

On “Humanitarian” Adoption (Madonna in Malawi)

In a luxury hotel in Acapulco, a group of women from the United States eat, swim, take in the tourist attractions, and wait for the processing of their international adoptions so that they can return home with their new babies. These women are the protagonists of John Sayles’s film *Casa de los Babys* (2003). As it follows one day in their lives, Sayles’s film gives voice to the stories of these women, who—despite their varied backgrounds and personalities—all believe that adoption will fulfill their frustrated aspirations for motherhood and thus allow them to “complete” themselves. It creates sympathy for these characters by exposing gender norms that conflate female identity with motherhood, and it makes visible what Ann Anagnost calls a regime of “maternal citizenship” linking parenthood, consumption, social value, and political agency.¹ But the film also conveys the colonialist belief of many of the women that the babies will be “better off” in the United States simply because they will possess more economic stability. In other words, Sayles reveals the problematic vision of the adoptive mothers that satisfying their desire for motherhood will unquestionably improve the lives of the children they adopt.

Such a belief resonates with what David L. Eng identifies as the original “humanitarian” justifications given to the public for transnational adoption, when it began to be practiced in the United States on a large scale after World War II.² As Laura Briggs documents, at this time photographic images of starving and abandoned children from overseas war zones began to saturate the news media. After the war, such images were used to build support for organizations like UNICEF and to underpin the burgeoning practice of transnational adoption.³ The Korean War in particular proved to be a watershed, since it inspired crusaders like the evangelical Harry Holt to publicize the adoption of Korean orphans as a mode of relief work. While Korea was the first and for some time the largest site for transnational adoptions, adoptions from other conflict zones in Asia such as Vietnam and Cambodia followed.⁴ More recently, transnational adoption has focused on China, where the adoption of baby girls has been scripted as a way to “rescue” these children from a supposedly sexist culture.⁵ New members of the “diaper diaspora” are also increasingly drawn from what are seen as the poverty- and violence-stricken former Eastern Bloc countries, Latin America, and Africa.⁶

What Anagnost calls the “theme of salvage” so central to the worldview of Sayles’s adoptive mothers, however, is not the whole story revealed in the film.⁷ Sayles carefully splices together the perspectives of the American women with those of local people whose lives interconnect with the *Yanquis*. One discourse that the Mexicans introduce to the debate is that of commodity extraction. A would-be revolutionary whose

mother owns the women's hotel describes transnational adoption in the language of dependency theory, defining it as one in a long line of historical injustices in which the United States steals "raw materials" from Latin America in order to "refine" them up north. When asked by his friends why the *Yanquis* can't breed their own children, he replies: "They are too busy making money to procreate." Another character, a former construction worker who has lost his job and comes to the hotel looking for work, straightforwardly and even proudly describes infants as his country's "greatest exportations."⁸

Contrary to the protest of one of the adoptive mothers—who tells her frustrated husband by phone, "No, I don't think you should call the Korean people . . . This isn't the commodities market"—the discomfiting equivalence of babies with other commodities produced in the global south and delivered up to the global north haunts the film. So too do the stories of two different biological mothers, which themselves point to what Eng describes as the "international gendered division of labor" perpetuated by global capitalism. The first is a teenager forced into giving her baby up for adoption by her domineering mother. In this case, the biological father (also a teenager) never even learns about the pregnancy. The second is that of a domestic worker in the hotel who attempts, without success, to share her pain at having given up her child for adoption in the hopes that her daughter would enjoy a materially richer life. After she tells her story in Spanish to an Irish immigrant to the United States who speaks only English, the Irish woman shakes her head and says, "I'm sorry, I didn't get that."⁹ This communicative breakdown mirrors a common gap in narratives about transnational adoption even as it reveals (to the spectator if not the adoptive mother) the story of biological parents compelled to give up their children, against their own desires, by the structural inequalities between north and south.

Part of the power of Sayles's film is its refusal to bring these different and contradictory narratives about transnational adoption to any resolution. Understandings of adoption as rescue and violent exploitation, of egoistic and altruistic, of gift, theft, and constrained choice, undercut and overlay each other. The way in which the film presents these multiple perspectives without attempting to coerce the spectator into a fixed position—and without providing an artificial closure—is often cited with praise in reviews on sites such as Amazon.com. One such reviewer adds, "Anyone who is considering adoption . . . should see it."¹⁰ However, the film is unlikely to be categorized as the most widely seen representation of transnational adoption of the turn of the millennium. Even with Maggie Gyllenhaal and Daryl Hannah in starring roles, *Casa de los Babys* has been quite overshadowed by the media coverage given to the "real world" adoptions of entertainers—such as Meg Ryan, who has adopted a child from China; Angelina Jolie, who has adopted children from Cambodia, Ethiopia, and Vietnam; and, in a particularly contentious case, Madonna, who has now adopted two children from Malawi.

Precisely because Madonna's adoptions of the Malawian boy David Banda (2006) and the Malawian girl Chifundo "Mercy" James (2009) became the center of so much media controversy, I turn to these adoptions in the following pages.¹¹ Beginning with Madonna's first attempts to become David's caregiver in 2006, journalists, fans and foes of Madonna, fellow celebrities like Angelina Jolie and Oprah Winfrey, and leaders

of child advocacy and humanitarian aid organizations such as Save the Children have all weighed in on Madonna's actions. Articles and broadcasts on this issue have appeared in places ranging from *People Magazine* and *US Weekly* to *Saturday Night Live*, the BBC and the *Chicago Journal of International Law*. Madonna has released her own responses to the global media controversy, not only in interviews but also (and more notably) in the documentary film *I Am Because We Are* (directed by Nathan Rissman, 2008). While these interventions constitute a public debate on the ethics of transnational adoption, they shape this debate very differently than Sayles does in *Casa de los Babys*.

This essay explores a series of these media representations, using the critical examination of depictions of Madonna in Malawi to track the evolution of dominant northern perceptions of transnational adoption and to chart the outlines of new forms of celebrity and humanitarianism emerging alongside this practice. It does this with particular, if sometimes implicit, attention to the racialized and gendered assumptions of established and emerging narratives of adoption and humanitarianism. As Laura Suski argues, helping children has long been at the heart of the humanitarian endeavor, since children are seen as the most ethically urgent “distant strangers” whose suffering should be alleviated through relief work.¹² Transnational adoption—at least from a certain point of view—literalizes a traditional vision of humanitarianism associated with child care, in which white Americans “save” and symbolically mother nonwhite or non-Western people portrayed as unable to attend to their own basic needs.¹³ In the United States, this hierarchical, patriarchal, and racially coded vision of humanitarianism was historically tied to appeals from political figures and media celebrities on behalf of “worthy” causes. These themselves, like ideas about transnational adoption, have recently been inflected by the development of a spectacular consumer culture that accompanies what Jean and John Comaroff call “millennial capitalism.”¹⁴ It is also inflected by the rise of the “intimate public sphere,” where, as Lauren Berlant describes, politics has been confined to personal choices such as the composition of one's family and intimate disclosure becomes the key to enter into the public domain.¹⁵ The crumbling of boundaries between public and private matches the collapse of perceived distance between celebrity and ordinary life, as the popularity of reality TV and YouTube attest. In such a situation, representations of Madonna's very public adoptions of two African children provide a useful window onto the impact of celebrity activism on the wider “ethos of humanitarianism.”¹⁶ Before turning to these representations, however, I would like to sketch out some of their overlapping contexts.

Celebrity, Adoption, and Rescue Narratives

Celebrity adoptions within the United States began in the early twentieth century, with domestic rather than transnational adoptions. As Viviana Zelizer argues in *Pricing the Priceless Child*, adoption was reconceived as a social practice in the 1920s and 1930s, when adopted children took on value as “priceless” companions rather than wage laborers. Up through the first decade of the twentieth century, economically disenfranchised parents had to pay to get others to take in the “surplus” babies they could not support. These children often ended up in so-called baby farms, where they

lodged until they were old enough to be shipped to other families as workers.¹⁷ What Zelizer calls the “sacralization” of children in the first part of the century changed this scenario. Beginning in the 1920s, a series of adoptions by figures such as Minnie Maddern Smith, Gracie Allen and George Burns, and Babe Ruth helped to popularize a vision of adoption in which adopted children provided the receiving families with joy and love rather than labor. These adoptions often had what Zelizer describes as a “Cinderella” aspect to them, with the adoptive parents rescuing children from an emotionally and financially bankrupt existence.¹⁸ The increasing dominance of this vision of adoption coupled with the shortage of (white girl) babies in the United States reversed the profitability paradigm of the previous century and led to a black market in infants. This grew to the point that in 1955 a congressional hearing declared baby selling to be a “national social problem.”¹⁹

The change in attitudes to and practices of domestic adoption in the United States outlined by Zelizer set the stage for the transnational adoptions described above; indeed, it was in 1955 that Holt was able to adopt eight Korean War orphans by a special act of Congress.²⁰ Not long after, Hollywood celebrities began to participate in and to publicize this practice. The case of Mia Farrow, one of the earliest celebrities to publicly adopt a foreign child, is instructive. In her memoir *What Falls Away* (1997), she describes her decision with then-husband André Previn to adopt daughter Lark Song: “In 1971 and 1972, in London’s parks, I marched, pushing a stroller alongside Vanessa Redgrave, to protest U.S. military involvement in Southeast Asia. The senselessness of André and I having another baby when there were already so many children in the world needing homes was dramatically underlined by the war, as it stretched on interminably . . . It was in this climate that we decided to adopt a Vietnamese war orphan.”²¹ In this passage, Farrow sets up adoption as an alternative mode of politics, an affective and intimate political act that will somehow right the wrongs of aggressive American imperialism by rescuing children orphaned in the Vietnam War. In his critique of this passage, however, Anthony Shiu condemns Farrow’s decision to eschew traditional political engagement and instead “institut[e] an economy of ‘protest’ through the introduction of war orphans into her and Previn’s kinship group,” positioning her action as a misguided and acquisitive step that substitutes the promise of domestic “love” for an end to war.²² The tension between these visions—adoption as a private act of reparation and adoption as a way of siphoning off public action and obfuscating the need for structural transformation—marks later celebrity adoptions.²³

Farrow’s adoption took place toward the beginning of a period that saw an increasing role of celebrities in humanitarian activism and concomitant changes in conceptions of humanitarianism itself. Like transnational adoption, humanitarianism is often criticized for substituting immediate but temporary relief from suffering for structural change, as well as for its dependence on the benevolence or charity of those “better off.”²⁴ Some recent celebrity attempts to refigure humanitarianism specifically address these problems. Lisa Ann Richey and Stefano Ponte outline the evolution of the involvement of celebrities in humanitarianism. They argue that this began in the 1960s and saw a large intensification in the wake of Bob Geldof’s “Band Aid” and “Live Aid” campaigns, designed to raise funds for victims of the Ethiopian famines of the 1980s. But particularly since the turn of the twenty-first century, they continue,

Band Aid techniques have come in for question and “aid celebrities” such as Bono, Jeffrey Sachs, and Paul Farmer have become “new totems of possibility” for humanitarian action.²⁵ Richey and Ponte present Bono’s Product (Red)TM campaign as a symbol for current attempts to reshape the humanitarian enterprise around what they term “compassionate consumption.” Articulating a “new modality of aid,” one linked to “commerce, not philanthropy,” Product (RED)TM plays on the celebrity status of its founder to guarantee the “coolness” of shopping in ways that benefit the Global Fund for the Prevention of AIDS, Malaria and Tuberculosis.²⁶

To what extent can a reorientation around consumption and celebrity style open possibilities for an enterprise aimed at reducing the suffering of others? If Richey and Ponte point to the closures of Bono’s project as they search for positive outcomes of this “new modality” of humanitarian action, Alex de Waal forcefully critiques the negative effects of both old (Farrow) and new (Bono) styles of “celebrity humanitarianism.” De Waal points to both Farrow and Bono as figures in the contemporary “humanitarian carnival” where celebrities rush to inspire outrage and sympathy for good causes. The central problematic is that of publicity. Celebrities, he argues, are used to playing the hero and being in the spotlight and attempt to do this even when this is not helpful to the victims on whose behalf they are supposedly acting.²⁷ As he puts it, “It is really unclear whether publicity is the servant of the issue or its master.”²⁸ De Waal’s concern is not so much the morality of publicizing Darfur or AIDS for personal gain or to consolidate star status but rather the negative practical implications that constructing relief projects and policies around publicity can have. The most useful aid projects, he suggests, are precisely the ones that resist being branded as “sexy” or “cool” and are not allied with big names like Bono, Farrow, or Oprah Winfrey.²⁹ While de Waal’s article may underplay the importance—indeed, the necessity—of publicity or visibility in contemporary aid work, his suggestion that celebrity campaigners are more likely to foster publicity than results deserves serious attention.³⁰

De Waal does not mention Madonna, but his critique might well apply to the entertainer, who has brought both transnational adoption and the AIDS crisis in Africa to the forefront of British and American media. Indeed, as we will see, many critics of the pop star have leveled similar charges to those of de Waal. I propose to give this critique greater scrutiny, by examining precisely how the publicity surrounding Madonna’s adoptions configures the projects of transnational adoption and humanitarian activism. How has the media represented this case? What kinds of debates do different media representations of the Madonna adoption controversy open about the linked projects of transnational adoption and relief work? How, if at all, has the development of consumer-oriented celebrity humanitarianism transformed earlier visions of adoption as a “humanitarian” rescue mission, in its attempt to reshape broader conceptions of global aid work?

Fashion vs. Philanthropy

Madonna first traveled to Malawi soon after 2000 to support the work of a non-governmental organization called Spirituality for Kids. In an orphanage visit that was part of this trip, Madonna encountered David Banda, whom in 2006 she petitioned

the Malawian courts to adopt. Opponents of the adoption argued that it violates Malawian law, which does not have a specific statute allowing for the adoption of Malawian children by nonresidents, as well as being a violation of international ethics, since the country has not signed the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption.³¹ Further uproar ensued when it turned out that David was not technically an orphan; his father, Yohane Banda, was living in Malawi.³² These issues caused Madonna to appeal to the public on Oprah and in an interview published in *Time* magazine. Here, she claimed that the press was only paying attention to sell papers and that their coverage “was negatively impacting the needy in Malawi: ‘When you throw in things like I’m a celebrity and I somehow got special treatment, or make the implication of kidnapping, it gets mixed into a stew, and it sells lots of papers. What they should care about is that there are over a million orphans in Malawi.’”³³ Eventually she was allowed to take David to the United Kingdom and her adoption was finalized in 2008. Shortly thereafter, Madonna—who in the intervening years had built multiple orphanages and supported both local and international aid groups through her charity Raising Malawi—began the process of adopting Mercy.³⁴ Surprisingly, in April 2009, the Malawian court reversed course and rejected Madonna’s request on the grounds that she was not resident in Malawi. What followed was a highly publicized appeal that was ultimately decided, in June 2009, in Madonna’s favor.³⁵

These adoption processes, one coming after the next, sparked reactions ranging from adulation to derision. However, coverage of the issue in the British and American press tended to turn on one particular axis. One of the recurrent questions raised by the media and by readers is whether or not these adoptions were taking place to “help” others or merely to improve the image of the celebrity. As a BBC online debate forum set up in response to Madonna’s 2006 adoption request put it: “Celebrity Adoption: Philanthropy or Fashion?”³⁶ These terms of debate were echoed in other forums like the ABC News article “Black Babies: Hollywood’s Hottest Accessories?” or *Time*’s “With Her Malawi Adoption, Did Madonna Save a Life or Buy a Baby?” Such pieces do not present a conclusive choice between the presented alternatives but rather aim to provoke discussion. The *Time* article, for instance, reads: “You wonder whether her world really is a stage, whether she knew that the whole world would watch her dance in the dusty Malawian village in her crisp white linens with the cosmically cute baby boy strapped to her back; that the press would be there waiting, scribbling, flashing . . . Did she hope that the controversy that followed would get around to mentioning that Baby David’s life expectancy was in the process of doubling from 40 in Malawi to 78 in Britain? Or that she has donated \$3 million to help 900,000 Malawian orphans with food, school, shelter?”³⁷

In this debate, supporters of Madonna emphasize the sincerity of her actions, the importance of the real commitment she has made, and the potential of her actions to inspire others to follow in her footsteps. They argue that Madonna has given David and Mercy a better life than these children would have had in orphanages in Malawi, and they—along with Madonna herself—suggest that Madonna has set an important precedent that will allow more adoptions from Malawi to take place. At a press conference at Cannes, Madonna quite plainly stated her hope that “after we get through with this adoption, it will be easier for people to adopt children from

Malawi.” And she insisted: “I am the template or the role model so to speak for future adoptions.”³⁸ Katrina Szish of *US Weekly* agrees: “This is an act of benevolence. This is an act of kindness. This is an act that should inspire all of us do good. It shouldn’t inspire anyone to attack Madonna.”³⁹ Beyond the adoption issue, supporters of Madonna suggest that her actions have drawn needed publicity to Malawi. The CNN correspondent Paula Hancocks points out that Madonna’s adoption of David helped put the AIDS crisis in Malawi on the media map. She states: “It is interesting that there are so many sidebars in the British press now actually focusing on the problems in Malawi, focusing on the fact that there are almost one million AIDS orphans in Malawi itself. So, it has really brought that to the forefront, something that most people know.”⁴⁰

Those in the critical camp suggest that what is at stake is not “helping others” but improving Madonna’s image by allowing her to participate in the new fashion of supporting good causes. Perhaps the most incisive of these critiques came in the form of a recent *Saturday Night Live* skit, which portrayed Angelina Jolie and Madonna in a catfight about who could find the “craziest” place to adopt their next child from and about whose baby interested the media more.⁴¹ Echoing de Waal, *SNL* makes jabs at both Jolie’s and Madonna’s obsession with publicity, and their argument about whose baby the media cares more about underscores the assumption that the babies are only of interest because they draw paparazzi cameras. The sketch throws into relief the orientalist fascination underlying Jolie and Madonna’s desire for what it terms “spicy brown babies.” It also decries the objectification and commodification of these babies. When the baby Jolie is carrying turns out to be a “decoy,” a doll that Madonna then steals, the show literalizes the widespread criticism that the celebrities turned babies into fashion accessories. All these represent important ethical considerations. Yet the sketch also undermines the radical possibilities opened by transnational adoption: as it indicts Madonna and Jolie for caring more about image than about actual children, it also betrays a fundamentally patriarchal vision that conveys fear about female-headed households, the liberation of women from men, and the act of constructing families across racial divides.⁴² Indeed, the right-wing commentator Glenn Beck’s attacks on Madonna showed a similar logic to the *SNL* sketch.⁴³

In addition to this antifeminism, which undercuts women’s potential to use transnational adoption to shape their families in ways that challenge traditional gender and racial norms, the frame “fashion vs. philanthropy” has other drawbacks as an approach to critically appraising Madonna’s actions. It serves almost tautologically to confirm that transnational adoption sells: that it in fact is fashionable, and that it is “philanthropic.” In doing so, it displaces a number of pressing questions, including whether adoption is the best thing for the particular child at hand and whether adoption should be conceived of as a philanthropic or “humanitarian” action at all. Indeed, Madonna’s biography, from her early loss of her mother to her recent fertility struggles, suggests a very different sort of motivation. I will return to this topic in closing and for now merely suggest that, even its critique of Madonna, much of the discussion in popular news sources reinforced the basic northern assumption that being adopted is a form of salvation for children from the global south. It did this

precisely by converting the debate over adoption into a debate about fashion, self-image, and the meaning of celebrity itself.

But this is not the only way in which the Madonna adoption controversy was covered. The adoptions also opened space for dialogue about the challenges of transnational adoption and the most effective ways to aid children in poor countries. The BBC hosted a different online debate between two representatives of NGOs dedicated to children's rights. In this case, the question was: "Should parents in affluent countries be encouraged to adopt children from different cultures in the developing world?" Sarah Jacobs from Save the Children responded negatively while Julia Fleming of the Overseas Adoption Support and Information Service took the positive side.⁴⁴ Aid groups such as Global Action for Children also used Madonna's attempt to adopt Mercy as an opportunity to get across the message that other ways of helping children—particularly, that of sending aid to support the community so the community can support the children—are much more effective forms of "charity" than adoption.⁴⁵ As the executive director of Global Action for Children, Jennifer Delaney, points out, the "independent voice for ethical adoption" Ethica.net even sponsored a campaign to raise the funds to allow Mercy to stay in her home village.⁴⁶ Interestingly, Delaney's provocation is also framed as an egoism/altruism debate—she begins and ends her piece with the question, "Is this about helping kids, or is this just 'all about Madonna'?"—but within the body of the piece considerations for the child occupy center stage.

Ubuntu (Reprise)

Madonna appears to be responding to some of the challenges leveled at her—at least those stemming from her adoption of David—in the 2008 documentary film that she wrote, narrated, and produced. The film is titled *I Am Because We Are*, a loose translation of the philosophy of *ubuntu* long existing in sub-Saharan Africa but popularized on the global stage by the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1996–98). This bizarre and hybrid film is part testimonial to the devastation caused by AIDS in Malawi, part music video, part advertisement for Madonna's charity Raising Malawi, as well as part explanation for her adoption of David and her concern with orphans more generally. It reworks the rescue narrative and resituates "humanitarian" adoption within a wider scope of activities that people can take to aid development in Malawi, as it narrates a spiritual reconfiguration of the obligations that tie people across the globe together.

One of the major goals of the film is to draw attention to the effects of the AIDS crisis in Malawi. The figures are indeed staggering. As the film reveals, there are one million orphans out of total population of twelve million. A second major goal is to spur the world beyond Africa into action—by raising money and encouraging other forms of humanitarian activity—to combat this problem. Linking these two together, one might say that the film is conceived around the basic (if often fallacious) activist assumption that the exposure of human rights abuses leads to action to end the abuse.⁴⁷ To achieve this end, Madonna joins up with the humanitarian stars Paul Farmer and Jeffrey Sachs, as well as former U.S. president Bill Clinton and Nobel Peace Prize laureate from South Africa Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Along with such

high profile global figures, the film features interviews with a series of Malawian politicians and activists. Most centrally, however, the film turns on the experiences of AIDS orphans. Sometimes it follows the story of children losing their parents and becoming orphans, and at other times it picks up the stories of the children after their parents have passed away.

I Am Because We Are relies on some standard if problematic techniques to mobilize support for the cause of AIDS orphans in Malawi. Most notable among these is its use of montages of black and white photographs that represent sick women and children. These shocking photographs, featuring often skeletal mothers with their equally skeletal children or the children alone, cry out for an emotional response—or at least they would if we had not seen similar images so many times before. Briggs points out that this kind of image is not only central to the Western collective consciousness in relation to transnational adoption and child sponsorship but also has become a stereotypical image of “third world need” more generally.⁴⁸ David Rieff underlines the ubiquitous circulation of such images and suggests that they often produce either “compassion fatigue” or modes of sympathetic investment that do not lead to action.⁴⁹ Given the saturation of the global media by these images, perhaps we should by now have learned that not showing such images might be more ethical than revealing them. Indeed, in response to the AIDS epidemic in Africa, showing these images may be especially pernicious. They feed into the negative stereotypes of Africa as a space of death and poverty and as a site of hypersexuality that made former South African president Thabo Mbeki deny that HIV causes AIDS and led to his disastrous AIDS policy.⁵⁰

These images can serve as a microcosm for the film as a whole, since there is a strong argument to be made that *I Am Because We Are* reinforces the view of northern audiences that black Africans are what Achille Mbembe, referring the history of racism in South Africa, calls “superfluous” beings whose bodies can be subjected to waste and violence.⁵¹ At the same time, it reinforces what Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg describes as the feeling of “safety” experienced by northern viewers of many films that supposedly aim to end human rights abuses.⁵²

The treatment of “traditional” Malawian culture in the film backs up this interpretation. The film presents “witchcraft” or “tradition” as a major factor impeding the effective combat of the disease. It does provide a serious analysis of the economic situation of tribal chiefs, who continue to force members of their tribes to participate in “purification” rituals that spread HIV/AIDS at least in part to ensure their own cultural and economic relevance. It thus gestures toward the links between witchcraft and global market forces and to the “occult economies” that the Comaroffs identify as a crucial aspect of “millennial capitalism.” However, the film also perpetrates a disturbing slippage between tribal culture and witchcraft. The emphasis given in the film to creepy images of African witch doctors dancing over mutilated children quite outweighs Paul Farmer’s measured explanation that what seems cruel and strange to outsiders can often be easily explained as a reaction to poverty; what spectators may be left with is not with Farmer’s voice but the clip of a masked black body swaying and dancing worthy of Joseph Conrad at his imperialist best.

However, *I Am Because We Are* also makes an effort to move beyond some of these

colonialist and neocolonialist imaginaries and to break down the visions of distance and safety—or, to put Goldberg’s fascinating description of Western citizenship as a “protective wrap” in the context of AIDS, of citizenship as a condom wrapping the Western viewer in latex.⁵³ First, in contrast to the notion of a “dying continent” and the representation of Africans as “victims” and “objects” rather than “survivors” and “subjects” or “agents,” the film emphasizes Malawian government officials, locally based aid workers, and community volunteers attempting to help solve the problems in their own country as well as the voices of children struggling to survive the AIDS epidemic. Stories like that of Wezi, a girl roughly eight years old who is HIV-positive but remains the primary caregiver to a number of younger children in an orphanage, show the children achieving success and living, not just dying. The story of Fanizo, who wins admission to an exclusive secondary school, is another case in point. The overall message the film wants to put out is that it is involvement in the global south should not be about giving charity or fixing their problems but about giving Malawians the tools to “empower themselves”—a rhetoric to which I will return below.

Second, as suggested in the title, the film attempts to rewrite its spectators’ understanding of responsibility and humanitarianism through the lens of the African philosophy of *ubuntu*. As glossed above, *ubuntu* can be translated as “I am because we are” or “a human is a human through other humans.” The South African writer Zakes Mda expands on this concept deeply embedded in and spanning across a variety of black African cultures, from his own local perspective:

When we black children of South Africa were growing up, we were taught by our parents, but especially by our grandparents, that we were not fully human until someone made us human. Humanity, our elders believed, was not something you were born with. Rather, it was endowed by other people. You were therefore a person because of other people. They called this philosophy *ubuntu* in the Nguni languages and *botho* in the Sotho languages. And how do others endow you with humanity? By giving you bounties of compassion and generosity . . . When you thanked someone who had been compassionate and generous to you, you uttered the words: “You have made me into a person.” As a beneficiary of *ubuntu* you had to make others into people, too, by showering them with compassion and generosity. Through deeds of compassion and generosity you could attain a high level of humanity.⁵⁴

Unlike the tradition of northern or Western individualism, then, where ethics is predominantly understood as a system of duties that stops each person from impinging on the freedom of others in any way, this African ethics suggests that we earn our own personhood by doing things for other people.⁵⁵ We exist and prosper in and through each other.

By privileging *ubuntu* as its guiding paradigm, the film promotes the value and relevance of southern philosophical paradigms for the public in the north. Along with providing a thematic way to validate Malawian culture in a way that transforms it into a global model, *ubuntu* can also be seen to motivate the formal construction of the film. At various key junctures, scenes from Malawi are juxtaposed with clips of spliced footage from other parts of the globe, from the Arctic to New York to

Baghdad. The explicit purpose of these sections is to show the audience that they cannot see themselves as removed from what is happening in Malawi—that the lives of people in the West are not separate or safe. In the global imaginary set out by *I Am Because We Are*, poverty and AIDS in Africa are made to overlap with Western urbanization and modernization generally and specifically with global warming, Islamic fundamentalism, the U.S. invasion of Iraq, and Hurricane Katrina. By using this principle of construction, the film underscores its narrated message that it is only when each person holds on to others and we cling to “the children [who] cling to us” that the disasters tying all of us together can be averted.

To be sure, the multivocal, internally divided film does not entirely succeed in forging a new understanding of humanitarianism based on African philosophy distinct from colonialist visions. As noted above, the rhetoric that the film returns to again and again is that of giving the people of Malawi the tools to empower themselves. While this is in some sense an improvement over the idea that Euro-Americans should jet in and fix the problems of the people of Malawi, it may be just another turn of the screw of the rescue narrative, since the Africans still depend on the will of rich people from somewhere else in order for their “empowerment” to be possible. Perhaps even more damagingly, the spiritual understanding of togetherness or “common humanity” set out in the film’s appropriation or construction of *ubuntu* may itself obscure an actually useful understanding of the systems that divide and connect us in material ways. Instead of learning much about the colonial history of Malawi and the dictatorship of Hastings Kamuzu Banda that followed it—topics to which the film dedicates roughly two and a half minutes—we hear Madonna hypothesize about sentimental and spiritual connections and see contingent juxtapositions linking global north and global south. We get the sense that AIDS is a force of nature that merely erupted onto the scene, instead of seeing how historical, political, and economic forces and current policies in and outside the country led to the expansion of this crisis and continue to marginalize African victims of HIV. In relation to Product (RED)TM, Richey and Ponte point to the tendency of current modes of celebrity humanitarianism to participate in “commodity fetishism”—on one level, in mystifying the economic relations inherent in the “helpful” products being sold, but on another, in mystifying the global economic structures that cause the problems that “compassionate consumption” is designed to alleviate.⁵⁶ Madonna’s film along these lines makes a spectacular commodity of the AIDS orphans she desires to help, since her own depiction of their situation obscures the causes of their current tragedy. And in a sense, how could it not turn these children into both commodity and spectacle, since any power that the film itself may have to inspire humanitarian action depends in the last instance on Madonna’s clever packaging of herself in these ways?

While there are differences between buying a Product (RED)TM t-shirt and the kind of action that Madonna calls for in her film—which in some sense works through the more traditional philanthropic model of using star power and spectacles of suffering to appeal for donations—these versions of celebrity humanitarianism exist along a continuum and fall into similar traps. This can be seen if we turn our attention to the local genealogy of the concept of *ubuntu*. While *ubuntu* was being held out by leaders such as Desmond Tutu in South Africa as a pan-African philosophy capable of

underwriting a new human rights era, *ubuntu* in Malawi was being corrupted by the new democratic government of Bakili Muluzi. Muluzi and his successor in the Malawi Congress Party used the term *ubuntu* as a codeword for political patronage—giving gifts in cash and kind to people who supported their policies.⁵⁷ Madonna is not the only person to attempt to revitalize the idea of *ubuntu* in Malawi in the past few years; there is also a brand of fair trade cola called Ubuntu Cola made in this African nation-state.⁵⁸ However, such a quick slide from patronage campaigns to fair trade marketing and humanitarian aid appeals might give one pause. Given its recent history in Malawi, what political work can *ubuntu* ultimately do? Are Madonna's film and the cola mistaken appropriations by well-meaning but perhaps not entirely helpful outsiders of a term already misappropriated? How different are the visions of aid work represented in the film from “compassionate consumption” of the cola and politics as usual?

These questions beg another: what does the film ultimately say about what can be done to help AIDS orphans in Malawi? Not surprisingly, *I Am Because We Are* presents the answer as a kind of individual consumer choice between different but parallel modes of humanitarian assistance. Madonna represents herself as choosing one option when she decides to become the adoptive mother of the child David. After showing a scene where she meets David, at that point in the care of little Wezi, Madonna asks herself and the viewers: “What was I prepared to do? If I was challenging people to open their minds and hearts, I had to be willing to stand at the front of the line.” Her solution: “I decided to try and adopt David.”⁵⁹ It could be argued that this redeployment of the adoption-as-rescue trope is meant to serve as a “hook” capturing interest and mobilizing other more structurally oriented forms of activism in Malawi, and the film does point to a variety of such actions that viewers could choose to take.⁶⁰ Madonna spotlights many issues where funding is necessary, from education policy to emotional and spiritual support for children to urban planning initiatives, agricultural advancement, and training sessions for tribal chiefs. In this regard, the film progressively reveals ways to fund a variety of community-based projects and spotlights these projects as the levers of social change. There is no escaping the fact, however, that the film presents transnational adoption as a “humanitarian” action interchangeable with sending money to support an orphanage or other local development programs through Raising Malawi. What does it mean to equate adopting a child and writing a check for a worthy cause?

Madonna's Intimate Disclosure

Madonna has been loudly criticized, from many sides, for adopting David and Mercy in order to publicize herself, and thus treating the children like fashion accessories. This is not the problem. The problem lies rather in the assumption that adoption is a mode of humanitarianism that forms the condition of possibility for the “fashion vs. philanthropy” debate. This assumption is opened for critique in the Sayles film *Casa de los Babys*, described at the beginning of this essay. In contrast, it is reinforced in the media representations of Madonna's adoptions, positively by her fans as they applaud her actions for their benefit to Malawi and negatively by her critics as they hold up the act of “saving a life” as the standard by which Madonna's adoption should be

judged. It is further disseminated in Madonna's film, where adopting a baby is literally presented as an equivalent to writing a check to support other humanitarian projects. Particularly in *I Am Because We Are*, such representations not only consolidate counterproductive visions of transnational adoption but also risk entrenching an anachronistic vision of humanitarianism precisely in the act of trying to reconfigure it.

Moreover, the focus on "saving" children lionizes the adoptive parent "savior" at the same time that it silences two sets of voices: those of the biological parents and that of the child. This dynamic is clearly visible in the film, where the biological parents are presented as "victims" in need of care themselves when they appear at all.⁶¹ While the absence of parental figures seems intuitive in a film about AIDS "orphans," the fact that David's biological father, very much alive, does not appear on screen points to the closures in dominant representations of adoption from the global south. The child faces a similar kind of silencing when he or she is presented as an interchangeable victim waiting to be saved.⁶² This second erasure is eerily evident in the closing credits of the film, which feature an update on all of the children except for David—the one child in whom viewers are presumably most interested. Does Madonna assume that we already know all about David? Does his continuing story cease to matter because he has been definitively rescued? Is there no space in the narrative she sets up for the experience of the adoptee? Posing these questions against the silence of the film is crucial in order to formulate what Jacqueline Bhabha proposes as a "child-centered" approach to issues involving children's rights.⁶³ As Bhabha argues, while it is difficult to figure out how to include the voices of children in discussion about the "best interests" of the child, such a step is necessary to create and regulate responsible policy relating to transnational adoption. Otherwise, this practice may be more likely to result in psychic damage than to provide a Cinderella ending for the particular child in question.

Further, in spite of the explicit effort of the film to rebrand humanitarian work as an actively shared responsibility to a common world as conceptualized through *ubuntu* and associated with the glamour of Madonna, the image of adoption constructed in *I Am Because We Are* reflects and indeed further entrenches a conservative vision of humanitarianism deeply rooted in Euro-American imperial history. With Madonna "standing at the front of the line," we have an image of a white woman mothering a black child because its black parents are unable to do so. Racialization is evident in the reification of the white hero rescuing the infantilized black subject. Gendering works as affect—feminized care—is foregrounded as the appropriate response to individuals conceived of as suffering victims. Here, providing succor to helpless child bodies becomes the paradigmatic humanitarian act. The fact that Madonna's name so remarkably calls to mind the Madonna and child iconography central to Christian belief only adds another layer to this European missionary model of activism. Building on and adapting the powerful argument made by Miriam Ticktin, one might argue that such a construction produces subjects who, even when they are rescued or relieved of suffering, are incapacitated as citizens and confined by a limited definition of the human.⁶⁴ It also keeps the humanitarian endeavor firmly fixed on treating symptoms rather than attending to the structural causes that constantly produce new "victims" in need of care.

I state this not to dismiss Madonna's film, celebrity humanitarianism, or transnational adoption. Indeed, part of the difficulty in discussing any of these issues is their polysemic nature, their ability to do multiple and contradictory kinds of work at the same time. Juxtaposed in the film with Madonna's framing of celebrity humanitarian adoption is a moment of personal disclosure that opens a different vista toward the future. At this moment, Madonna explains to the audience why it is that she feels the need to care for the children from Malawi by turning to her own personal history: "I can't compare my suffering to other children, but when I was six years old, my mother died. It's unfathomable, I can't explain the pain that I felt." With this confession, Madonna gestures toward the fact that adoption is not, fundamentally, about doing a good deed for others. It is an act of entwining two or more lives together indefinitely and in the most profound ways, in order to fulfill the desire of the adoptive parent for a certain child. While Madonna's statement can easily be labeled as an example of false identification with Malawian orphans, it also reveals what Madonna is gaining from her adoptions—a chance to release some of her own pain by becoming for others the mother-figure that she so keenly misses. It is by attending to this need that Madonna may come closest to representing the *ubuntu* she tries to package in the film, establishing lasting emotional and material connections not for the sake of "saving" someone else but for what she gains in doing so. And as she attends to this need in both the flash of the paparazzi cameras and the light of the intimate public sphere, she may reconfigure the image of family beyond the biological, the racial, and the national, in a way that may indeed impact the ability of spectators to see themselves as related to and invested in the lives of fellow humans who might otherwise be no more than the fabled "distant strangers" in need of salvation.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank the participants at the "Gender of the Humanitarian Narrative" conference, as well as Florian Becker, Eleni Coundouriotis, Manisha Desai, Kathy Libal, Samuel Martínez, Sarah Nuttall, and Cathy Schlund-Vials, for their helpful engagement with this essay.

Anagnost discusses the role that transnational adoption can play in creating a sense of "completion" and develops a theory of "maternal citizenship" in Ann Anagnost, "Scenes of Misrecognition," *Positions* 8, no. 2 (2000): 391–93. See also David L. Eng, "Transnational Adoption and Queer Diasporas," *Social Text* 21, no. 3 (2003): 7–8; and Eng, "Political Economies of Passion: Transnational Adoption and Global Woman," *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 7, no. 1 (2006): 49.

2. Eng, "Transnational Adoption and Queer Diasporas," 9–10.

3. Laura Briggs, "Mother, Child, Race, Nation," *Gender and History* 15, no. 2 (2003): 184–85, 191–92.

4. Eng, "Transnational Adoption and Queer Diasporas," 10.

5. Anagnost, "Scenes of Misrecognition," 393.

6. See the various charts that make up Peter Selman, "The Diaper Diaspora," *Foreign Policy* 158 (January/February 2007): 32.

7. Anagnost, "Scenes of Misrecognition," 399. Eng and also Briggs similarly point to what I will refer to below as the "rescue narrative" element of transnational adoption. All of these conceptions can be profitably understood in relation to Makau Mutua's seminal critique of the "savages-

victims-saviors” formula that underwrites northern human rights discourse, where northern aid workers are represented as the rescuers of innocent victims from barbaric (southern) governments. See Mutua, “Savages, Victims and Saviors: The Metaphor of Human Rights,” *Harvard International Law Journal* 42, no. 1 (2001): 201–45.

8. As Briggs points out, this language circulates forcefully in both elite and popular discourse in Latin America, where the United States is often accused of stealing babies and baby stealing is conflated with organ theft. See Laura Briggs, “Making American Families: Transnational Adoption and U.S. Latin America Policy,” in *Haunted by Empire*, ed. Ann Laura Stoler (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006), 616.

9. Eng, “Political Economics of Passion,” 51. Eng’s brief discussion of *Casa de los Babys* (ibid., 56) also complements this discussion here.

10. An Amazon product reviewer, Jenny J.J.I., writes: “I was very grateful that there was no real closure at the end, and that all Sayles had to say was that, despite all, both the least sympathetic and the most sympathetic of the potential moms were about to leave with babies. This is certainly for anyone who is considering adoption (domestic or international—either way, it’s all the same issues) should see it.” See <http://www.amazon.com/Casa-los-Babys-Angelina-Pelez/product-reviews/B0001EQIF6> (accessed August 4, 2009).

11. While I do not have space to pursue this line of argument here, it seems important to point out (especially in the context of a dossier on gender and humanitarianism) that the Madonna adoption controversy builds on and carries within it the memory of the many other controversies regarding sex, gender, and race that Madonna’s actions have prompted across her three-decades-long career as a cultural icon. These include the scandals over her representation of her own female sexual agency, her crotch-grabbing and cross-dressing stunts, and the challenges she issues to racial and religious oppression in videos such as *Like A Prayer*. Among the rich and extensive scholarship on Madonna, see bell hooks, “Madonna: Plantation Mistress or Soul Sister?” in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 157–64; Carla Freccero, “Our Lady of MTV: Madonna’s ‘Like a Prayer,’” *boundary 2* 19, no. 2 (1992): 163–83; and Lynn O’Brien Hallstein, “Feminist Assessment of Emancipatory Potential and Madonna’s Contradictory Gender Practices,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 82 (May 1996): 125–41.

12. See Laura Suski, “Children, Suffering and the Humanitarian Appeal,” in *Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy*, eds. Richard A. Wilson and Richard D. Brown (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 202, 209–10. Suski defines humanitarianism as an “emotion-based impulse” that creates an “active response . . . a humanitarian intends to alleviate the suffering of others.” Wilson and Brown expand on the link between humanitarianism and suffering in their “Introduction” to *Humanitarianism and Suffering*, 10–12. The term “distant strangers” comes from Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

13. See Suski and Briggs, “Mother, Child, Race, Nation.”

14. Jean and John L. Comaroff outline their vision of contemporary neoliberal capitalism in “Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming,” *Public Culture* 12, no. 2 (2000): 291–343. Linking an increase in consumption at the cost of production with the rise of a series of “occult economies,” the Comaroffs identify “a capitalism that presents itself as a gospel of salvation; a capitalism that, if rightly harnessed, is invested with the capacity to wholly transform the universe of the marginalized and disempowered” (292).

15. Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* (Durham, N.C.: Duke

University Press, 1997), 4–5. Berlant compellingly critiques the intimate public sphere as a conservative construct that strips away the possibility of radical, solidarity-based politics. This critique points to a need to resist this confinement of the political to the domestic. Nevertheless, as I will suggest below, since the intimate public sphere forms the matrix for millennial American culture, it is also important to consider the possibilities of refiguring politics from within this construct. One useful example of an effort to create transformation through intimate disclosure, in this case in an African context, can be seen in Sarah Nuttall and Liz McGregor's *Load Shedding: Writing On and Over the Edge of South Africa* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2009).

16. As Wilson and Brown point out, one should not assume too much internal consistency within the larger field of humanitarianism, since multiple and contradictory conceptions of humanitarian action co-exist with each other and are tangled together in popular culture. Wilson and Brown, "Introduction," 4.

17. Viviana Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 169–74.

18. *Ibid.*, 190–91.

19. *Ibid.*, 199.

20. This information comes from the "Adoption Timeline" at the Adoption History Project, University of Oregon, <http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~adoption/timeline.html> (accessed May 1, 2009).

21. Farrow cited in Anthony Shiu, "Flexible Production: International Adoption, Race, Whiteness," *Jouvert* 6, no. 1/2 (2001), para. 8.

22. *Ibid.*, paras. 8–9.

23. The double nature of adoption is something that many scholars reflect on, though they configure it in different ways. Anagnost, for example, asks the question: "How can we turn some of the energy we invest in the nurture of our own children to a more broadly realized program of social activism that transcends the privatized realm of domestic life to enhance the conditions of nurture for all children?" Anagnost, "Scenes of Misrecognition," 413.

24. For an overview of this critique, see Wilson and Brown, "Introduction," 8, 11–12. For more extended arguments along these lines, see Suski, "Children, Suffering, and the Humanitarian Appeal," 215; and Miriam Ticktin, "Where Ethics and Politics Meet: The Violence of Humanitarianism in France," *American Ethnologist* 33, no. 1 (2006): 33–49.

25. Linda Ann Richey and Stefano Ponte, "Better (Red)TM than Dead?: Celebrities, Consumption and International Aid," *Third World Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (2008): 716.

26. *Ibid.*, 711–13.

27. Alex de Waal, "The Humanitarian Carnival: A Celebrity Vogue," *World Affairs* 171, no. 2 (2008): 47.

28. *Ibid.*, 50.

29. *Ibid.*, 52.

30. I thank Sarah Nuttall for her insights on this point.

31. See "Bringing Home David," *People*, October 30, 2006, 60–62; and Veronica S. Root, "Angelina and Madonna: Why All the Fuss? An Exploration of the Rights of the Child and Intercountry Adoption within African Nations," *Chicago Journal of International Law* 8, no. 1 (2007): 324, 337–39. According to Root, the accusation that Malawian law bars adoption by nonresidents does not rest on solid legal reasoning, since Malawi did sign the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (2000), which allows adoption to persons who are citizens of countries that are signatories to the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption.

32. "Madonna's Adoption Woes," *People*, November 6, 2006, 62.
33. Josh Tyrangiel, "I Have a Good Life to Offer David," *Time*, November 13, 2006, 141.
34. Raising Malawi itself, rather than Madonna's adoptions, became the center of news controversy as this article went to press, when it was announced that the board of the charity had been disbanded for financial mismanagement. Raising Malawi is currently reorganizing in conjunction with the Global Philanthropy Group, and Madonna asserts that she will continue to use the charity for development purposes in Malawi. Adam Nagourney, "Madonna's Charity Fails in Bid to Finance School," *New York Times*, March 24, 2011.
35. "Madonna 'Ecstatic' over Adoption," *BBC News*, June 12, 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/8095837.stm> (accessed August 4, 2009).
36. See *BBC News*, <http://newsforums.bbc.co.uk/nol> (accessed May 4, 2009).
37. Nancy Gibbs, "With Her Malawi Adoption, Did Madonna Save a Life or Buy a Baby?," *Time*, October 22, 2006.
38. "Madonna Talks of Baby 'Struggle,'" *BBC News*, May 22, 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/7414211.stm> (accessed May 4, 2009).
39. Szish made this comment on CNN's *Larry King Live*, "Inside Madonna's Adoption Controversy," October 18, 2006, <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/061018/lkl.01.html> (accessed August 4, 2009).
40. Ibid.
41. See the *SNL* website, http://www.nbc.com/Saturday_Night_Live/video/clips/update-madonna-and-angelina-jolie/1081317 (accessed May 1, 2009).
42. I am indebted to Francoise Dussart and Eleni Coundouriotis for this point. I refer here to the "perhaps radical" potential of transnational adoption to reshape the intimate public sphere that Eng identifies when he states: "The contemporary formation of interracial First and Third World families represents a tremendous opportunity to question the conservative impulses of (hetero)sexuality and diaspora." Eng, "Transnational Adoption and Queer Diaspora," 32–33.
43. See Glenn Beck, "Madonna: Adoption or Accessory?," October 18, 2006, <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/061018/gb.01.html> (accessed May 1, 2009).
44. "Head to Head: Madonna Adoption," *BBC News*, April 1, 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7974232.stm> (accessed May 4, 2009).
45. Jennifer Delaney, "Madonna Malawi Adoption Puts Spotlight on AIDS, Poverty, Orphans, and Pop Stars," *US News & World Report Online*, April 7, 2009, <http://www.usnews.com/opinion/articles/2009/04/07/madonna-malawi-adoption-puts-spotlight-on-aids-poverty-orphans-and-pop-stars> (accessed August 1, 2009).
46. See Ethica's website, <http://www.ethicanet.org/malawi> (accessed August 1, 2009).
47. On this assumption and its failures, see Thomas Keenan, "Publicity and Indifference (Sarajevo on Television)," *PMLA* 117, no. 1 (2002): 104–17; and Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg, *Beyond Terror: Gender, Narrative, Human Rights* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 4, 11.
48. Briggs, "Mother, Child, Race, Nation," 179–80.
49. David Rieff, *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003), 33–34.
50. See Jean Comaroff, "Beyond Bare Life: Aids, (Bio)Politics and the Neoliberal Order," *Public Culture* 19, no. 1 (2007): 201, 214; see also Richey and Ponte, "Better (Red)TM than Dead?,"
720. For an earlier and sensitive reading of the problem of representing people from the global

south, particularly Africa, in visual culture, see Jeremy Benthall, *Disasters, Relief and the Media* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 177–88. Benthall quotes studies revealing the extent to which portraying Africa as a space of suffering and death in the 1970s and 1980s shaped British public opinion, and he traces the complex debates that occurred in NGOs like Save the Children over how to most ethically use photographic images in relief and development work. This level of engaged self-reflection clearly has not been filtered down to all NGOs and all forms of news media, and for this reason it might be useful to revisit the debates Benthall lays out.

51. Achille Mbembe, "Aesthetics of Superfluity," in *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*, ed. Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008), 43.

52. Goldberg, *Beyond Terror*, 33.

53. Writing about films that represent Western characters witnessing human rights abuses in the global south, Goldberg describes how "western characters wear their citizenships (not to mention their skins) like protective wraps in faraway places, allowing them to move safely and to command help from natives willing to expose themselves to danger in order to save the western protagonist." She later describes U.S. and Canadian citizenship as a "prophylactic." *Ibid.*, 72, 81.

54. Zakes Mda, "Justify the Enemy," *Boston Review* (May/June 2008), <http://bostonreview.net/BR33.3/mda.php> (accessed August 1, 2009).

55. For a robust philosophical analysis of *ubuntu* and its comparison to Kantian and other forms of Western ethics, see Thaddeus Metz, "Towards an African Moral Theory," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 15, no. 3 (2007): 321–41. Metz points out (p. 324) that a version of something like *ubuntu* exists and has persisted over time in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, from Ghana to South Africa. On *ubuntu* in Malawi specifically, see Richard Tambulasi and Happy Kayuni, "Can African Feet Divorce Western Shoes? The Case of 'Ubuntu' and Democratic Good Governance in Malawi," *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 14, no. 2 (2005): 148.

56. Richey and Ponte, "Better (Red)TM than Dead?," 723.

57. Tambulasi and Kayuni, "Can African Feet," 151.

58. Thanks to Richard Wilson for alerting me to the existence of Ubuntu Cola. The company's website tells the story of their operation in Malawi: <http://www.ubuntu-trading.com> (accessed August 1, 2009).

59. As one of my anonymous reviewers points out, it is interesting that Madonna ends up adopting one of the few children in the orphanage who is not HIV-positive, and further that she does not discuss this fact directly in the film (though she does assert that, when she decided to adopt David, he had "pneumonia, malaria, and God knows what else"). This gives some sense of the closures of discourse in celebrity-led humanitarian campaigns.

60. I am indebted to Kathy Libal for this point.

61. Suski notes a similar depiction of parents of sponsored children. Suski, "Children, Suffering, and the Humanitarian Appeal," 213.

62. This description resonates with Lisa Cartwright's work on "waiting children," though instead of focusing on the way visual images can present children as substitutable victims, Cartwright traces the way photographic images are used to individuate children in sometimes problematic ways during the adoption process—serving to "lure" potential adoptive parents and being used for purposes of racial and medical classification, along with becoming cherished parts of the family memory box. Lisa Cartwright, "Photographs of Waiting Children: The Transnational Adoption Market," *Social Text* 21, no. 1 (2003): 83. Cartwright's piece explores the dilemmas related to transnational adoption in a spirit of constructive criticism rather than to condemn the practice.

63. Jacqueline Bhabha, "The Child—What Sort of Human?" *PMLA* 121, no. 5 (2006): 1534. Bhabha made this point specifically in relation to transnational adoption and the Madonna case at her lecture "Motherless Children and Childless Mother: Transnational Adoption and the Narration Wars," University of Connecticut, Storrs, May 2009.
64. Ticktin, "Where Ethics and Politics Meet," 34, 44.