; and city newspapers were selling at from \$6 to \$18 million in the 1920’s.” Ibid., 282.

¹⁵³Ibid., 283.

remains, in his words, a “powerful company with an extensive international reach, deeply involved in the nuclear power business, and...important...in the arms industry. It is a highly centralized, deeply secretive organization with a vast stake in ‘political’ decisions.”¹⁵⁴ All of these factors generally combine to keep news at odds with a conservative, pro-American business message away from the consuming public.

Tied to the concept of the ‘business of news production’ remains the second filter: advertising. This, as the former, has a long-standing tradition of stifling dissent. Sir George Lewis, a Liberal British Chancellor of the Exchequer in the mid-nineteenth century “noted that the market would promote those papers ‘enjoying the preference of the advertising public.’”¹⁵⁵ This first meant that news outlets, in order to increase advertising revenue, would seek to expand their audience base. This, in and of itself, hardly remains reason for suspect (indeed, from the proper angle it could even be read as rather populist.) However, today “the mass media are interested in attracting audiences with buying power, not audiences per se; it is affluent audiences that spark advertiser interest today, as in the nineteenth century. The idea that the drive for large audiences makes the mass media ‘democratic’ thus suffers from the initial weakness that its political analogue is a voting system weighed by income!”¹⁵⁶ As a result, Chomsky argues, “advertisers will want, more generally, to avoid programs with serious complexities and disturbing controversies that interfere with the ‘buying mood.’”¹⁵⁷ This thus does not bode particularly well for insightful, properly contextualized stories about far-off Africa.

Closer to the ‘journalism’ side of the equation, a third filter remains sourcing. Sourcing refers to the individuals and institutions to whom reporters turn for their daily information and background. Traditionally, reporters attempt to ‘cultivate’ sources by establishing relationships

¹⁵⁴Ibid., 288.

¹⁵⁵Ibid., 289.

¹⁵⁶Ibid., 291.

¹⁵⁷Ibid., 292.

approximating trust through repeated meetings and at least consideration of the source's agenda. There remains an economic factor to this process as well, however. "The mass media are drawn into a symbiotic relationship with powerful sources of information by economic necessity and reciprocity of interest... They have daily news demands and imperative news schedules that they must meet," thus, "they cannot afford to have reporters and cameras at all places where important stories may break. Economics dictate they concentrate their resources where significant news often occurs."¹⁵⁸ Thus, news organizations establish 'beats' that reporters regularly 'work' for stories and information. Africa, where the costs of maintaining beat reporters remains considerably higher than, say, keeping them at the sources of 'official information' like Washington, D.C., therefore continues to suffer. What's more, corporations have found that one of the best means of foisting their own 'line' has been to co-opt the academics and 'experts' to whom reporters turn for supposedly independent, outside opinions by funding 'think-tanks' like the Georgetown Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) or Freedom House with the aim of reproducing appropriately conservative messages.

In order to maintain sources, "a newsworker will [tend to] recognize an official's claim to knowledge not merely as a claim, but as a credible, competent piece of knowledge. This amounts to a moral division of labour: officials have and give the facts; reporters merely get them."¹⁵⁹ Sensing this relinquishing of authority by reporters, "government and business-news promoters go to great lengths to make things easy for news organizations... provide... facilities in which to gather... advance copies of speeches, photo sessions, timing of pressers, etc."¹⁶⁰ As a result, the larger picture shows that "the large bureaucracies of the powerful *subsidize* the mass media, and gain special access by their contribution to reducing the media's costs of acquiring the raw

¹⁵⁸Ibid., 293.

¹⁵⁹Ibid.

¹⁶⁰Indeed, "only the corporate sector has the resources to produce public information and propaganda on the scale of the Pentagon and other government bodies." Ibid., 295.

materials of, and producing, the news.” Thus, in effect, Chomsky offers (in particularly biting terms), that “the citizenry pays to be propagandized in the interest of powerful groups such as military contractors and other sponsors of state terrorism.”¹⁶¹ One might question who actually maintains greater agency, a reporter or a source. The answer, according to this model, remains quite clear.¹⁶²

Perhaps slightly more apparent in its overtly censoring nature, Chomsky’s fourth filter remains what he terms “flak.” Flak, he states, “refers to negative response to a media statement or program.”¹⁶³ Flak can come in forms both direct (a president summoning a reporter to the White House for a verbal ‘dressing-down’) and indirect (politicians and corporate leaders denouncing the workings of the ‘liberal media’.) Tied to the observations noted earlier, Chomsky notes that Freedom House, for example (which has “long served as a virtual propaganda arm of the government and international right wing”), “has expended substantial resources in criticizing the media for insufficient sympathy with U.S. foreign policy ventures and excessively harsh criticism of U.S. client-states.”¹⁶⁴ He mentions how the foundation published Peter Braestrup’s Big Story, which essentially blamed the American media for the military defeat in Vietnam following the Tet offensive. He states outright that “the work is a travesty of scholarship, but what is more interesting is its premise; that the mass media not only should support any national venture abroad, but should do so with enthusiasm, such enterprises being by definition noble.”¹⁶⁵ Reflecting the power of the other filters, the media generally treat such ‘flak machines’ well, giving them and their accusations, including the apparently derisive label ‘liberal media’, more

¹⁶¹Ibid.

¹⁶²Indeed, traditional ‘repeat sources’ have become quite adept at managing the media, by “inundating the media with stories which serve sometimes to foist a particular line and frame on the media, and at other times to chase unwanted stories off the front page or out of the media altogether.” For example, at the height of World War I, the governmental Committee on Public Information discovered that “one of the best means of controlling news was flooding news channels with ‘facts,’ or what amounted to official information.” Ibid., 296-7

¹⁶³Ibid., 298.

¹⁶⁴Ibid., 300.

¹⁶⁵Ibid.

than adequate play. At this stage, however, one should begin to feel comfortable in dismissing the aforementioned label as somehow imprecise. If sourcing is the ‘carrot’ through which governments and corporations use to incite the media toward a conservative agenda, then flak remains the requisite ‘stick.’

While the fifth listed filter, anti-communist ideology, may now appear comparatively dated, if reworked as pro-capitalist, pro-free market, or more generally, neo-liberal ideology (in the classical economic sense), then one finds that this filter too continues to censor quite powerfully. In a key summary, quite applicable to the place of most Africa stories in contemporary mass media, Chomsky states that “messages from and about dissidents and weak, unorganized individuals and groups, domestic and foreign, are at an initial disadvantage in sourcing costs and credibility, and they often do not comport with the ideology or interests of the gatekeepers and other powerful parties that influence the filtering process.”¹⁶⁶ However, “if the government or corporate community and the media feel that a story is useful as well as dramatic, they focus on it intensively and use it to enlighten the public.”¹⁶⁷ There is a need, when promoting the hegemonic ideology, to find *appropriate victims* in the news, those whose plight underscores U.S. interests and dogma. Thus, the operators of the media filters use “definitions of worth based on utility [such that] the news stories about worthy and unworthy victims...differ in *quality*” as well as quantity.”¹⁶⁸ Neo-liberalism, of course, has strong intellectual and historical links with imperial racist ideology.

Thus one finds that Africa, in the light of these filters, plays poorly in the media five times over. Chomsky concludes his survey by stating that “a propaganda approach to media

¹⁶⁶Ibid., 302.

¹⁶⁷ For example, there was a substantial difference in the amount of coverage given to the Soviet 1983 downing of Korean jetliner KAL 007 and the similar Israeli 1973 shooting of a Libyan airliner over the Sinai. Indeed, the *New York Times* even stated in a follow-up editorial in 1973 that “no useful purpose is served by an acrimonious debate over the assignment of blame for the downing of a Libyan airliner in the Sinai peninsula last week.” Ibid., 303.

¹⁶⁸Ibid., 305.

coverage suggests a systematic and highly political dichotomization in news coverage based on serviceability to important domestic power interests.”¹⁶⁹ These same interests tend to promote, or at the very least passively accept, the dominant racist ideology outlined in Part One. Indeed, in many cases they remain the contemporary inheritors to the original authors of the discourse.

Stanley Looks in the Mirror: American Reporters Reflect on Africa

Given this theoretical background, one now turns to the thoughts and observations of actual reporters and media analysts with regard to American coverage of African stories. In keeping with the discourse outlined in Part One, Beverly Hawk, a media analyst concerned with Africa, writes that “ever since Stanley was sent in search of Livingstone, Africa has been seen as a wild adventure story and it continues to be perceived as such.”¹⁷⁰ Investigation suggests that the combination of the dominant racist ideology, business and political concerns (many of the filters listed above) and unique infrastructural barriers related to the work of foreign correspondents together produced a distorted view of the continent. One example of this trend is the turn to *ethnicity* as a new source of causation for conflict after the end of the Cold War.

The old imperial discourse on Africa, the ‘mythologies’ of darkness and barbarism, still continue to hold sway over the imaginations of reporters as well as their consuming public. “The American media,” Bosah Ebo writes, “still see African cultural traditions as uncivilized, and even barbaric, and have not explained the relevance of these traditions to American news consumers.”¹⁷¹ Hawk goes one further, stating that “like anthropologists and explorers of the colonial era, journalists are empowered to paint an image of Africa by listing its deficiencies with respect to Western norms.”¹⁷² Even the persistent use of the term ‘Africa’ and ‘African’ to describe all things relating to a vastly varied continent remains a colonial leftover, a “narrow,

¹⁶⁹Ibid.

¹⁷⁰Hawk, 5.

¹⁷¹Ebo, Bosah. “American Media and African Culture.” *Africa’s Media Image*. Beverly Hawk, ed. New York: Praeger, 1992. 21.

¹⁷² Indeed, “Western education teaches that Europeans, not Africans, are the motive force in African history.” Hawk. 9,4.

racial definition of Africa, structured by the language employed to tell the African story, [which] tells readers and viewers that the continent has a simple, homogenous culture.”¹⁷³ Indeed, “the enduring fascination with Africa and things African is revealed in the vocabulary of the metaphor. The vocabulary of the story reports ‘Africans’ in ‘tribal’ or ‘black-on-black’ violence...Implicit in this vocabulary is that African events do not follow any pattern recognizable to Western reason. It is ‘tribal conflict.’”¹⁷⁴ Hawk too sees a direct link between colonial discourse and current reporting. “Today’s reporting of ‘tribal violence’ quelled by the intervention of ‘security forces’,” she writes, “has its origins in the reporting of colonial fears of majority rule...In colonial times, this view of Africa justified intervention and cultural surgery....Today’s story is more likely to be couched in terms of economic degradation, and the envisioned cure is described as economic intervention.”¹⁷⁵ Metaphor and language, moreover, have tremendous power, especially in the hands of those entrusted with the authority to define and demarcate ‘reality’ beyond our everyday grasp. Hawk notes that:

Western beliefs about Africa have constructed an image of Africa as the repository of our greatest fears. *The colonial image has become the media image.* [emphasis added] Image becomes fact...In this way, the metaphors used to communicate the story interpret that story for the reader and provide the value judgments that fuel subsequent political action...They were chosen because they correspond to notions about Africa already existent in the minds of Westerners.¹⁷⁶

Thus, it remains but a small leap to state that, with regard to Africa, “the news is not a flow of information from the South to the North at all but a flow of information from the North to the North.”¹⁷⁷ In other words, when reporting Africa, Stanley and all of his American reporter progeny since have been really talking to Americans about Americans, about our shared racist discourse and heritage.

¹⁷³Ibid., 8.

¹⁷⁴“No one calls the violence in Northern Ireland white-on-white violence, or tribal bloodshed.” Ibid., 7-8.

¹⁷⁵Ibid., 7, 9.

¹⁷⁶Ibid., 13.

¹⁷⁷Ibid.

As Chomsky predicted, commercial and economic considerations limit and filter American stories about Africa. The stories that do emerge often lack “needed contextual information about Africa [because they are] limited by commercial and financial considerations of editors, the personal opinions of editors and correspondents, and press restrictions of host governments.”¹⁷⁸ In the world capitalist system, information remains a commodity that is produced and distributed. Therefore, Ebo notes, “a major implication of the market concept of news is that American correspondents in Africa look for news stories that are easy and convenient to gather. As a result, these correspondents are readily attracted to exceptional and aberrant news stories. As one correspondent notes: ‘The Western taste for the sensational compounds ignorance.’”¹⁷⁹ Tellingly, the “American media are not interested in meaningful development stories about Africa because they are mundane and commercially unattractive...African news [in short] does not generate attractive revenues.”¹⁸⁰ As Jim Hoagland, a two-time Pulitzer Prize-winning foreign correspondent and editor with the *Washington Post* once stated, Africa “is becoming increasingly irrelevant economically to the rest of the world.”¹⁸¹

Political considerations, too, act to limit and distort stories. Quite bluntly, Ebo asserts that “the American media give superficial coverage to Africa because Africa is not considered an important player in global politics.”¹⁸² Paradoxically, “there is general agreement among editors and producers – as well as reporters – that if African issues were regarded as important for US policy considerations, they would cease to be seen by the news media as fringe concerns, outside

¹⁷⁸Ibid., 4.

¹⁷⁹Ebo, 16.

¹⁸⁰A point to which this paper will return in the concluding remarks. Ibid., 17.

¹⁸¹Hultman, Tamil. “Dateline Africa: Journalists Assess Africa Coverage.” *Africa’s Media Image*. Beverly Hawk, ed. New York: Praeger, 1992. 228.

¹⁸²Ebo, 17.

the mainstream. But...it is often media attention that sparks policy debates.”¹⁸³ There may, however, be more complex processes at work in this censoring as well. Ebo offers that “the stories are not given historical context to avoid linking the West to the problem. After all, much of the political strife in Africa results from the coalition of distinct cultural groups arbitrarily thrown into political entities by colonizers in their scramble for Africa.”¹⁸⁴ Andrew Breslau in turn summarized the unfortunate results of this policy: “American media coverage of Africa affairs has been striking for its paucity and lack of sophistication. More alarming than this troubling state of affairs, however, is how that sparse coverage has been shaped and used by various US administrations to further specific political agendas.”¹⁸⁵ Government and corporate interests, in other words, quite effectively filter Africa stories.

At the same time, current foreign reporting presents significant structural obstacles to coherent and consistent coverage of the continent (though this very fact may, in turn, be related to some of the existing filters as well.) In their article “Changing Policy: An Editorial Agenda” Thomas Winship and Paul Hemp argue that six main problems stand in the way of proper American reporting of Africa. They remain:

1. General lack of interest
2. Difficulties of access: “It costs an average of \$200,000 a year just to keep one correspondent going in Africa. A small press corps, spread thinly, focuses its limited resources on the hit-and-run big story (often trouble) or an overly generalized and simplistic overview.”
3. Anti-American feelings
4. Differing perceptions of the media’s role
5. Declining resources
6. American insensitivity and ignorance¹⁸⁶

(Objection 1, we will find in the concluding remarks to this paper, may remain less compelling than Winship and Hemp offer.) However, objections 2 and 6, in particular, speak to a real

¹⁸³Hultman, 230.

¹⁸⁴Ebo, 18.

¹⁸⁵Ibid., 19.

¹⁸⁶Winship, Thomas and Paul Hemp. “Changing Policy: An Editorial Agenda.” *Africa’s Media Image*. Beverly Hawk, ed. New York: Praeger, 1992. 238.

infrastructural barrier. Reflecting, again, Chomsky's predictions, Hawk notes that "there is very little of the beat reporting... Indeed, this distance from African culture is often viewed as objectivity, as an asset."¹⁸⁷ Codi Wilkins, of National Public Radio (NPR) argues that, infrastructurally Africa remains quite hard to cover. "It's the physical, economic and social crisis in Africa that makes it difficult to cover," she states, "It's not, in my view, something to do with Africans being particularly unwilling to cooperate with journalists."¹⁸⁸ That said, Hultman nevertheless presents an interesting example that appears to contradict this position. In 1990, following the release of Nelson Mandela from prison in neighbouring South Africa, Namibia finally gained independence from the occupying South African Security Forces, making it the last nation in Africa to achieve this end. A great number of American journalists were in South Africa at the time, covering the story there. Nevertheless, the independence ceremony in the stadium in Windhoek, the Namibian capital, received scant coverage at best. "Although the cost of transporting reporters and camera crews long distances is cited by network executives as a major reason for infrequent African coverage," Hultman argues, "Namibia was a reminder that the most important reasons may lie elsewhere. All four commercial networks had crews on the spot."¹⁸⁹ Africa generally only appears on American television screens and front pages during crises, and then only briefly. David Gergen notes that *parachute journalism*, "a quick in and out during crisis situations... has been the most common response to African events."¹⁹⁰ Another problem arises from *pack journalism* occurring at 'hotspots' like the Congo, whereby foreign journalists remained confined to the capital, thousands of miles from their stories and relevant sources. Joseph Lelyveld, a writer for the *New York Times*, implicates himself rather tellingly. "I felt a little fraudulent," he admitted with reference to the Congo, "that I was writing

¹⁸⁷Hawk, 6.

¹⁸⁸Hultman, 232.

¹⁸⁹Ibid, 223.

¹⁹⁰Ibid., 224.

authoritatively about a subject I knew very little about. I knew the capital – and this was a vast country. The rest I was doing mostly on hearsay.”¹⁹¹ These issues (or non-issues, depending one’s perspectives) thus considered, one can begin to appreciate the multiple levels at which news coming out of Africa remains distorted.

To see how these influences act together, consider briefly the language used to describe conflict since the end of the Cold War. During that period, of course, anti-communist discourse marked most descriptions of the world. Whole nations fell into ‘teams’, into a paradigm of ‘us’ versus ‘them.’ With that perception no longer operative (and ever more discredited), analysts and suddenly quite knowledgeable reporters like Samuel Huntington, Thomas Friedman and Robert Kaplan now instead describe the world in terms of ‘ethnicity’ and, in particular, ‘ethnic conflict.’ This discourse, however, displays the hidden operation of the prevailing racist ideological picture of Africa even more powerfully than did its predecessor.

This shift in descriptive discourse comes about in part through a complex (often two-way) relationship between the media and America’s political position in the world. On one hand, as we have seen, the media have tremendous framing power, particularly with regard to concepts as nebulous as ‘war’ and ‘conflict.’ Tim Allen argues that “in practice the term ‘war’ is employed as a means of conferring status. It indicates that a conflict should be taken seriously and not just treated as a criminal activity or dismissed as petty squabbling.”¹⁹² Nevertheless, “journalism is the art of the cliché”; journalists still remain “dependent on the language and ideas that audiences recognize.”¹⁹³ Thus, one finds an increasing number of reporters employing explicatory strategies similar to that elaborated by former U.S. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan:

¹⁹¹Ibid., 227.

¹⁹²Allen, Tim. “Perceiving Contemporary Wars.” *The Media of Conflict: War Reporting and Representations of Ethnic Violence*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, Inc, 1999. 18.

¹⁹³Seaton, Jean. “The New ‘Ethnic’ Wars and the Media.” *The Media of Conflict: War Reporting and Representations of Ethnic Violence*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, Inc, 1999. 59.

“The world entered a ‘period of ethnic conflict, following the relative stability of the Cold War.’”¹⁹⁴ This portrayal blurs the actual situation on the ground, however, for the increase in which “military forces of more and more states have become involved in serious armed conflicts within the territories which they are supposed to govern” has been growing since at least 1950.¹⁹⁵ Why then are ‘ethnic’ explanations only now surfacing? Allen offers a number of possible reasons, including: the weakening of state institutions, war within social groups, arms supply networks and the decentralization of conflict and (perhaps above all) the media.¹⁹⁶ The sources of media responsibility should by now come as little surprise. John Ryle, a writer with the British daily *The Guardian* observes that “when reporters in a conflict situation cannot make out what is happening...they call it anarchy. Since they have usually arrived in town only a day or two before, this is quite often.”¹⁹⁷ At the same time, “it often seems to be the case that warring factions are becoming increasingly sophisticated at manipulating the international media.”¹⁹⁸ If the media were just simply naïve, that would in and of itself be cause enough to worry. Unfortunately, however, there remain other factors at play in the ‘rise of ethnicity’ as well.

When reporters ‘parachute’ into a situation with little to no understanding of the background of the conflict, they tend to revert to their stereotyped pictures of Africa and African conflict. They then often end up mimicking and reformatting the dominant racist ideology to the situation they are attempting to explain. Anthropology tends to view ethnicity as something negotiated, as a socially *constructed* concept. This remains contrary, however, to the pictures painted in the media of ‘resurfacing ethnic tensions’ or ‘longstanding tribal tensions’ in places like Liberia, Rwanda (or, indeed, even the Balkans.) Yet ethnic strife is not ‘re-emerging’ out of

¹⁹⁴Allen, 27.

¹⁹⁵Ibid., 23.

¹⁹⁶Ibid., 33-40.

¹⁹⁷Ibid., 38.

¹⁹⁸Ibid. Indeed, as Seaton adds on this point, “A discussion of the instrumental rationality of some groups who further and prosper from the savage civil conflicts is so at odds with how the wars have been described that it has frequently been ignored.” Seaton, 57.

some semi-distant, primordial past in these countries. Rather, it remains part of the deliberate strategies of certain leaders and factions in each conflict. Journalists have often appropriated (whether consciously or sub-consciously) the rhetoric of leaders like Milosevic and the 'Hutu Power' clique because it corresponded to their own learned racist understandings. Allen notes that there remains:

a tendency for a counter-productive connection to be made between ethnicity and a Victorian concept of race. Especially since the Second World War, biological understandings of race have been discredited in academic analysis, and in many countries they have become unacceptable in public discourse. What is recognized to exist is racism, usually understood as the socially constructed ranking of people into hierarchies, commonly linked to unfounded assertions about natural superiority... There has been a growth in what Mark Duffield has called 'cultural functionalism', a view that suggests that certain distinctive groups have their own discrete qualities and characteristics... It is only a small step to a shift from 'racial discourse structured around categories of hierarchy and superiority to one in which cultural difference is argued to be the key operational factor.'... Use of the term 'ethnicity has been affected by this trend... In fact, 'new barbarism' and 'new racism' have been apparent in discussions of Africa for some time. The academics who adopted the term 'ethnic' in the 1960's did so partly to avoid the primordialism associated with usage of the word 'tribe', but soon found that it was not so easily avoided. *Tribe, ethnicity and often some reference to Conrad's Heart of Darkness are elided together in the international media's representations.* [emphasis added]¹⁹⁹

This flies in the face of both the actual reality of the situations and years of academic work and research attempting to prove that many 'ethnicities' in Africa remain deliberately constructed leftovers from the colonial era.²⁰⁰ Thus many reporters make use (again, deliberately or not) of a prevailing racist discourse when explaining ethnic conflict in Africa. However, if one rejects primordialism as a causal factor for ethnic conflict, then one should naturally avoid its use in developing an explanation for its use by reporters as well. One must at least consider the possibility that the appearance of racist ideology in the media remains as much a strategy as that articulated by warring factions on the ground.

This thus elicits a return to the commercial and political factors outlined in Chomsky's model. As established, corporate news organizations certainly make "a virtue out of a minimal

¹⁹⁹ Allen, 30-1.

²⁰⁰ Indeed, Richard Fardon laments that "the achievement of a previous generation of Africanists was to demonstrate that African ethnic identities were not primordial, that they had histories of invention or construction that belonged, just as much as their counterparts elsewhere, to the conditions under which the contemporary world came to be what it is." Fardon, Richard. "Ethnic Pervasion." *The Media of Conflict: War Reporting and Representations of Ethnic Violence*. New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc, 1999. 74.

approach to analysis, and avoiding criticism of powerful government and other entrenched interests which jeopardize their global access.”²⁰¹ These new media empires ruthlessly cut costs by asset-stripping newsrooms. Fewer journalists, fewer experts, but more news programmes. There is more news in the world, but it is produced by less-specialized, more generalized reporters.”²⁰² In other words, Seaton continues, “the pantheon of significance that is at the centre of good journalism may be being undermined. Thus a greater volume of news should not be confused with a greater variety of news.”²⁰³ Stepping back and re-assessing the picture of Africa presented to the American consuming public with even a modicum of sympathy for the actual situation in Africa, one soon discovers the problem that “to attempt to explain Africa’s ills as the results of ethnicity is to treat a translation as if it were a sufficient explanation.”²⁰⁴ What’s more, “ethnicity can all too easily become a way of laying not just entire blame, but responsibility for the entire circumstances at the door of the natives.”²⁰⁵ There thus remain strong political and economic potential reasons for the production of distorted images of Africa. When seen combined with the experiences of journalists ‘in the field’ and the powerful action of the hegemonic racist position, one can begin to appreciate the various levels at which these short, simple ‘reports’ operate.

The next two sections will briefly apply this analysis to two case studies as a means of inviting further research into similar instances of American reporting of Africa. The second case finds American reporters in Africa’s Great Lakes region, the first on the continent’s western coast.

²⁰¹ Allen., 38.

²⁰²Ibid., 58.

²⁰³Ibid.

²⁰⁴Fardon, 70.

²⁰⁵Ibid., 76.

Guerillas in the Mist: Media Mythologies of Liberia

Few could argue that the civil war, which ravaged the West African nation of Liberia throughout the 1990's, was anything but complicated, at least on the surface. With dozens of different 'ethnic groups' and socio-economic cleavages (particularly between the long-ruling, but ousted 'Americo-Liberians' – descendants of the original freed American slaves who colonized the region in the nineteenth-century – and the 'African Liberians'), as well as a number of competing and fluid and often inter-locking factions, analysis of the conflict seemed to call for contextualization and a study of local history. Instead, most American audiences received messages describing the conflict as 'another African basket-case' where 'tribal violence' appeared to run amok.

Closer examination, however, would reveal that Liberia did not exactly function as the tribal hot zone it was made to resemble. In Liberia, Philippa Atkinson argues, "ethnic identities have always been highly negotiable, and were used as a method to consolidate authority at the local level."²⁰⁶ Indeed, the presence of long-standing institutions and ceremonies that crossed supposed ethnic boundaries, like the widespread use of the Poro and Sande initiation societies, seems to contradict an explanation of Liberia as 'tribe on tribe' violence. Rather, "the expansion of direct economic and military control of the hinterland, and the increasingly corrupt practices used by the elite to maintain their position, heightened the divisions between Americos and African Liberians, and the resentment of the latter."²⁰⁷ (One might even argue that there was still a colonial aspect to the Liberian socio-economic scene (at least prior to the 1980 military coup of Samuel Doe), but one unseen by the international mass media because, in fact, those in the

²⁰⁶ Atkinson, Philippa. "Deconstructing Media Mythologies on Ethnic War in Liberia." The Media of Conflict: War Reporting and Representations of Ethnic Violence. New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc, 1999. 194.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 195.

dominant, ‘colonial’ position were black themselves.) After Doe manipulated elections in the mid-1980’s and quashed an attempted coup, he began to implement strategies favouring his own Krahn grouping.²⁰⁸ These events led to the beginning 1989 of an uprising by Charles Taylor and his National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) that would continue on and off until Taylor’s 1997 electoral victory. “While the initial struggle to oust Doe released an outpouring of violence that was expressed through ethnic targeting,” Atkinson allows, “as the war developed violence became more directly functional, in terms of being used at local levels for economic survival and empowerment by individual fighters.”²⁰⁹ The conflict would be best remembered in the American public, however, for its horrific, tragic manipulation and mutilation of marauding child soldiers and diamond profiteers. The media utterly failed to recognize the internal competition for political and economic resources at work in the conflict.

One could argue that such necessary contextualization and analysis remains beyond the purview of the American mass media, that “the purpose of media coverage of distant conflict is not...to provide detailed analyses of the causes and issues involved, but rather is merely to brief Western audiences on the development of the war as it happens, and perhaps to attempt a superficial analysis of some of the international political implications.”²¹⁰ Yet even by these severely reduced standards (limited principles to which, one could counter, few news organizations purport to hold, at least publicly), the coverage of the Liberian civil war remains striking in the manner in which it instead adapted the distorting filters established earlier.

A brief review of headlines and quotes on the subject reveals the depth of the media’s superficiality toward the conflict. *The Economist*, a nominally well-read and trusted paper of international scope, carried the following headlines with regard to Liberia: ‘Savagery’ (9

²⁰⁸Atkinson even goes so far as to question the authenticity and historical existence of this group. Regardless, its use by Doe made ‘Krahn’ an effective, exclusivist social grouping with political benefit within Liberia.

²⁰⁹Ibid., 205.

²¹⁰Ibid., 209.

September 1995), ‘Horror Story’ (21 November 1992), ‘Shambles’ (24 September 1994) and a reference to the ‘Hobbesian chaos that grips Liberia’ (6 April 1991). A 1995 article made the astounding discovery that “there was never any convincing reason for the fighting in the first place.”²¹¹ The *International Herald Tribune* (a joint overseas collaboration between the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*) maintained in a 22 January 1996 article that Liberia “is an African A Clockwork Orange in which militias don’t even pretend to stand for anything other than looting villagers of all they own.”²¹² Indeed, exactly one year earlier the *New York Times* published an article entitled ‘A War Without Purpose in a Country Without Identity.’ “The implication,” Atkinson notes, “was that violence was being perpetuated for no good reason, as if the political and economic motivations behind the conflict, and control of the distribution of the great natural wealth of Liberia, were somehow not worthy causes of war.”²¹³ Britain’s *The Guardian* made more overt use of racist discourse in 8 April 1994 by stating that the conflict proves that “the unraveling of ancient customs and complex civilizations threatens the vast areas of the continent with a future in which Conrad’s Heart of Darkness will be read as a straightforward description.”²¹⁴ However, for pure racist language and unconcealed ignorance, it would be hard to top Keith Richburg’s 1 June 1997 observation in London’s *Sunday Times*: “I realized that fully evolved human beings in the twentieth century don’t do things like that. These must be cavemen.”²¹⁵

As a result of these skewed observations, “the civil war has been used continuously by media analysts as an example to support theories of the disintegration of the state in Africa, the re-emergence of primitive tribalism, and the general perceived inability of Africans to live

²¹¹Ibid., 210.

²¹²Ibid.

²¹³Ibid., 211.

²¹⁴It remains beyond the scope of this paper, of course, to argue that Conrad’s novel might also be read as a cautionary tale of the evils and excesses of Western imperialism. Ibid., 212.

²¹⁵Ibid.

together in order and peace.”²¹⁶ Even more troubling, however, remains “the hidden implication, that Liberians are at some backward phase of their political development, [which then] forms part of the more general analysis of the African situation.”²¹⁷ We have already seen numerous potential causes and reasons for this distortion, ranging from outright racism to the desire to sell ‘sexy’ images. The power of these once-hidden operative factors can be seen in one of the implications drawn by political leaders from these sorts of pictures of African conflict. “Conclusions are drawn,” Atkinson offers, “based on this imperfect analysis, that the West can play no positive role to help Africans with their local and historical conflicts, with disengagement seen as the only sensible strategy, and that perhaps humanitarian aid can be offered through the non-committal channels of NGO’s.”²¹⁸ What better way to maintain the political and economic status quo on the continent than by establishing the inherent ‘savage’, ‘senseless’ and ‘impossibly cruel’ nature of Africans in the imagination of the public?

Looking for Kurtz: The Tragic Misreporting of Rwanda

Rwanda, like Liberia, remains another case of quite blatant media implementation of the ‘primordialism’ approach to ‘ethnic conflict’, though one with even more tragic political and humanitarian consequences resulting from coverage of the country. In a three month period commencing in April 1994, the ‘Hutu Power’ government of tiny, highly centralized Rwanda initiated a program of mass genocide that claimed the lives of over 800, 000 fellow Rwandans.²¹⁹ The genocide remained a planned program of extermination, and one rooted in earlier Western socioeconomic manipulation of Rwandan society. Mel McNulty argues that “although the societies of the Great Lakes were distinguished by separate [socioeconomic classes] in pre-

²¹⁶Ibid., 211.

²¹⁷Ibid., 213.

²¹⁸Ibid., 212.

²¹⁹For a particularly compelling and well-researched account of both the preparation for and Western reaction to the Rwandan genocide, please see David Gourevitch’s *We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families: Stories from Rwanda*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1998.

colonial days”, with ‘Tutsis’ (cattle farmers) originally chosen by the Belgian colonizers as puppet rulers over the ‘Hutu’ majority, “the current segregation into separate ‘ethnicities’ is a product of the colonial era, used effectively to divide and rule Rwanda’s population.”²²⁰ After independence, a popular revolution swept a Hutu government into power (again with outside Western help, this time in the strong, though publicly silent, support of France.) Factions within this government grew ever more extreme in their use of the national media to establish a xenophobic hatred of Tutsis within much of the Hutu popular imagination. The 1994 joint assassination of the presidents of Rwanda and neighbouring Burundi (by, it is thought, the elements within the extreme fringe of the ‘Hutu Power’ movement) became the signal to put the ever less subtly articulated plan into action. Again, in response to the situation, the American mass media chose (at least at first) to simply swallow the ‘Hutu Power’ propaganda, perhaps because its inherent (if constructed) message of African ethnic hatred matched their own learned racist ideology.

The purveyors of Hutu hate radio knew exactly the implications of their reporting; the Western media, on the other hand, approached Rwanda blindly and merely accepted the first causal account they discovered. Reflecting on the simple and ignorant early coverage of the genocide, McNulty notes that the use of such Western messages “follows directly from... colonial predecessors who rejoiced in the unfathomable mysteries and exotic thrill of horror provoked by the ‘dark continent.’”²²¹ However, “by swallowing the deliberate disinformation that the Rwandan war was ethnically-driven, [the media] legitimized that view. Thus the media

²²⁰McNulty, Mel. “Media Ethnicization and the International Response to War and Genocide in Rwanda.” *The Media of Conflict: War Reporting and Representations of Ethnic Violence*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, Inc, 1999. 276.

²²¹Ibid., 272.

became accomplices in the power politics of external actors in the region.”²²² This was to have grave consequences for the events to follow.

As events in the country grew ever more gruesome and widespread, France began to send troops into the region in *Opération Turquoise*. The ostensible reasons for intervention were humanitarian; the actual cause however lied in a desire by French politicians to covertly support their long-standing Hutu clients against a mounting insertion by Tutsi-led rebels in Uganda (their leader, Paul Kagame, was feared to be something of an ‘anglophile.’) Gérard Prunier, African advisor to Mitterrand’s Defence Ministry summed up the cynical manipulation of media ignorance with regard to the continent in earlier comments on French involvement in Somalia:

You see, it is soon going to be Christmas and it would be unthinkable to have the French public eat its Christmas dinner while seeing on TV all those starving kids. It would be politically disastrous... But don’t worry, as soon as all this stuff blows over and TV cameras are trained in another direction, we will quietly tiptoe out. With luck it shouldn’t last more than three to four months and in the meantime we will try our best not to do anything foolish.²²³

Not only French, but American media as well, wholly failed to suspect these motives in French action in the country.

Instead, they reverted to their learned descriptive devices for African conflict and, when Western UN peacekeepers were forced to leave the capital, quickly lost interest in the nation altogether. McNulty notes: “the volume of Western coverage of recent African crises is almost always in direct proportion to the scale of direct Western involvement (NGO or military interventions) or to the degree of clamour for such interventions.”²²⁴ Indeed, surveys of British, French and American media “show that relatively little change occurred in the media coverage after 6 April compared to the paucity before. There was a blip with the shooting down of the plane [of the two presidents] and the reporting on the slaughters – generally portrayed as ancient

²²²Ibid., 268.

²²³Ibid., 269.

²²⁴Ibid.

tribal feuds – but with the withdrawal of foreign personnel there was a precipitous drop in coverage.” Instead, “when the genocide was accelerating, the Western press virtually ceased to report on Rwanda.”²²⁵ In a tragic addendum to the story, the media performed an interesting case of *mea culpa* coverage by portraying the establishment of ‘refugee camps’ in eastern Zaire following the invasion of Kagame’s forces and the end of the genocide. What they failed to either realize or report was that the camps, in fact, served as hiding places and foci of reorganization for the ‘Hutu Power’ elements who initiated the conflict. Nonetheless, it remained these pictures of desperate ‘refugees’ which finally reached American homes and elicited the need for a humanitarian response. “This was something the Western reader could understand,” McNulty states, “a massive disaster, dying children, Western aid needed, make a donation. This was ‘Band Aid’ reporting,” a direct result of ignorant pack, parachute journalism.²²⁶ With this added aid, the *génocidaire* elements in the camp were able to attempt to further destabilize Rwanda and Burundi as well provoke the quick collapse of the Zairean state, sparking a massive regional conflict which continues into the present day. In this case, not only did the American media mislead their consumers at home, they helped to enflame and spread fighting across the Congo basin.

Conclusion

A quote from Beverly Hawk at the beginning of this section stated that: “there are no such things as facts without interpretation.” Indeed, the media’s role in contemporary American society appears to be that of interpreter or translator. However, they do so from either a dominant-hegemonic or (at their most level-headed) negotiated position with respect to America’s racist discourse on Africa. As a result, they remain the chief distributors of this

²²⁵Ibid., 277.

²²⁶Ibid., 280.

ideology. This of course suits quite well the political and economic interests which (to extrapolate from Chomsky) *really* control the media. Seen from an oppositional code, one realizes the structured and carefully constructed nature of this system of ideology distribution. Seaton summarizes: “History is never the product of ancestral memory; it is what educated people make it. Nevertheless...the only corrective to myths is evidence. Yet, it is the considered, well-informed, disciplined journalism that produces such corrective and well-founded accounts which is most under threat in the highly competitive markets of contemporary broadcasting.”²²⁷ As the cases of Liberia and Rwanda demonstrate, such journalism remains in terribly short supply with regard to Africa.

Given the systematic role played by the American mass media, some of the political implications drawn from this distorted reporting not surprisingly echo the political motivations that sparked the authoring of the racist discourse in the first place. McNulty articulates, in compelling (and rather frightening) language the full potential implications of the ‘ethnic’ agenda in reporting Africa. Ethnicization, he notes:

comforts us in the knowledge that the perpetrators are mad; we in contrast are sane...It is not too far from this media-driven agenda of humanitarian intervention to the argument that decolonization was a mistake, that Africans are unfit to govern themselves...In response to a crisis, the media portray the conflict as ethnic; a media focus on human suffering rather than its political causes provokes demands for a presumed apolitical response – to freeze the situation, not to solve it – which equals forcible ‘humanitarian’ intervention; intervention by a powerful state into a weak state cannot be disinterested or free of the suspicion of neo-colonialism; the media, through mechanical ethnicization of conflict in Africa, become the (unwitting) vehicle of a post-Cold War neo-colonial agenda, what has been called the Second Scramble for Africa.²²⁸

How far is it, then, to assert that microphones and cameras have come to replace pith helmets and Gatling guns as the imperialist agent’s uniform of the age?

²²⁷Seaton, 61.

²²⁸McNulty, 271.

Conclusion:

The ‘White Man’s Burden’ Revisited

Investigation of the American mass media’s reporting of Africa thus reveals a longstanding pattern of racist misrepresentation of the continent. Rooted in America’s political and economic relationship with the continent, Americans dealing with Africa expropriated denigrating images from Europe. They then began to develop their own racist ideology as the needs of the slave trade, missionary activity and economic activity dictated. While the country’s political and economic association with the continent has changed greatly since the time of Stanley, it appears from close analysis of American reporting that the racist and denigrating vocabulary used to describe the region have not so varied. Europe and America’s racist ideology with regard to Africa continues, as Basil Davidson asserted, to maintain an “underground existence” within a more complex system of ideological distribution. One is left to imagine the implications of this discovery for describing America’s current political relations with the nations and peoples of the African continent. If it looks like an imperialist, and talks like an imperialist...what then?

Looking further into the structure of the American mass media, one finds a highly structured system for the distribution of government and corporate propaganda. Reporters tend to adapt the dominant-hegemonic position with regard to the racist ideology on Africa, distributing it with little questioning of its actual validity in describing the contemporary continent. The reasons, one discovers, for this remain relatively complex but the political implications remain comparatively clear. To paraphrase Seaton (from earlier) such descriptions participate in a process of justifying the political status quo, laying the blame for the region’s troubles with its

African inhabitants, rather than with current and former imperial powers. Given the nature of the media system, the result hardly elicits great surprise.

However, there remain sources for potential change for those concerned with a more accurate and responsible portrayal of Africa in the American mass media. To begin with, one must question and criticize the current realities of the media system. For example, Tamil Hultman's expose of the views of various editors and correspondents on African coverage suggested that "news executives agree that if a broader interest in Africa were demonstrated, all the obstacles to better African reporting would be overcome."²²⁹ Given the institutionalized depth described in the Chomsky model, this assertion might strike the reader as somewhat simplistic. However, it does speak to a reason given by the corporate media in defense of its coverage of Africa. Essentially, they state, Americans don't care about the continent (and usually produce polling data to back up this assertion.) Yet, as CNN's Charlayne Hunter-Gault maintains: "It's a real chicken-and-egg situation...People look at it and say 'There's no interest in Africa.' Well, there's no coverage of Africa. If there was coverage of Africa, there would be interest in Africa. It's as simple as that, I think."²³⁰ Indeed, Hultman continues, "the standard response to this attitude is that editors shouldn't respond only to readership surveys but should also help to raise the public's consciousness about important issues."²³¹ What's more, polling data further suggests that the media's original contention may not even accurately reflect American public opinion.

Recent surveys have in fact come to the conclusion that Africa *does* appear to matter to a significant portion of the American population and, what's more, most think that the continent receives short shrift in coverage. For example, "when asked in a May 2000 Gallup survey how

²²⁹Hultman, 234.

²³⁰Ibid., 236.

²³¹Ibid., 237.

important to the U.S. is ‘what happens in Africa,’ 69% said it was either vitally important (18%) or important (51%).”²³² Perhaps even more surprisingly, a large number of Americans are unhappy with coverage of the continent. In May 1999, “a Newsweek poll asked respondents whether the U.S. is ‘too concerned, is not concerned enough, or is about as concerned as it should be about problems in each of the following places.’ Of six regions of the world mentioned, Africa was the one about which the highest percentage said the U.S. was not concerned enough, with 47% expressing this view. Only 11% said the U.S. is too concerned about Africa and 34% said it is as concerned as it should be.”²³³ The fact that the media appear not to speak to a popular agenda thus only further confirms the systemic, ideological view of the industry already established. It also points the way forward for a program of increased American understanding of the African situation.

Whether or not they are willing to accept the onus of the conclusion, one could effectively argue that the media maintain a moral responsibility to improve the picture of Africa they sell to American consumers. “The increasing importance of mass news media as a source of information for Americans,” Bosah Ebo explains, “places great responsibility on them to give the American people an accurate, balanced and realistic picture of the world.”²³⁴ There remain a number of potential strategies open to a media outlet willing to pursue this program. One could allow for “increased reporting of trends, not just newsbreaking events”, thus eliminating or at least contextualizing the worst abuses of parachute journalism.²³⁵ Similarly, putting ‘colour stories’ about exotic Africa into the context of the actual social situation there would help to curb the underground power of racist discourse. Other strategies might include reporting the African

²³²Public Opinion on International Affairs. “Americans and the World: Regional Issues: Africa: Importance of Africa.” Program on International Policy Attitudes. http://www.americans-world.org/digest/regional_issues/africa/africa1.cfm, May 2000. 1.

²³³Ibid.

²³⁴Ebo, 15.

²³⁵Hultman88888, 240.

‘successes’ as well as the crises and attempting to train and recruit more skilled, African journalists who would often be best equipped to explain African stories in a manner more free corporate and political agendas. The most important requirement for change, however, is a willingness on the part of the American mass media to recognize that their coverage remains problematic. At the same time, the concerned, consuming public share the responsibility of making their rejection of the current portrayal of Africa, and the implementation of more responsible coverage, known on a deep and institutional level within the media system. This may, in turn, call for the implementation of tactics of public non-violent resistance (advertiser boycotts, letter campaigns, awareness strategies, etc.) Until this occurs on a wide and public scale, larger and more systemic change will most likely not occur in the near future.

Yet the concerned individual is not without option, either. One might cast oneself in the mould of late movements in British cultural studies and attempt to seek “counterhegemonic forces of resistance and contestation.”²³⁶ At the same time, sources for information on Africa do exist that remain free, in varying degrees, from the systemic racism of the corporate media. For example, a movement of ‘Independent Media Centres’ (IMC’s) has begun to spread across the globe in the last five years. These non-profit publishing centers and activism clearinghouse’s stress community self-publishing and resistance to a corporate agenda. IMC’s currently exist in Nigeria and South Africa, for example. At the same time, the rise of Internet journalism allows for much greater individual access to alternative news sources. A search of the web could now put any number of African newspapers and sites into one’s view, thus sidestepping the gatekeeping role of traditional American media.

²³⁶Kellner and Durham, 16.

In the end, American reporters may still channel the racist ghost of Henry M. Stanley in their reporting of Africa but the American consuming public, at least, remains less obligated than ever to actually take them seriously.

For information on alternative sources of African news, consult:

<http://indymedia.org> - The Independent Media Centre Movement

<http://nigeria.indymedia.org> - Nigeria IMC

<http://southafrica.indymedia.org> - South Africa IMC

<http://allafrica.com/> - AllAfrica.com

<http://www.ipl.org/reading/news> - The Internet Public Library – Online Newspapers

<http://www.africa2020.com> - Africa2020.com

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