



Bondage
Trap. Mouse
trap and
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Mr. Kristof, I Presume?

*saving Africa in the footsteps of **Nicholas Kristof***

Kathryn Mathers

I DO NOT want to write about Nicholas Kristof. The sheer banality of his representations of Africa paralyzes me. His columns and blogs about Africa in the *New York Times* are repeatedly under fire for their poor research, careless reading of studies on Africa, and blatant generalizations. This allows him to repeat troubling and problematic tropes about Africa and about how Africans need foreign help. Yet student bodies across the country frequently invite him to speak on their campuses. Saving Africa has become a favorite hobby for celebrities and ordinary Americans alike. And journalists like Nicholas Kristof, who write endless stories about Americans doing good in Africa, are central to this shift. Kristof even got to bunk down with actor George Clooney in Chad so that they could report back about the conflict in Darfur across the border.

Kristof's representations of Africa in the *New York Times*, therefore, seem more in tune with those media outlets not known for good journalism or social critique. Yet my global development classes are full of students who believe that he speaks to their concerns and it is his writing that shapes their goals for doing good in the world. All of the copies of Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn's book *Half the Sky* were checked out of the libraries of nearby universities last summer. My students know that there are problems with the development and aid industries and can even offer biting critiques of celebrity interventions in aid programs in Africa. But they believe that they can do it better, that their generation understands the failures and can solve them, and that their intentions are pure enough to overcome the cynics. Their confidence is made possible in part by the examples of individual young Americans just like them establishing and running educational, health, and technological programs in Africa trumpeted by a serious journalist like Kristof in a serious newspaper like the *New York Times*. Kristof's writing about humanitarianism in Africa makes possible a very limited but accessible form of aid by asking his readers to focus on what they can do and the importance of one individual saving another. So, no, I do not want to write about Nicolas Kristof. But I must, because he has claimed such an authoritative voice in conversations about Americans' relationship to Africans that he has somehow made the act of writing about them an actual intervention in the lives of poor people in the world.



WHEN KRISTOF FIRST moved from a focus on his area of expertise—China and especially the Asian economy—to write about Africa, it was to explore, like many of his colleagues at the time, the economic prospects of the continent during the 1990s. Then, as he is now, he was drawn to the sentimental, mobilizing the faces of individual women to tell stories about broad African challenges:

MWANABWITO, Tanzania—Her face was calm and soothing, but Mariam Karega’s eyes brimmed with fear as she cradled little Hussein and nursed him, trying to pump life into him along with her milk.

MALARIA MAKES A COMEBACK, AND IS MORE DEADLY THAN EVER.
NEW YORK TIMES JANUARY 8, 1997

KISANGANI, Congo—Mauwa Funidi’s face softens and glows for a few moments as she recalls happier days as a brilliant student, as a new college graduate, as a member of a prospering family in a nation seemingly about to enjoy an endless economic boom.

CHANGEOVER IN AFRICA: IN CONGO, A NEW ERA WITH OLD BURDENS.
NEW YORK TIMES MAY 20, 1997

BY THE BEGINNING of the new millennium, however, he became part of the astonishingly wide range of people participating in cementing a peculiarly colonial set of images and ideas about Africa. From Bono’s Product (RED), to Oprah, to Jeffrey Sachs and his cheerleader, Angelina Jolie, Africa increasingly occupies a troubling space in the lives of Americans. Not least because of how much these contemporary images of Africa and engagement with Africans are reminiscent of the ways the continent was imagined and fashioned in imperial and colonial times in Europe and America. Twenty-first century travelers and viewers of the so-called Tribal Channel or NatGeo search for and often find an untamed wilderness devoid of markers of modernity and global connections and disconnections. African people may be present either as backdrops to the Westerners’ adventures and discovery or as embodiments of African primevalness; helpless characters in travelers’ stories about self-discovery and responsibility. The presence of these Africans helps to create the fiction of reciprocity that Mary Louis Pratt has described in the writing of nineteenth century explorers like Mungo Park and Henry Stanley. This fiction made it possible to claim that their explorations were an innocent pursuit of knowledge and underscored their anti-conquest agenda.

These similarities were starkly represented by the History Channel's 2009 reality television show, *Expedition Africa*, which brought together a motley crew of modern day "explorers" in order to retrace Henry Morton Stanley's footsteps in Tanzania. Like Stanley, who wrote for American newspapers in the nineteenth century about his explorations of Africa, the toughest challenge on their journey was to avoid the towns and other markers of human settlement. Kristof's gaze into the eyes of suffering African women evokes Stanley's own stories of being unmanned by his encounters with Africans, stories that allow both men to create a fiction of equality and engagement with people from the continent. But familiar as these images seem, they have not always characterized Americans' relationship with Africa during the twentieth century. These have been diverse and changing and, of course, often linked to the concerns and histories of the descendants of Africans in America.



AS I BEGAN my own fieldwork in 1999 with Americans interested in Africa—as activists, investors, development experts, tourists, study abroad students, policy makers—the conversation about Africa fit comfortably into a set of late twentieth-century neoliberal global relationships. At the end of the 1990s, I observed a dynamic and diverse set of debates about new African nations and new African consumers. The PBS series hosted by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Wonders of the African World*, was generating debate online and in print about representations of Africa in America. The National Summit on Africa was mobilizing grassroots feedback across the country on proposed education, economic and cultural policy papers on Africa. Secretary of State Albright and President Clinton both traveled in Africa in 1997 and 1998 respectively. The President talked of “an Africa whose political and economic accomplishments grow more impressive each month” in remarks broadcast throughout the continent before his arrival. Press on Africa focused on such attempts by the West to broker peace, democracy, and free trade on a continent poised for prosperity.

When the World Affairs Council of Northern California hosted Susan E. Rice, then assistant secretary of state for African affairs, on November 10, 1999 in San Francisco, the audience was greeted by protestors decrying the involvement of U.S. oil companies, especially Chevron, in violence and government oppression in Nigeria and other human rights abuses in the name of Free Trade. Rice, though, focused on the value to the United States and to American corporations of a “healthy” Africa, especially in terms of the potentially large influx of new consumers the continent could offer. On the left, the Jubilee 2000 campaign sought to build a South-South alliance to fight for the cancellation of debt. Rock-superstar and humanitarian Bono



Black Trap.
Mouse trap and
birth control
dispenser.
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even went on the *Oprah Show* to try to explain why the debt accrued by South American and African regimes during the 1970s and 1980s should not have to be paid back by the new democratically elected governments of post-postcolonial nations. Though these concerted efforts by global corporations and northern states to produce disciplined consumers in Africa were troubling, this moment in U.S. relations with the African continent stands apart from the subsequent and increasingly dominant stories of Americans saving helpless Africans.

Over the first decade of the twenty-first century such familiar neoliberal conversations about Africa began to incorporate neocolonial narratives that evoked the nineteenth century travel writing of missionaries, explorers, and scientists. The positive press that characterized most of Bill Clinton's administration came to an abrupt halt towards the end of 1999 when the issue of AIDS in Africa began to dominate American media. It seemed that whatever hope Americans may have had for African nations to develop stable capitalist democracies was completely drowned by this epidemic. Debates about structural inequalities represented by the debt cancellation movement got subsumed by the apparent urgency of humanitarian rather than economic needs.

This single story began in 2000 and slowly took over all the American events, meetings, and orientations that I attended, as well as dominating the media on Africa. But after the events of September 11, 2001, the subsequent and rapid pathologizing of African people and African societies felt like a runaway train, and even the work of researchers, let alone journalists, could not escape the story of a continent facing such a pandemic. This was also when the desire to save Africans became the dominant story told by American travelers. While a very real tragedy for too many people and families around the world, the AIDS story was also a perfect "African story." It increasingly brought up all the old lemons about Africa: tradition versus modernity; patriarchy and hyper-masculinity; tribalism; over-sexualized black bodies; government failures and incompetence; etcetera. It was all too seldom a story about global inequalities, or the structural causes of poverty that contribute so much to HIV infection rates in Africa, and hardly ever about local health care providers, family and community support systems, and the flawed but willing health services all over the continent. Africans could not escape HIV/AIDS and nor could the Americans who cared about Africa. Suddenly there were no conversations about new democracies in Africa, or investment opportunities; the potential consumers were represented as too sick to labor, let alone to shop. This became the burden of caring Americans whose consumption practices can give a sick child in Africa ARVs or provide mosquito nets against the ravages of malaria.

Helping Africans, therefore, became a way for Americans to "do good" in the world without questioning the growing inequalities at home.

Here the relationship between Africa and Americans became part of a broader American story, both local and global. Two factors have been especially important in shaping this shift in how Africa is represented in the United States. First, the tragedy of September 11, 2001 and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq brought home disturbing encounters between Americans and the world that had largely taken place on other continents. This has made Americans more conscious that their role in the world is not entirely positive, contributing to American desires to do good somewhere, anywhere in the world where they are not hated. Second, an increasing shift in the U.S. to a neoliberal individualizing discourse of responsibility was helped by displacing AIDS from an American public health care crisis to the third world, and especially to Africa. The very “naturalness” of Africa supported by neocolonial imagery gave credence to the idea, important to the American story of AIDS as a disease caused by deviance, of AIDS as “nature striking back.” Images of Africa, founded on the rhetoric of the AIDS epidemic, created a space of undifferentiated suffering people that needed to be rescued through education about HIV or the simple dissemination of a drug. Helping Africans, therefore, became a way for Americans to “do good” in the world without questioning the growing inequalities at home.

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KRISTOF’S STORIES ABOUT Africa after 2003 returned again and again to the AIDS epidemic ravaging Africans. To his credit he took on the failures, not only of local governments, but also of foreign organizations to slow the epidemic down, and was especially critical of the ways that evangelical Christian organizations were characterizing the challenges of AIDS in Africa. When his focus shifted to Darfur he made concerted, though flawed (especially given his adoption of George Clooney as *the* expert on the conflict) efforts to raise the profile of this war in the United States. His coverage supported coalitions like SAVE DARFUR that were flourishing on campuses in the United States. He even expressed a frustration with his own industry’s inability to change the ways Americans thought about Africa as well as their obsession with celebrities:

[W]e need to show that we serve the public good—which means covering genocide as seriously as we cover, say, Tom Cruise.

ALL EARS FOR TOM CRUISE, ALL EYES ON BRAD PITT.
NEW YORK TIMES 26 JULY 2005

BUT SUCH A critical perspective, especially in his writing about Africa, did not last.

While many *New York Times* readers and subscribers read his writing with enthusiasm, lots of people don't. Comments on his own blog on the *New York Times'* website and other multiple online sources—especially those interested in how Africa is represented—rail against how often he gets the facts and even the fundamental issues wrong. These critiques of Kristof include his seemingly deliberate inability to contextualize or historicize anything happening in Africa and his obsession with the white, often American, saviors of African sufferers. Julia Holler, for example, writing for FAIR, shows how his more than careless reading of an MIT report allowed him to make these dubious generalizations in his May 23, 2010 column entitled *Moonshine or the Kids?*:

...if the poorest families spent as much money educating their children as they do on wine, cigarettes and prostitutes, their children's prospects would be transformed. Much suffering is caused not only by low incomes, but also by shortsighted private spending decisions by heads of households.

Edwin Okong'o writes on New American Media's EthnoBlog about Kristof and his wife, Sheryl WuDunn's piece on "The Women's Crusade":

But reading "The Women's Crusade" made me feel like I was reading a tale from the nineteenth century... If I hadn't grown up in Kenya, one of the places Kristof and WuDunn wrote about, it would have been hard for me to imagine the existence of even a single good man in the developing world.

On the RH Reality blog, Yifat Susskind and Diana Duarte of *Madre* summarize the frustration of people in both Africa and the U.S. who work on the same issues that Kristof cares so much about:

Kristof and WuDunn tell the stories of women facing catastrophic circumstances, but with little thought to the forces that created such circumstances. Why do women suffer abuse, poverty, and discrimination? Because, we are meant to understand, the culture "over there" has always thus sentenced them.

Despite these critiques, Kristof's writing about Africa (and he is not alone) is attractive and compelling to many Americans. Students and other fans come to listen to him talk about the ways that impoverished women around the world are being helped by people just like them. These are the same students that attend my classes on Africa or global development, who just want to know how they can "do development better." My courses ask them to take a critical look at the structural, political, and economic causes of poverty and the ways that development and humanitarian interventions often contribute to these causes. But Kristof offers a much simpler and ultimately compelling answer to their question. Kristof has become the very thing he once bemoaned, a celebrity in his own right, an unquestioned authority on places and people that he really knows little about. His claim to this authority seems to lie partly in the strength of his own caring and partly in the ways his fans respond to him. Yet even they raise questions about the impact of aid and humanitarian intervention on global poverty and health care. Kristof responds with his "starfish parable," which goes something like this:

Walking along a beach covered in stranded starfish washed up by the tide you encounter a young girl picking up the starfish one by one and throwing them back into the ocean. "Why," you ask her, "are you bothering to throw the starfish back into the water, when you obviously will never be able to throw them all back?" "True," she says, "but look" and she bends over and picks up another starfish and throws it out to sea. "See I have helped that one."

And see, says Kristof, one individual can at least help one person and that is what matters.

What is so marked about this story, though, is how much it reflects Kristof's limited approach to global poverty and aid. It also illustrates the extent to which his writing embodies and defends a particular relationship between Americans and Africans—naturalized, individualized and apolitical—that is so prevalent today. First, starfish are washed ashore by an inexplicable random and completely unstoppable force—a high tide, an ocean without cause or agenda—certainly not worth interrogating about why or how starfish are being washed ashore. On the beach the starfish are helpless and voiceless, unable to solve or even articulate their problem. One young girl comes along, and without pondering or asking what the starfish might prefer—a nice rock pool or a communal return to the water, for example—throws them one at a time back into the ocean. Especially scary is that her action will inevitably lead to the starfish being once again washed ashore by a mindless tide, a possibility that Kristof is well aware of:



A Match Made in Heaven Trap for Rasheed Araeen. Mouse trap and match book. ©2011 Theodore Harris.

So now I have purchased the freedom of two human beings so I can return them to their villages. But will emancipation help them? Will their families and villages accept them? Or will they, like some other girls rescued from sexual servitude, find freedom so unsettling that they slink back to slavery in the brothels? We'll see.

BARGAINING FOR FREEDOM.
NEW YORK TIMES JANUARY 1, 2004

This model does not question the causes of poverty, either general or specific, for the people it is meant to help. It does not pay attention to what people are doing for themselves or ask what they need. It is founded on a story that treats people as if they were just part of a natural landscape washed ashore by forces that aid agencies do not participate in or have any control over. It offers solutions, often expensive and technological, and therefore measurable, that inevitably cannot be sustained or make any genuine long term change in the lives of poor people around the world. This makes it difficult to tell my students that there is not a single solution to the problems they want to solve—that solutions are multiple and very particular to place, people, and the problem itself. It is not that Kristof's story is always wrong, but that it is the only one he tells. The stories Kristof tells invariably leave out existing and local agencies and individuals fighting the same fight he is to rescue a woman from violence or poverty. In his blog



Malcolm X
Trapped. Mouse trap
and button. ©2011
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“You Need Nicolas Kristof,” Dan Moshenberg challenges Kristof’s most recent story about helpless African girls:

The story says, if you’re Black and a girl, in “a place like Sierra Leone,” you better have the phone number of a prominent White American Male. You need Nicholas Kristof.

AFRICA IS A COUNTRY.
OCTOBER 15, 2011

Moshenberg describes dozens of Sierra Leonean women, politicians, activists, and business women that are working alone or through a variety of local organizations to help and support their countrywomen, contrary to Kristof’s message that they are alone. These are the women that I want my students to listen to and who I believe should be the recipients of the donations of well-intended and concerned Americans.

But Kristof, like the majority of image-makers of Africa in America, almost invariably tells a story about the good American in a bad African country and the ways that they are helping and saving Africans. While he has come under a great deal of criticism for his insistence on approaching Africa through the lens of western heroics on the continent, he justifies it in his blog for the *New York Times* with an astonishing dismissal of his audiences’ power to think:

It’s very hard to get people to care about distant crises like that. One way of getting people to read at least a few grafs is to have some kind of a foreign protagonist, some American who they can identify with as a bridge character. And so if this is a way I can get people to care about foreign countries, to read about them, ideally, to get a little bit more involved, then I plead guilty.

WESTERNERS ON WHITE HORSES.
JULY 14, 2010, 5:38 PM

My students would also argue for the benefits of awareness no matter how it is come by, whether through stories of American saviors or celebrities adopting babies. Indeed, Kristof does consistently write about Africa in a media space that equally consistently ignores the continent. He believes that he is doing important work in the American media on behalf of Africa and Africans and his intentions are certainly good. In her study of late twentieth century white European and American novelists, *Weary Sons of Conrad* (2002), Brenda Cooper asks whether it is possible for such authors to escape the burdens of colonial pasts and imperial tropes when writing about Africa. She offers only a qualified “yes,” suggesting that, despite the stranglehold of African discourse originating in conquest, thoughtful, politically astute, and sensitive story-telling can free white men from the burdens

of the past. It is a qualified “yes” because while writing against patriarchy, imperialism, and racism, white male Western writers can still “involuntarily reaffirm and collude with some of them.”

Kristof colludes with patriarchy and imperialism through the most persistent trope in his writing about Africa, aid, and humanitarianism. This, as his starfish parable shows, is the story of the lone, often white, often American traveler who stumbles onto a scene of devastating and disturbing poverty somewhere in the underdeveloped/third/poverty-stricken world and returns home to try and do something to help. All this takes, according to Kristof, is a nice person with good intentions. This journey to poverty and back to become a fundraiser or advocate for Africans has become an increasingly familiar story.

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THE AMERICAN TRAVELERS I worked with in 2000 as an anthropologist, however, had diverse reasons for going to Africa on a “trip of a lifetime,” reasons connected to factors such as their family histories, their interest in South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, concerns about environmentalism, and even a passion for surfing. These Americans did experience a life changing moment—an important expectation of travel to destinations like southern Africa—but not necessarily of the kind that they expected. They came face to face with a realization of their Americanness and the burdens that such a globally privileged identity carried. All of them told stories about their encounters with poverty and suffering and how it changed them. Unlike the travelers Kristof mostly writes about they often returned to America questioning their own privilege, and developing their political and ethical responsibilities in the United States rather than in Africa. Certainly some dreamed about joining the Peace Corps or volunteering in Africa but many made career decisions to pursue work that might impact issues important in American society and politics. This was a very hopeful moment, as they had begun their journeys feeling politically powerless or alienated, and ended it as socially active young Americans planning to work toward political and social change in the United States, change that had the possibility of also changing U.S. relations with Africa.

But it is the former response, the impetus to join foreign aid agencies, with its emphasis on individual goodwill and a simplistic, technological approach to what are serious geopolitical problems, that has become characteristic of the aid and development industries. It is prevalent amongst the giant foundations like Gates, Google, and the Global Fund, organizations that might have been able to take more renegade approaches to global poverty alleviation and health care. It also dominates the endless stories in entertainment media of encountering poverty and saving people by celebrities from Oprah, Bono,

and Angelina Jolie, to Paris Hilton. While Kristof has a bit of a love affair with George Clooney, he largely focuses on stories of everyday Americans who found school programs or develop new innovative ways to make sanitary napkins. Yet it doesn't seem so complicated to understand, or for somebody like Kristof to communicate, that putting band-aids on the symptoms of serious problems, while supporting the very structures that make those problems and perpetuate inequalities at home and away, is not going to end poverty, empower women, or build equitable societies.

Kristof's readers, as he points out, trust the personal experience of people like them over other forms of knowledge construction or information sources such as local development workers and researchers or even American scholarship and critical writing on the issues that concern them. This in part is why so many Americans still seem to have to travel somewhere in person or through other people's travel stories to discover that there are poor people there. They embrace or repeat stories of discovery and revelation as if they lived in isolation without the possibility of obtaining information and knowledge about the world without going there in person or vicariously. One of the frustrating aspects of trying to understand what Americans learn when they travel to Africa is that all too often their experiences in "Africa" become the foundation for an authority to speak about African issues, despite knowing no more about them than when they left America. This discovery is more about authority and sincerity than it is about information or knowledge learned on their travels. I saw the power of the authority conveyed by experience when returned travelers told *their* stories about "Africa." This story—been there, saw it, suffered through it—gives the traveler the required authority to know how to solve the problems they saw. It highlights how these stories teach readers to care about American travelers and not the Africans that they encounter.

Kristof's single story mobilizes the authority of the traveler. He frequently draws on this familiar trope in writing about Africa—travel writing—as the mechanism for framing his and his audiences' "discovery" of Africa. These travel narratives are sometimes about his own journeys, sometimes those of an accompanying celebrity or politician. But most importantly his columns annually rediscover Africa through the journeys of young protégés, aspiring writers who enter a *New York Times* competition for the privilege of traveling to Africa with him. Here they can have their own encounters with poverty and suffering and with ways to overcome it, as he explains:

I originally decided to hold this contest because I thought that plenty of young people tune out a fuddy-duddy like myself but might be more engaged by a fellow-student encountering African poverty for the first time.

Americans still seem to have to travel somewhere in person or through other people's travel stories to discover that there are poor people there.

MARCH 9, 2007

THAT KRISTOF CHOOSES travel writing and especially writing by the first time traveler to frame his recent work on Africa shows just how much he has moved away from his original intentions and the extent to which he has become the contemporary apologist for other encounters—economic, political, humanitarian—between Americans and Africans. His use of travel writing about Africa not only evokes the heyday of eighteenth and nineteenth century explorations, but models similar appropriations of African landscapes while reducing African people to backdrops in the adventures and discoveries of Western travelers. The frontiers and new challenges of science and biology were often the mechanisms that made it possible for colonial explorers to depoliticize and secularize their encounters with African people. Today, as so starkly illustrated by Kristof's and his companions' writing, this same depoliticizing process is effectively managed by a relentless focus on humanitarian interventions and the challenges facing Americans who want to do good in Africa. He, therefore, frequently finds himself defending his stories about humanitarian interventions against readers' criticisms of their costs and compromises:

A president may or may not be able to improve schools or protect manufacturing jobs in Ohio, but a president probably could help wipe out malaria. Compared with other challenges a president faces, saving a million children's lives a year is the low-hanging fruit... Karlo, bouncing in his mother's lap, underscores the hope.

GOOD NEWS: KARLO WILL LIVE.

NEW YORK TIMES MARCH 6, 2008

Here he seems to actively dismiss the possibility of structural change either in Africa or in America, seeing in individual, singular, and technological interventions a cure for the apparent hopelessness to really make a difference. Once again Africa becomes a place to learn about the limits of modernity.

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THESE NARRATIVES DEPEND on Americans seeing or taking part in journeys that prime them for an experience with nature, one that allows them a glimpse of their "real" selves. In 2000 this was invariably the backdrop for the travelers' discovery of their American privilege and their global responsibilities. Then American travelers responded in diverse ways to this discovery of themselves in Africa, which included but was not limited to



Patriotism Trap. Mouse trap and match book. ©2011 Theodore Harris.

“saving Africa.” What has changed is that responses to travel experiences or other encounters with poverty in Africa today are increasingly limited to one pathway—saving Africa while not engaging with specific histories or politics in particular regions or nations on the continent. This kind of journey is supported, as it was in much earlier eras, by images of Africa that ensure that travelers arrive with expectations of immersing themselves in a pristine wilderness, a Garden of Eden, in which they can learn to be better humans. Guidebooks for South Africa reflect a peopled landscape but one where the people are “perfect” embodiments of the landscape, rather than moving on or through it. Ecotourists in Ghana do not go to a nature reserve but to a cultural village. Game drives in Kenya are required to evoke the heyday of the safari through an inclusion of a “native” tracker. Senegal can teach tourists to get in touch with themselves through traditional drumming. As in an earlier era when these tropes persisted, this bears consequences for Africans.

Tarzan is one of the more powerful and constantly reinvented travelers to Africa and especially Africa’s wilderness. Here he finds his best and most European self, his true aristocracy, so that when he returns to England, he can take on the responsibilities of his privilege with authority. Side by side

with him on this journey, of course, is an ape. Such apes are powerful and consistent figures in white men's and women's fantasies of Africa. Brenda Cooper's reading of white male novelists reveals how much the ape (and female protagonists surprisingly—or not—frequently called Jane) feature in the moments when these writers cannot escape histories of racism and patriarchy. These apes allow the African to be consistently present but only as a backdrop to the travelers' adventures. The ways that culture is collapsed into nature in encounters between Americans and Africa emphasize how Africa has become a naturalized space for finding oneself and especially one's better self. While apes, as they did for Tarzan, can help European and American travelers in Africa to find their true selves, the black bodies of the inhabitants of these places become invisible, incapable of representing humanity. But they are not simply obliterated—it is in fact their presence in the face of the apes or the landscape of the hills that makes them so invisible.

This collapsing has serious consequences. The failure of expensive AIDS campaigns in Africa starkly exposes the effects of displacing a crisis that requires complex social and political solutions onto a space where culture and nature are so intertwined. The supposedly easy solution of drug cocktails becomes an unsurprising failure blamed on either the natural inability of Africans to stick to the regime or the equally “natural” cultural problems of patriarchy, hypersexuality, and broken communities.

Thinking about nature-cultures in terms of American travel to Africa and especially the travel stories of American saviors told so insistently by Kristof is a disturbing process. Americans go to Africa, the motherland, the placenta, to become reborn as more human, if anything sloughing off their cyborg natures, becoming naturalized humans, while Africans, just as they did for Tarzan, become more like animals, apes that the American can rescue so as to become more human.

That's the kind of Africa story you normally hear—a dash of guns and chaos—and it's real, but also incomplete. As my win-a-trip winners found on this journey, the poverty is heartbreaking and the insecurity ominous. But the giraffes and villagers alike are hugely welcoming, and the progress is now effervescent.

AN AFRICAN ADVENTURE, AND A REVELATION.
NEW YORK TIMES, JULY 1, 2011

Kristof squashes giraffes and villagers together as if in Africa either animal or person can stand in for its indomitable spirit in the face of poverty and violence. While not usually quite so crass, Kristof's invocations of African women and men in the stories of American protagonists effectively obliterate them. Hiding people in plain sight as part of a landscape is a much more effective silencing tool than wiping people out. The collapse then of culture into nature or nature into culture in Africa benefits the tourists,

travelers, and journalists who find a fuller sense of themselves and of their own humanity. This is a sense of self which cannot be grasped without giving up some of our technologies of living; it is enormously aided by the most natural of landscapes and the most “natural” of people.

Kristof, therefore, forces us to gaze into the strained eyes of a suffering woman like Mariam Karega while emptying her life of support networks and her own social tools. This singular being has to stand in at one and the same time for all African people and for American failure. Her suffering must be defeated, although only partially or temporarily, for American “man” to save himself and to save Africa over and over again. This can only be the job for the “fully human” American guided by writers like Nicolas Kristof. That is why Kristof’s stories about American NGOs and enthusiastic young travelers in Africa, meant to encourage Americans’ interest in the continent, are so disturbing. They allow the Africans to be consistently present but irrelevant to the project of making Africa safe for Africans. 🌐