

**EXTRACTIVE PRACTICE TO DECOLONIAL FUTURES: INTERROGATING  
THE 'HUMANITARIAN IMPULSE' IN NONPROFIT FILMMAKING**

by

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B.S., Texas Christian University, 2018

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES

(English)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Vancouver)

April 2022

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EXTRACTIVE PRACTICE TO DECOLONIAL FUTURES: INTERROGATING THE 'HUMANITARIAN  
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submitted by Austin Shaw in partial fulfillment of the requirements for

the degree of Master of Arts

in English

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines nonprofit documentary films produced within the African continent featuring African populations. Contemporary humanitarian documentary productions by Western constituents frequently commit acts of ideological violence against the African communities they purport to assist through neocolonial tropes and extractive visual aesthetics. Decolonial storytelling strategies are imperative for ethical and holistic narratives to begin revitalizing Western epistemologies about the African context. Drawing on critical humanitarian studies – which critiques the imbrication of humanitarian work with Western national political agendas – I argue that the contemporary nonprofit narrative model draws inspiration from a neocolonial humanitarian history built on inequitable power imbalances between Western imperial powers and their former colonies.

African scholars Achille Mbembe and Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o provide theoretical and pragmatic strategies for repositioning African voices in positions of agency, and these strategies will provide an avenue through which nonprofit films can be assessed. Then, by looking to nonprofit films produced by both Western filmmakers and African filmmakers, this research evaluates the requirements necessary to move the nonprofit documentary sector from a neocolonial present into a decolonial future. Considering elements such as language and authorship, I conclude my analysis by discussing how encouraging locally-led cultural production will not only work to actively decolonize the current Western impression of African nations, but also to curb any future utilization of the same tired neocolonial tropes by rising global powers.

## **Lay Summary**

Western nonprofit documentary films featuring African communities are often guilty of misrepresenting the communities they serve and new narrative strategies are necessary in order to more equitably represent these populations. Looking to African scholars Achille Mbembe and Ngũgĩ Wa Thiongo helps to provide an avenue through which decolonized storytelling models can emerge. By using Mbembe and Thiong'o's framework, I examine nonprofit film productions created by Western filmmakers and African filmmakers in order to identify the most effective strategies for moving towards a decolonial storytelling future. Implementing these practices into future nonprofit films will not only help to limit the problematic depictions of African communities by a Western audience, but it will also help to mitigate an acceptance of the same representational strategies by future global powers.

## **Preface**

This thesis is the original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Austin Shaw

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## Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank and recognize the Sk̓w̓x̓ wú7mesh (Squamish), Stó:lō and Səl̓íl̓wətaʔ/Selilwítlh (Tsleil-Waututh) and xwməθkwəy̓ əm (Musqueam) Nations, on whose lands I have lived, learned, and grown throughout this research. I also am forever grateful to the Acholi People, who graciously welcomed me into their community in Gulu, Uganda with the most kind smiles, ceaseless patience, and the most generous love I believe I will find on earth - Apwoyo Matek.

I am also immensely grateful to the following individuals. To my wonderful supervisor, Dr. Christine Kim - thank you for graciously guiding me through this process with thoughtful insight and an ongoing pursuit of excellence. To my committee member, Dr. Y-Dang Troeung, who has provided dedicated ongoing support with immensely generous critique and care.

To my wonderful family including my parents, Haley and Carol Shaw, siblings Alli and Caleb Shaw, grandparents, and my in-laws Scott and Diane Sachs, Sarah, Rob, and Johnny Rozell, and Wesley Sachs, thank you so much for your ongoing encouragement, love, and support.

Special thanks are due to Quinn Neeley, who helped me begin to rethink the way nonprofit videos are shot and to imagine future possibilities.

And most importantly, endless thanks and gratitude to my treasured bride, Cora Shaw, who continually supports my dreams, ideas, and visions with enduring love and endless grace.

For my incredible family.



## Chapter 1: Introduction

In 1993, photographer Kevin Carter published what would become his Pulitzer-winning image, *Vulture Watching Starving Child* in the *New York Times* (Brown 182). Carter's photograph depicts a Sudanese child, curled on the ground, with a vulture watching with preying eyes from several feet behind. The image is, of course, jarring as it yields empathy for the child and her situation. Descriptions surrounding the photo suggest the child "weakened from hunger, collapsed" (NYT March 26, 1993) en route to a United Nations food camp (Brown 182) and was unlikely to survive long enough to reach her destination. Read in this context, the vulture appears to sense the impending tragedy and waits opportunistically for the child to die, an interpretation reinforced by the original article that ominously states, "A vulture waited" (NYT March 26, 1993). Though this photo and text clearly depict a desperate situation, they are also an explicit example of the visual and narrative economy frequently required by international nonprofits, NGOs, and humanitarian aid organizations to depict the African experience.

*Vulture Watching Starving Child* (henceforth abbreviated *Vultures*) was exceptional in creating a widespread affective response among Western audiences, but the aesthetic qualities of the photo are hardly unique. It is a prime example of the genre of "humanitarian storytelling" which has contributed significantly to furthering the disenfranchisement and dispossession of Black people in African spaces, even as this mode of narration purports to humanize and render the documentary subject sympathetic. Far too often humanitarian imagery produced by Western photographers, journalists, filmmakers, and documentarians about African people centers on scenes of desperation, tragedy, and hopelessness. Like Carter's *Vultures*, they perch opportunistically, and capture scenes of poverty to communicate a sense of immediate need to their Western audiences. As a result, Western

understandings of communities in the developing world (Africa especially, but also on other continents) are built on a representational strategy that renders African bodies in one-dimensional and undeniably “othered” terms.

These conventional representational strategies create a visual aesthetic found throughout nonprofit media communication that I call the *humanitarian African aesthetic*<sup>1</sup>. The humanitarian African aesthetic refers to any visual representation that caters to the Western moral consciousness by rendering the African body as a null or passive subject in the telling of their own stories. The humanitarian African aesthetic has been deployed in numerous ways across humanitarian marketing campaigns, national-scale humanitarian appeals, and other nonprofit representations of the African experience. The scale to which these troped images have been used would make an exhaustive list difficult to produce, but generally, this aesthetic form depicts Africans as victim of crisis or proponent of violence. Some common trends include decontextualized shots of an unbathed, crying child wearing tattered clothing; an image of a traditional hut with a voiceover narrative communicating the inadequacy of this form of housing solution; soiled water sources; pictures of child soldiers, unfertile farmlands, African mercenaries, or in its most damning form, scenes of death and starvation.

As these scenes are often depicted without local descriptions of lived experience to contextualize the places or circumstances, they fail to balance scenes of poverty with scenes that would communicate a more holistic sense of the African experience. These scenes are also often narrated by a Western voice that communicates the direness of a specific crisis for which they are

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy K. August’s term “The Refugee Aesthetic” inspired the framing of the Humanitarian African aesthetic. August claims the “refugee is conventionally considered a powerless figure” and seeks to examine “how refugees are represented and represent themselves” – an approach that applies in our context to the representation of African communities.

fundraising. In such narrations, the specific model of Western intervention is poised as the only viable solution to alleviate the desperation of the crisis. As a result, the African subject is rendered hopeless and helpless, and the Western intervention and involvement with proposed aid and assistance in the region is perpetuated through misguided understandings of the capacity and capability of African people.

As a whole, this project meets at an intersection of critical humanitarian, critical refugee, and postcolonial studies. One of the overarching goals of this research is to discuss how the frequently utilized tropes that define this aesthetic visual form do little to reflect the numerous and complex experiences found across the African continent. Furthermore, I will connect how the, though perhaps unintentional, perpetuation of these tropes enacts representational violence upon the very communities that these organizations aim to assist. Scholars from critical humanitarian studies such as Randal Williams, Neda Atanasoski, Pooja Rangan, and Samuel Moyn help to build the framework for this section. But in order to move towards a conversation about the decolonized potential of humanitarian media efforts, this chapter will examine the problematic neocolonial framings found within the majority of nonprofit media content. Critical Refugee Scholars Timothy August, Naomi Paik, Hannah Arendt, and Kelly Oliver were critical in shaping this portion of the argument, including the ways I imagined the leading term of this project, the humanitarian African aesthetic. To begin, I will describe how Western framing often positions African subjects as dependent upon Western assistance and aid, and relies upon a humanitarian African aesthetic in representing these situations. Examining the visual and narratological structures of these representations will help reveal why these aesthetics came to be expected features of the humanitarian genre and help identify the agential structures currently pervading these storytelling forms. Next, postcolonial scholarship from Achille Mbembe and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o help provide the primary theoretical components of

decolonial storytelling potential. In looking at Achille Mbembe's work in *On the Postcolony*, I will show how interrogating the relationship between viewer and subject often upholds Western ideals rather than African autonomy. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's argument that the work of decolonization begins first with local language usage will then help to mold my primary argument that the best way to move into decolonial storytelling practices is to embrace African storytelling strategies. And finally, I will begin to gesture toward the artists (like Isaac Oboth) that are already paving the way for new storytelling methods in African spaces. After having laid the theoretical foundation, I will conclude my introduction by providing an overview of each of the following chapters. This research is critically important and by the end of the project, I aim to convey that these issues are more than just ideological explorations of potential creative ventures. Instead, these methods of representation are directly connected to human rights and the way we see, perceive, and understand individuals across the globe.

### **1.1 Imbedded neocolonial practice**

The violence imbricated within nonprofit media campaigns can be easily traced to narrative standards instituted through national and international humanitarian aid media campaigns. Neda Atanasoski's book *Humanitarian Violence* (2013) describes these current systems of humanitarian aid media and how they emerged to justify Western militaristic agendas. These specific considerations will be discussed more thoroughly in the first chapter, but in sum, media corporations effectively marketed a "humanitarian gaze" that produced and inscribed a narrative of "crisis and resolution" surrounding populations inhabiting areas for current and future US intervention (14). The audience of these narratives (Western citizens) were then subjected to images of "pain, suffering, brutality, & violence of the other" (Atanasoski 14) that reaffirmed Western moral codes. I argue that as national-scale humanitarian aid narratives were crafted in order to create sympathy among national

populations in the West, nonprofit organizations began to apply similar narrative strategies as the national campaigns in their own privatized work. Though the stories told by private nonprofit organizations that I will discuss are not often linked to the same national-level militaristic campaigns covered by Atanasoski, they do continually commit an ideological “violence and extremism” (Mbembe 5) upon the populations they claim to assist by using the same aesthetic qualities exemplified by international humanitarian media campaigns.

Developing a storytelling strategy that rejects the reproduction of the humanitarian African aesthetic will inevitably require deconstructing the Western humanitarian impulse to inequitably represent African communities alongside the failure to allow these communities to represent themselves within the Western context. These issues are personal, given my background working in South Sudan, Uganda, and Kenya with various nonprofits ranging from small, locally-led nonprofits with microscopic budgets to international organizations with thousands of employees. As a white, male, American filmmaker who has worked in various East African spaces, I recognize the neocolonial humanitarian enterprise of many of these nonprofit organizations. Having witnessed these systems first-hand, I am interested in pursuing a project that questions the current systematic narrative structures that perpetuate a stereotyped, one-dimensional, and undeniably white, Western understanding of Black African life.

For instance, in 2019 I was hired to direct and film a fundraising video for a Western organization working with multiple communities in rural Northern Uganda. During production, we travelled to a beneficiary’s home village, but when we arrived, we found that their neighbour’s hut had caught fire the previous night while a woman cooked her family’s evening meal. The following morning, only still-smouldering remains of their home were left. When our team arrived in the village, the family was beginning to clear the remaining debris. The family in crisis was not

previously a recipient of the organization's work, and their situation fell outside the scope of the work the organization addressed. However, despite the organization's lack of connection to this family, the organization's director strongly encouraged me to capture footage of the fire's wreckage and the tragedy it produced. In this instance, it was clear that reproducing images of tragedy was not seen as problematic by the organization's director. Because of the frequency with which these visuals are incorporated into humanitarian media communication and the expectation of these visuals by Western audiences, this moment of crisis was perceived as a scene that could elevate the emotional stakes of the video and communicate the immediacy of their work in the region. Presenting a moralistic case for why this behaviour was unacceptable was ineffective, so I had to present a more compelling and alternative way of capturing the story I had initially been hired to tell in order to avoid being forced to capture images of the tragedy.

To capture this moment would have been opportunistic and exploitive, rendering this family's existence for the audience of the video exclusively as a victim of tragedy, and creating a misimpression that the ongoing work of the organization would have alleviated their situation. As a result, had I captured their story in this way, their tragedy would have positioned them within the video as passive subjects being used to assert the fundraising strategies of a Western organization catering to the affective urges of a Western donor group. The motivation or intent of the organization's director may have been well-meaning, but the impulsive, reactionary call to capture this story at a moment's notice neglected the necessary care, consideration, and context required for outsiders working within this context. Because of the impulsive reaction to document tragedy, this situation could have quickly catered to a humanitarian African aesthetic dependent upon miscalibrated tropes of African-as-victim and the West as savior.

There are certainly instances of crisis throughout the globe that require quick action and assistance. Kelly Oliver wrestles with the tension between these geopolitical contexts that demand humanitarian aid and the desperate need for reform across the humanitarian sector. In writing about the refugee context Oliver states, “humanitarian aid is both the cure and the poison. It is the cure insofar as right now it is the only chance we have for helping refugees under the current...policies of most nation-states” (15). Similarly, African communities depend on humanitarian aid and non-profit work to support their economy, systems of support, or own livelihoods and to call for the immediate removal of all Western presence in Africa would leave an incredibly damaging void. But, decolonized narrative forms can begin to shift the ways these communities are perceived by Western audiences. As I intend to make clear through detailed analysis of Charity Water’s recent video *The Legacy of Helen Apio*, Western filmmakers and storytellers are capable of generating stories that reflect the agency of African voices (especially when in collaboration with local filmmakers). Informally, I have had conversations with colleagues from the United States working as filmmakers across Africa that have begun implementing strategies into their films that deviate from the non-profit norm (such as refraining from desperate images of poverty). But, doing so must be done with careful consideration of the stories that are being created and enacted and without reinforcing racialized tropes or ideological violence. Through my analysis, I hope to uncover some of the pitfalls that plague Western storytellers working throughout the region, and introduce productive strategies engineered by African storytellers that other decolonial artists and activists can utilize.

## 1.2 Mbembe's Referential Dynamics

Representations of Africa often fail to comment upon Africa itself. Instead, they are extensions of Western consciousness. For instance, in news articles or nonprofit videos, the African voice is frequently shown as either speaking about or for the Western stakeholder. Achille Mbembe speaks to these representational forms and the referential dynamics that they create (though his focus is not directly centered on humanitarian forms of representation). In *On the Postcolony*, Mbembe argues that representations of Africa by the West tend to remove referential qualities from African subjects, and instead use the African context as “the mediation that enables the West to accede to its own subconscious and give a public account of its subjectivity” (3). Mbembe seeks to write an account of the postcolonial state by and for African peoples, rather than as a pretext to Western political or academic agendas. To prevent interpretations of his writing as being about the West or former colonizers, Mbembe explicitly identifies how Africa is often used to speak about Western interests, whether that be academic, political, or in our cases, humanitarian. Mbembe characterizes his work as a critique of the African postcolonial state on its own terms as opposed to Western terms. His important designation effectively allows the conversation to remain African-centric, speaking about African issues on African terms, rather than devolve into a conversation or an interpretation that is focused on the Western involvement in the African postcolony.

In conjunction with these referential power imbalances, Mbembe proposes that “the African human experience constantly appears in the discourse of our times as an experience that can only be understood through a *negative interpretation*” (1). Failing to “account for complexity” has instead “impoverished our understanding of... what it means to be a subject in contexts of instability and crisis.” (Mbembe 17). Part of the reason for this narrow understanding of the African context is simply a lack of genuine curiosity in the complexity of the continent. Instead, images and



understandings of Africa are “always [a] pretext for a comment about something else, some other place, some other people” (3). Consequently, narratives about Africa told by Western individuals are more likely to comment on their own ethical appeals and social consciousness rather than allowing for an African led narrative that can inform a more complex understanding of African spaces.

According to Mbembe, this context is so engrained in a global understanding of Africa that it has become “one of those significations” that allows the West to consider its own values, self-image, and identity (2). In the eyes of the West, Africa is thus rendered as “the very figure of what is null” (4). Mbembe describes the West as enforcing representational dynamics that reinforce a Western sense of morality. Because of the frequency with which these tropes are enacted, a flattened understanding of the African context is continually pushed through commentary about the continent across genres. Mbembe addresses this within the academic context, but this problem occurs in many sectors, especially within the humanitarian aid enterprise. Western media reinforce these violent representational forms by insisting on images consistent with the humanitarian African aesthetic. Functionally, in each instance of immediated content or redeployment of the humanitarian African aesthetic, the Western storyteller enforces its own consciousness through a referential narrative system designed to use African bodies as a source to confirm their own pre-existing beliefs and ideas.

To summarize, the visual qualities in a media context confirm the humanity of the audience at the expense of the perceived inhumanity of the subject. Specifically within the humanitarian context, filmmakers represent the inhumane conditions of the subjects they are assisting, but render these subjects in an inhumane manner. As can be seen through examples like *Vultures*, the camera focuses on elements like the poverty of their living situations, their seeming helplessness in remediating their own situation, or the desperate measures they’ve necessarily had to undergo to

survive. As this narrative is presented, the audience is moved to an affective response, effectively confirming their own ability to feel empathy (at best) but more likely guilt or pity towards another. As a result, the African subject is utilized as a mirror for the West to consider their own consciousness. The appropriated African image not only reaffirms a Western ethic but limits the potential for true connection that could be found with a complex narrative structure imbued with African agency. These dynamics confirm a neocolonial hierarchy that needs to be extensively challenged.

In some ways, Mbembe's own critique could be leveraged against my own methodology in this project as I use his critique of the Western ways of extrapolating African epistemological systems and apply his framing to my own research and context. However, I hope that instead of a misapplication of his conceptual framework for my own purposes, that the research contained within this project will expose the frequency with which African subjects are depicted as passive subjects to a Western viewer. Revealing the structural components that compose humanitarian media strategies and the narratological assumptions upon which they are based will hopefully produce an effective critique of current systems and inspire imaginative alternatives to violent representational patterns. Remedying this issue will require theoretical considerations like those that Mbembe calls for in *On the Postcolony* as well as interventions that recalibrate narrative structures to position African voices as the dominant and active agents speaking to their own context and people.

Mbembe's analytical framework is useful for understanding the ways in which Western audiences impose their own social frameworks on African societies and contexts rather than recalibrating the terms of engagement to develop a more comprehensive decolonized understanding. *On the Postcolony* offers a useful and necessary theoretical context for beginning to reconfigure an African-centric mode of interpreting African writers, philosophers, artists, and activists on their own

terms. Mbembe uses this chapter to reconfigure interpretive methods for the chapters that follow to be interpreted as commentary about Africa (as opposed to commentary about the West). And while his theoretical assertions are valuable, Mbembe's work fails to provide pragmatic strategies for deconstructing the culturally-inscribed neocolonial understanding of the African context. Suggesting that Western audiences simply do away with contemporary Western forms of interpretation is more complicated than simply asserting one's desire to see, understand, and interpret something differently. As such, reconfiguring the referential dynamics within the humanitarian media narrative will require deconstructing and decolonizing tangible and fundamental aspects of representation.

### **1.3 Decolonizing strategies**

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind* offers a pragmatic solution to the theoretical problems presented by Mbembe. Thiong'o's primary agenda in *Decolonising the Mind* is to suggest that in storytelling about African communities, local language should be central to the methods of communication. Practically, this refuses the instrumentalization of African voices, ideas, and people for Western purposes simply by reframing the central method of understanding away from English or European languages to local languages. For Thiong'o, cultural interpretations and perspectives emerge from a governing language system and can offer a method for breaking the dangerous referential cycle that Mbembe outlines (Thiong'o 15). Thiong'o's writing concerns literal spoken language systems (such as Swahili or Luo or English) and the ways that these systems carry ideas and culture among a population. He insists that a localized or indigenous language will carry forms of understanding that a foreign or imposed language simply would not be able to fully grasp. I want to extend Thiong'o's assessment and suggest that visual mediums also operate, like language, as a tool through which systems of ideas are communicated. Similar to the ways Thiong'o describes language use, film tools communicate ideas about the subjects they represent. If the humanitarian African

aesthetic is reflective of a Western visual language communicating a neocolonial understanding of African communities, then a visual communication strategy that emerges from African filmmakers might work to decolonize these visual forms. As Thiong'o suggests, one method to decolonize Western understandings of African epistemologies would be to center the storytelling practice upon the local African language (depending upon the geography from which the story emerges). Similarly, nonprofit, humanitarian, and Western aid forms of communication should emerge from African filmmaking visual strategies in order to consider how decolonial visual forms can be connected to humanitarian visual strategies.

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o discusses the value of storytelling traditions in the community where he grew up, Limuru town in Western Kenya. He emphasizes that there were "good and bad storytellers" (Thiong'o 10) and the differentiating factor between the two was the success in which "the use of words and images and the inflexion of voices" could refresh the telling of a story whose narrative structure had not necessarily undergone dramatic shifts. Thiong'o describes this dynamic to communicate that in his storytelling tradition, words and language "had a suggestive power well beyond the immediate and lexical meaning" (11). Moreover, language operates as both "a means of communication and a carrier of culture." (13). The subtle intonations and minute variations in meaning are critical for communicating a way of thinking, being, and belonging in the world. Though the nonprofit narrative clearly does not operate as a language system in the same fashion as English or Swahili or Luo, it does contain a particular form of diction, signifiers, and subtle intonations as well as carry a cultural understanding of the subjects it represents.

One of the primary sentiments expressed in *Decolonising the Mind* is that the imposition of a colonial language system threatens a localized way of understanding that would be produced

through learning a local language. In order to counteract the effects of a colonial language system, Thiong'o continually insists upon learning and relearning local linguistic forms. He proclaims:

We reject the primacy of English literature and cultures. The aim, in short, should be to orientate ourselves towards placing Kenya, East Africa and then Africa in the centre. All other things are to be considered in their relevance to our situation and their contribution towards understanding ourselves... In suggesting this we are not rejecting other streams, especially the Western stream. We are only clearly mapping out the directions and perspectives the study of culture and literature will inevitably take in an African university." (Thiong'o *Homecoming* 145)

Doing so would allow for the preservation of a specific cultural understanding with a specific history (Thiong'o 15). In other words, decolonizing language could decolonize cultural understandings.

Similar actions could be done to decolonize representational forms of African communities. If the nonprofit agenda depends on a neocolonial and Western understanding of African people in pursuit of maintaining a contemporary understanding of African people, it will inevitably be rooted in a communication system that will render African bodies in a neocolonial framing. Allowing the local communities guide the narrative construction and use their own representational language in describing their own stories would begin to shift Western understandings of Africa to be more closely aligned with the ways African communities imagine themselves.

Decolonized potential within the humanitarian storytelling space is exciting, and filmmakers like Isaac Oboth, who, according to the mission statements of his production companies African Storytellers and Media 256, is on a mission to "rewrite the story of Africa using film," is producing content that exemplifies the types of stories that other filmmakers can use as inspiration as they navigate decolonial possibilities within this genre. Oboth rejects the tropes that frequent

humanitarian visuals, such as scenes of poverty to insist upon the desperation of a community or an individual's situation. But the complexity of his decolonized storytelling strategies extends beyond simply the absence of negative aesthetics. Oboth provides visual strategies that center localized methods of understanding, reorient referential dynamics to focus on African stories being told and interpreted on their own grounds, and work against problematic humanitarian visuals by actively representing African subjects with agency and voice.<sup>2</sup>

However, the challenge facing emerging African voices is not just to recalibrate the referential signals within the dominant system. Doing so will only result in categorizing new work as a minor literature or what Deleuze and Guattari describe as “the literature a minority makes in a major language (16). Categorized by a deterritorialization of language, a connection of individual and political, and a collective arrangement of utterances, Deleuze and Guattari argue that only minor literatures have the ability to be “great and revolutionary” (26) due to the deterritorialized ways in which they butt against normative forms of a particular language system. But, fundamentally, this understanding depends upon being immersed with in the major system as a whole. In this sense, the minor literature remains within the same proverbial “ballpark” as the major system. In the context of decolonial pursuits, this strategy does not offer the best or most effective solution. Instead, African voices need to be considered within a new and radicalized framework in which referential dynamics speak to their own context rather than continue to ascribe to preexisting power dynamics and language conditions.

Being recognized on its own terms might come with a different collection of issues such as a potentially smaller viewer-base, or a lack of interest from Western players as a whole. But, there are indicators that suggest the contemporary global audience is more primed for African-led stories now

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<sup>2</sup> Chapter 3 provides a detailed examination of Oboth's methodology.

than it may have been previously. In 2021, African authors were awarded some of the most prestigious literary awards in the world; Tanzanian author Abdulrazak Gurnah's won the Nobel Prize, South African author Damon Galgut was awarded the Booker Prize, and at least 8 other major book awards were awarded to African writers (Ibeh). At the beginning of 2022, *The Girl in The Yellow Jumper*, a 2020 feature film from Ugandan director Loukman Ali's, became the first Ugandan-produced film to be distributed by Netflix. These are just a few of the examples of a growing global interest in the wildly-creative art and media emerging from the African continent, and nonprofit videos can begin to participate in the wider African cultural movement.

As Mbembe articulates, the challenge will be to recognize that the African context is being used as “the mediation that enables the West to accede to its own subconscious and give a public account of its subjectivity” (3). Operating within existing systems will only result in a recapitulation of the issues Mbembe identifies. In the nonprofit context, this means that a local filmmaker creating a video from the Western nonprofit template will simply lead to a slightly more localized version of already existing content and structures. Instead, a new language needs to be written.

Thiong'o calls for a “regenerative reconnection with the millions of revolutionary tongues in Africa” (108) and local artists and filmmakers are the contemporary linguists who will be able to rewrite the language that outsiders use when speaking about the African continent. In many ways, this is already being done by individuals like Oboth. As I discuss more thoroughly in the final chapter, by learning the cinematic language these creators use to engage in conversations surrounding humanitarian efforts and relying on this language to influence future humanitarian dialogue, productive momentum towards a decolonized narrative can occur. Understanding these dynamics, recognizing the deeply inscribed nature of these issues, and giving language to the

conversation will be critical before assessing the current storytelling moment, assessing potential movements in the humanitarian storytelling space, and calling for better futures.

Decolonial storytelling futures are possible, and the purpose of this project is to identify the ways that contemporary creatives are moving towards this future and the necessary steps for implementing this change. The following chapter will detail the historical context and theoretical backgrounds that have created the humanitarian genre of storytelling. After outlining theoretical concepts for abstract notions of autonomy, agency, and representation, the remainder of the thesis will look at practical strategies displayed among current filmmakers and visual artists that offer potential intersections into more conventional humanitarian storytelling methods. Chapter 2 will seek to answer an important foundational question, namely to what degree is it possible for a non-African storyteller to productively move towards decolonized storytelling futures? Joris Postema's 2019 film *Stop Filming Us*, which posits many of the same questions that guide my own inquiry, will begin the discussion. *Stop Filming Us* provides a helpful segue from a theoretical perspective to the undercurrents that are surfacing in contemporary media. After recognizing a stark contrast between representations of Goma, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) by sensationalized Western media news outlets, and the Goma he personally experienced, Postema set out to complicate a Western audience's understanding of the city. In order to show that the city is often mistakenly characterized through Western media as a dangerous and lawless city, Postema features local Congolese artists, photographers, and filmmakers in an effort to show a sampling of the approaches that local creatives used to represent their city. As Postema becomes more and more aware that he might be engaging with the same issues of representation as he hoped to uncover as problematic, several "round-table" discussions organically unfold between him and his Congolese film crew. Along with Postema's feature film I will discuss a recent video produced by Charity Water, a New



York-based non-profit organization, which features a Helen Apio, a woman from northern Uganda who invested into her local community daily and has left a lasting legacy. Charity Water's video offers a key example of the ways that Western storytellers can create storytelling dynamics that position African subjects as the commanders of their own story. Each of these films are produced and directed by Western filmmakers but offer interesting and differing representational models of how future Western filmmakers might consider their own approach. However, as Chapter 3 will suggest, the most generative work in pursuing a decolonized future will be led by storytellers who are local to the community being represented.

Chapter 3 looks to works by Black African filmmakers and artists that provide a blueprint for decolonial forms of documentary non-profit storytelling. My aim is to connect contemporary case studies to the theoretical components discussed throughout my analysis. Some examples of this are the films produced by Ugandan filmmaker Isaac Oboth. From features of female entrepreneurs engaging in economic initiatives in their home communities in his series *The Audacious Ones* to a biopic of his own story about finding success as a filmmaker, Oboth's narrative formulations begin to rewrite the African aesthetic in a decolonized manner. Furthermore, because of reframing strategies employed by filmmakers like Oboth, international communities are also beginning to reconceptualize ways to engage with representational modes of African communities.

As I conclude my analysis, I will discuss how encouraging locally-led cultural production will not only work to actively decolonize the current Western impression of African nations, but also to curb any future utilization of the same tired tropes by rising foreign powers. Big budget Chinese-made films set in Africa are increasing emerging as the Chinese government's neocolonial influence in the African region grows. With a rising interest in African resources by Chinese stakeholders, what many commentators have referred to as "The New Scramble for Africa," films like *Wolf*

*Warrior II* rely on a “Chinese savior” template (reminiscent of Hollywood films such as the Rambo series). These films work to justify the PRC’s extractive neocolonial presence throughout the continent as evidenced through global projects such as the One-Belt-One-Road initiative. By briefly discussing the ways in which the humanitarian African aesthetic is not a uniquely western repertoire, I will continue to insist upon African autonomy in the construction of their own stories. I hope to use this research as the beginning of a lifelong learning process of decolonizing my own storytelling methodologies as well as advocating for the future of African independent film production.

## **Chapter 2: Troubled Tropes: Tracing the historical patterns of humanitarian aesthetics**

The strategies guiding contemporary nonprofit narrative forms are directly linked to a long history of a Western ethical consciousness being imposed onto a global population. Beginning with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the central ethic for social and economic justice was enacted in response to the human rights abuses in Europe during World War II (rather than the atrocities committed during, say, colonialism). It is important to trace the lineage of a Western epistemology as it relates to global ethical consciousness in order to recognize the ways in which the power imbalances present in today's nonprofit sector are a product of historical conditions. We should not be surprised that contemporary nonprofit video productions include humanitarian African aesthetics – these video productions were built on a system that enforces Western imperialist powers, and this chapter will necessarily trace the ways this has been enacted upon African populations.

Adopting global legislative measures to uphold human rights was an understandable response after the atrocities endemic to the second World War. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted on December 10<sup>th</sup>, 1948, was the international response that pushed for global-scale legal protection of individuals “without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.” (Universal Declaration of Human Rights). As a performative act that created a legal framework in which rights could be upheld, the UDHR unsurprisingly created a space that invited active engagement from both the state and (eventually) nongovernmental organizations, to uphold this new international standard. People organized to uphold these newly categorized rights, most notably in the form of Nongovernmental Organizations like Amnesty International. With the active

response to the UDHR in motion, Samuel Moyn argues, “human rights emerged historically as the last utopia” (Moyn qtd. in Paik 10). With a legal framework built around an ethical standard gathering individuals under a new universal ethical consciousness, the UDHR and the collective response generated the ethical foundation for what would become a contemporary understanding of human rights and the associated humanitarian ethic (Williams xcii).

Though the UDHR has worked to uphold the human rights of many individuals and communities, it has also further entrenched problematic power dynamics between imperial and nonimperial powers over deciding which rights are universal and who is responsible for upholding the rights. Like a border separating those who are within a nation and those who are outside of that nation, the UDHR erected a distinction between those with rights and those without rights. In other words, the establishment of this document aiming to protect all individuals, immediately created distinctions between groups of people based on their current legal status. As a result, those with rights automatically possessed the ability to assist (or neglect) those without. But those without rights were subjected to recalibrating their situation under a new legal framework to remedy their own situation. In effect, the imposition of human rights further separated those possessing rights and those without rights. Furthermore, by imposing legal measures to uphold human rights, those without rights would be required to operate within the internationally recognized ethic to appeal for access to these rights.

Scholars like Hannah Arendt have analyzed the ways that these systems of rights have been implemented and maintained by the nation-state. In *On Totalitarianism*, she describes the ways that the nation-state holds the ability to grant or withhold human rights to those within its borders. When stateless individuals (such as herself during her time in France) “had no governments to represent and to protect them and therefore were forced to live...under conditions of absolute

lawlessness” (Arendt 269). But the conditions in which the state implements human rights are often far from arbitrary, and often shaped by a larger geopolitical context. Arendt goes on to state that “denationalization became a powerful weapon of totalitarian politics... [which] made it possible for the persecuting governments to impose their standard of values even upon their opponents” (Arendt 269). Arendt suggests that though human rights, as outlined by the UDHR may seem to be written for all human beings, the enforcing agencies of these rights often fall within government agencies in service of the preservation of the nation state. And so, in the greater national political interest, the thoroughness with which the standards are applied to all peoples (both within the state’s system and outsiders) is at the discretion of the government. However, when vulnerable individuals, such as stateless people, come into this system seeking refuge, or to be afforded human rights, they are forced to operate within the governing authorities’ system. Or, as Paik articulates, “rightless people have had to use the flawed instruments of rights to resist state powers” (13). With regards to cultures and populations that may be dispossessed by a Western ideological system, it further subjects these individuals to this Western ethical and moral agenda in order to plead for recognition.

Despite the complexities surrounding the UDHR, the power dynamics it protected, and the impacts it has had (both positive and negative) on human rights, when enacted, a new universal ethic took root and precursors to contemporary models of human rights advocacy began to emerge. Amnesty International was one of these organizations. In pursuit of a desire to protect unjustly held political prisoners, Amnesty International developed the new concept of the “prisoner of conscience” (Williams 3). This distinction primarily sought to protect the ideas of an individual and the articulation of these ideas under a human rights framework so long as it did not advocate or condone personal violence. Those who were detained based on a political position or a rhetoric deemed threatening to the dominant powers could be labeled as a prisoner of conscience and

Amnesty International might try to intervene for the release of the prisoner (Williams 4). Like Amnesty International, independent organizations sought to intervene and impose the new standards of humanitarian treatment, and notably, from the beginning of this historical moment, a universal humanitarian ethic began to develop.

As a humanitarian ethic grew to be widely accepted by the general public in the West, political entities and other national powers began developing strategies of deploying action based on an affective national ideological consciousness. In the United States, this began during the Cold War and flourished during the postsocialist era. Generally, United States politicians “promoted its vision of free markets and democratic governance by claiming the language of human rights” (Paik 10) while also asserting its own military force to meet this end. Neda Atanasoski details the deeply rooted seeds of these acts in *Humanitarian Violence: The U.S. Deployment of Diversity*. She argues that the United States and the West erected a humanitarian ethic to justify their imperialistic, postsocialist, and militaristic objectives. As humanitarian ethics became more popular, political agendas became aligned with global ethical sentiments, and nations like the U.S. began to portray themselves as multicultural and socially progressive entities (13). In doing so, the U.S. government effectively “Engaged in a sustained effort to tell a particular story about race and American democracy: a story of progress, a story of the triumph of good over evil, a story of U.S. *moral superiority*” (Dudziak qtd. in Atanasoski 11). Due to this public image, these nations could more easily justify their militaristic interventions as necessary to modernize the enemy and imbue a U.S. ethic on a global scale.

## 2.1 Contemporary Humanitarian Aesthetics

The combination of an international interest in a universal humanitarian ethic alongside a nationalistic agenda aiming to gain support from a western population resulted in a humanitarian gaze from the United States (and other western nations) that focused upon the “pain, suffering, brutality, and violence of the other” (Atanasoski 14). In effect, this objectifying gaze, rooted in an imperial project imbricated “feelings for the victims of illiberalism, monoculturalism, and intolerance with the military and juridical technologies working to save those subjects to inhuman atrocities” (14). Specifically, the ways these narratives frequently unfolded often situated national powers as the primary source able to alleviate conflict and generate solutions, and photography and video content enabled these ideologies to pervade throughout a national consciousness.

In her 2017 book *Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary*, Pooja Rangan extends conversations in both critical humanitarian studies and documentary media studies by engaging with what she terms “the humanitarian impulse” of documentary storytelling. Documentary films often use the humanitarian impulse to create a sense of urgency demanding immediate intervention which create, as Rangan describes, immediated documentary forms (4). In the humanitarian realm, this impulse sustains stories of disenfranchisement by reinscribing scenes of poverty and racialized suffering in order to quickly solve crises seen as emergencies through avenues like fundraising campaigns or other forms of assistance (5). Even in films where filmmakers highlight the “humanity” of those in need, this dynamic effectively gives power to the documentary before the people as the documentary film acts as the vessel through which humanity is given. Consequentially, the power remains with the filmmaker rather than shifting towards an understanding of the inherent humanity already present within the subjects of the film. Film and photography provide visual

accompaniments depicting desperate situations where intervention seems to be required. The documentary forms then positioned the nation-state as the entity with the knowledge and strategies to best alleviate these issues, regardless of their culpability in crafting the very situations they claimed they wanted to resolve. Atanasoski specifically identifies the U.S. involvement in Vietnam as an example where this ethic was used to respond to violence and impose a U.S. humanitarian vision as a solution to the suffering.

Throughout the Vietnam War, “images of Vietnamese suffering became the condition of possibility for reviving U.S. humanity in the post-Vietnam War context” (Atanasoski 101). As images of atrocity continued to feed U.S. national sentiments, “the pain of the other depicted in prominent photographs became linked to the possibility of national transfiguration and resurrection rather than deterioration” (75). By using scenes of atrocity to generate feelings of Western-led empathy and support for a chance at redeeming their wrongs, media entities effectively capitalized on producing a structure of crisis and resolution (Atanososki 13). She points to Eddie Adams iconic photo *Saigon Execution* as illustrative of this point. Instead of leading western audiences to question their own involvement for creating a necropolitical context that allowed for these sorts of actions, photos like Adams instead became “linked to the possibility of national transfiguration and resurrection rather than deterioration” (Atanasoski 75). In other words, Atanasoski argues that the presence of U.S. media outlets effectively utilized scenes of atrocity to generate a communal sense of outrage among the U.S. population. In doing so, the American sense of a collective ethic became the very tool used to reveal its own empathy. Because the war ended (and in a large part because of the public outcry against the atrocities), a United States collective ethic became not only unified, but seemingly justified.



Most notable for this conversation, the primary avenue through which these narratives became commonly known throughout the Western consciousness was through the close proximity of the camera to the conflict. The camera emerged as “an unlikely weapon” and effectively deployed the American humanitarian gaze “as one that could perceive a moral victory even in the face of military atrocity” (Atanososki 75). The prominence of Western-led political campaigns purporting a humanitarian ethic as justification was clearly linked with a perceived success in the West. As a humanitarian ethic continued to grow among western populations, a “human rights spectacle” became more and more common “through imaging technologies and discourses of vision and violation into the normative frameworks of a human rights internationalism based on United Nations documents and treaties” (Hesford 7). Media coverage of the Vietnam war reveals the development of a collective humanitarian ethic growing among the U.S. population (and, generally, among other Western populations) that persisted far beyond the end of the Vietnam war.

Returning briefly to the opening example in this project, *Vultures* illustrates the same form of visual atrocity in a way that caters to Western empathy in pursuit of overarching political agendas. The opening line of the *New York Times* article accompanying the image reads “The Sudanese government has made a series of gestures that are meant to placate the West but are also emblematic of the country’s need to become more flexible and pragmatic, relief officials say.” (NYT March 26, 1996). Sudan’s alignment with Iraq during a period of ongoing tensions between the US and Iraq led to economic and aid sanctions impressed upon Sudan. At the time of this article’s publication, the US was moving towards “adding Sudan to a list of countries that sponsor terrorism” (NYT March 26, 1993). The article describes the devastation in the southern region of Sudan (now the Republic of South Sudan) and attributes these failures to “the Islamic fundamentalist government” (NYT March 26, 1993). Apart from a brief caption accompanying the photo, the article fails to discuss the

girl pictured in Carter's image. Instead, her body is used as an affective visual aid to assist in crafting a narrative that U.S. government policy and their actions against the Sudanese government is justified for, at least, the poor children suffering from the conflict. The girl's image is appropriated for a political agenda and these narrative couplings persist in the ways images of crisis are reproduced in national media rhetoric.

The historical context of humanitarian ethics and media representational forms contextualize why current referential media forms were developed. These large-scale political events reveal how the humanitarian gaze of the west has been produced and reproduced by media and political subjects in order to produce a narrative of crisis and resolution. The perceived success of these large-scale political media agendas invariably influences the methodologies through which localized nonprofit, humanitarian aid, and NGO organizations choose to represent the communities in their own depiction of developing nations. Leaders of aid organizations know that strategies of a depiction of crisis in order to stimulate an affective response is an incredibly powerful dynamic for garnering quick support in both public appeal and financial contributions. For instance, during the Darfur conflict in 2005, the UN Secretary General "called on photojournalists to produce more pictures as part of the struggle for attention and action" (Campbell 357). Carter's *Vulture* image also communicates this same dynamic; to capture an image that communicated the desperation of the situation in Sudan would ensure purchase and distribution. *The New York Times* bought and printed the image, signifying that Carter understood the types of images that would cater to a humanitarian ethic found within an American audience.

Nonprofits are complacent in the same representative models as national media campaigns aiming to generate sympathy and justification for violent military intervention. Pooja Rangan states that "when humanity is upheld as a primary principle and imperative, it can turn into an alibi for

discriminatory and violent acts – all performed in the name of humanity” (6). The nonprofits I will discuss throughout the remainder of the project are not typically intertwined with large, international, political efforts. Instead, they are privatized organizations often operating on a small-budget and small-scale of operation. Though these nonprofits are not often operating in a large-scale governmental capacity, by utilizing similar ethical appeals through images of “the pain of the other” (Atanasoski 13) these organizations actively enact an accidental violence in their representational forms.

## **2.2 Contemporary media dynamics**

Rangan’s research into immediations highlights the ways that the abstract conversation on violent representational forms is most commonly applied in contemporary nonprofit media agendas. Examples of immediations can be found across nonprofit, NGO, and humanitarian aid websites, YouTube channels, and social media platforms. Extreme images of poverty like Carter’s have been critiqued extensively as media prevalence continues to be an integral way we engage with our modern, global world. As such, these renderings would be left behind as a relic of storytelling past. However, organizations like Action Against Hunger, which I focus on now, continue to perpetuate a narrative about the African continent that depends on these images to justify their presence in the region. The rhetorical strategies used in the titles of the videos alone communicate a sense of emergency and demand immediate action such as “Delivering Vaccines by Any Means Necessary” “‘Everything has changed’ – Breaking the Cycle of Hunger in Ethiopia” “East Africa Drought: Helping Families Cope” and “Saving Halima’s Life” (Action Against Hunger). In many of their videos, images of malnourished children communicate to audiences that African populations are

desperate for help, and this help can only come through their organizations. “Saving Halima’s Life” is one of these videos, as it tells the story about a mother who brought her malnourished child to an Action Against Hunger center in Somalia.

The video begins by showing Halima, a two-year-old child, with her mother Fatima. The video suggests that while they are now happy and healthy, only months earlier, they experienced a different reality. A flashback sequence accompanied by voiceover narration shows images of (presumably) Halima while experiencing malnourishment. Images of sickness, disease, and nakedness, with flies buzzing around a crying face communicate the direness of the circumstances. As the video progresses, the mother and child find an Action Against Hunger nutritional center that helps nourish Halima back to health and provides the opportunity of life and a hopeful future. The video features interviews with Fatima, Halima’s uncle, and members of the Action Against Hunger staff that helped nourish Halima back to life.

“Saving Halima’s Life” highlights the dynamics that Rangan, Atanasoski, Brown, Hesford, and Campbell each identify. The camera communicates that Halima is desperate before communicating that the alleviation of this desperation came only when Action Against Hunger intervened. The narrative positions the Western representative, Action Against Hunger, as the redeeming figure, giving life, hope, and humanity back to the young child. In her critique on *Vultures*, Kimberly Juanita Brown suggested that the image communicates to a Western audience that, “famine has a savior. That Savior is the (white) witness” (Brown 183). A similar sentiment emerges from Action Against Hunger’s ad.

Initially, several considerations made in the video’s production might suggest an African-led narrative agenda. The video utilizes an African narrator, refrains from using clips of white aid workers throughout the video, and even includes interview clips from Fatima sharing a piece of her

story. As objective steps moving towards decolonized methodology, each of these elements would ordinarily be productive. However, in this video in particular, the visual removal of whiteness actually works to reinforce a neocolonial hierarchy. Short, choppy sentences and brief audio cuts suggest that the narrator was reading directly from a script and that the audio segments were edited in post-production. Though this can be standard practice, in this scenario it seems to communicate that the participants in the film were communicating the thoughts, ideas, sentiments, and overall narrative qualities that Action Against Hunger wanted to communicate. Instead of allowing Fatima, the African health care workers, or the community that cared for Halima to express their own story, they instead used their voices to support their own narrative, seemingly justifying the content and narrative presented between the opening and closing frame. According to Fanon “to speak is to exist absolutely for the other” (1), which in one sense carries a sense of agency in which to speak means the other individual engaged in the verbal exchange hears and acknowledges your presence, existence, and humanity by choosing to engage in the conversation. But in this video, that phrase takes on another meaning, and one that might have been closer to the issue Fanon hoped to expose. In this video, the speaking voice exists absolutely for the other, meaning the thought and words being spoken seem to belong not to the voices in the video, but to the organization the video is supporting. Put another way, the voice is in service of another, confirming the existence of the voice of the organization rather than the voice of Fatima to further establish her own existence.

The purpose of this conversation is not to critique the fact that a child was supported by others and nourished back to life. My argument is not an indictment on all humanitarian aid work, nor do I necessarily mean to suggest that this work (including Action Against Hungers own work) is inherently negative. Though there is no shortage of issues to critique in this space, those arguments will find a more suitable home in a different thesis project. What I am critiquing is the manner in

which the beneficiaries of these organizations are continually represented. Because of the frequency with which groups like Action Against Hunger depend upon poverty-stricken aesthetic qualities in media campaigns, these representational tropes have become dominant in Western understandings of African spaces, histories, and identities.

When the types of images described above are used in connection with humanitarian aid work, media entities utilize what I call the humanitarian African Aesthetic. Rooted in the types of images that emerged from the humanitarian gaze of Western nations, the humanitarian African aesthetic positions African communities as impoverished, desperate, and dependent on the Western donor for life and relief from their “crisis.” Because of the frequency with which groups like Action Against Hunger depend upon this aesthetic in media campaigns, this representational trope has become dominant in Western understandings of African spaces, histories, and identities.

The ways that aid organizations imagine communities across the African landscape mirrors the ways that other humanitarian organizations depict other minority communities. Timothy K. August’s 2020 book *The Refugee Aesthetic: Reimagining Southeast Asia* tracks “the tropes that define and confine the ways that refugees are conventionally imagined” (11) and many of the same tropes are frequently applied in similar ways to African populations. August’s observation of the most positively generative solution is that refugee communities “[take] control of a narrative...being used by colonial institutions, refugee organizations, and/or collaborative autobiographies cowritten by white authors” (16). By allowing refugee writers to lead the conversations surrounding their own experiences, they are more able to dictate the way that “the refugee image, the refugee position, refugee space, and the refugee personality” are presented (August 21). Doing so reimagines the “identifiable formal patterns” more commonly used by large media corporations or national news coverage and allows for new voices to create new signifying meanings from the images.

The power of August's argument lies in the dramatic shifts in the ways that the phrase "the Refugee Aesthetic" can be read. The phrase operates as an adjective phrase describing a troped understanding found throughout news stories of refugee crisis. However, August provides a new way of understanding "the refugee aesthetic" as the aesthetic which is created by a refugee. Or perhaps more clearly, "The Refugee's Aesthetic." Reframing this phrase invokes a fundamental shift from the way one is presented to way of presenting oneself. This is an issue of agency, of power, and of representation and the humanitarian African aesthetic is due for similar changes. If the contemporary notion of Africa is through a Humanitarian African aesthetic, it is because the agency is held by the west, the power is upheld by media content confirming a narrow and stereotyped understanding of the continent, and the representational models are held by Western populations. Reframing this understanding would mean that the humanitarian African aesthetic would find agency in African voices, with power upheld by these storytelling communities, and representing the complexity of the African experience. In effect, this would reassign power from the West to Africa. For western-based humanitarian organizations to allow the same reconfiguring practice and allow Ugandan and Kenyan and Somalian and Ethiopian and Tanzanian and other African voices to structure the narrative of the places where they work would transform the Western perception of African populations "from a passive subject into an active agent" in representing their own narrative (August 68) and possibly warranting a shift towards the phrase Africa's humanitarian aesthetic.

Extreme images of poverty have been critiqued extensively as media prevalence continues to be an integral way we engage with our modern, global world. As such, I would expect that these renderings would be left behind as a relic of storytelling past. However, as has been extensively discussed, immediated documentary forms support reinscribed images of a humanitarian African aesthetic. When coupled together, these representational forms effectively operate as a neocolonial

instrument that enacts a humanitarian violence upon African communities. The methodology in which these documentary forms are created necessarily need to be reimagined. Doing so in a way that does not recreate a new neocolonial form will require African voices, filmmakers, and cultural creatives to lead non-African storytelling allies who are working in and creating narratives that emerge from the continent.



### Chapter 3: Stop Filming Us? Evaluating the role of Western Storytellers

Considering referential dynamics as presented by Mbembe, rejecting violent, immediated renderings, and rewriting the humanitarian African aesthetic through a more holistic variety of images and visual aesthetic qualities will be imperative in decolonizing humanitarian media efforts by the West. Western documentary filmmakers like Joris Postema and nonprofit organizations like Charity Water have begun incorporating these considerations into their practice as they've become increasingly aware of the damage and violence that the humanitarian African aesthetic has enacted upon African populations. In seeking to decolonize their own minds, stories, and representations, these parties (along with a handful of small-scale organizations) have sought to produce films that move beyond traditional forms of representation that are dependent on the humanitarian African aesthetic and instead pursue the types of stories that might be useful in reshaping Western perceptions of African populations.

In analyzing the films by both Postema and Charity Water, two dominant considerations are necessary for Western individuals seeking to engage in a decolonial way. In his 2018 film *Stop Filming Us*, in which Postema travels to Goma, DRC to shoot a film featuring Congolese filmmakers and photographers discussing the ways they want to represent their city, Postema shows the ways in which a Western storyteller should interrogate their own positions and storytelling aims when engaging with African communities. Postema's examples reveal the relative unfamiliarity and ignorance that Western storytellers often bring to this storytelling space, and thus the value of *Stop Filming Us* shows how this lack of understanding can contribute to ongoing racialized understandings of cities like Goma. Postema's commitment to approaching story with the "correct" mindset is important but falls short in detailing a practical methodology for constructing films

differently. Self-reflection and decolonizing ideologies are of course important, but do not necessarily lead to decolonized filmmaking practice.

Fortunately, Charity Water moves this abstract self-consideration further through their recent film *The Legacy of Helen Apio*. In this short film telling the story of the late Helen Apio, a local leader in her Ugandan community, Charity Water's video team roots the story not in their own agenda, but in the testimonies of individuals from the community keen to share their stories of success as a result of Helen's committed work with their town. This film details the ways that Western storytellers can create stories that imbue the referential agency to the African subjects of the film, and tell a story without depicting the communities in a state of crisis demanding immediate Western intervention. To produce a film with such care necessarily requires the type of critical interrogation that Postema outlines while crafting stories that limit the visual presence of the West.

The aim of this chapter is to analyze the limits for Western filmmakers and storytellers who engage in the humanitarian storytelling space. Each of these examples demonstrates useful considerations and strategies that other non-African allies can use in their own production process. However, each of these examples is also inherently limited and questions whether a Western-produced film in the African humanitarian space can ever fully be decolonized. Chapter 3 will move to the ways that local African filmmakers can extend the success of these filmmaking strategies even further than those imbued in Western connections. But, because of the ongoing presence of the West across the African continent, calling for a total removal of Western filmmakers from this context seems unlikely. Consequently, Western filmmakers need to interrogate their practices and methodology in order to ensure an ongoing movement towards decolonized storytelling futures.

As a whole, *Stop Filming Us* is a self-reflexive consideration of the role of Western filmmakers working in Goma, DRC and provides a fascinating insight into the self-considerations necessary for

western filmmakers to move beyond a neocolonial form. The film features interviews with local Congolese artists speaking to their interpretations of the humanitarian African aesthetic as well as strategies that they are utilizing to reclaim their own representation. It also features Postema's own interrogation of his own complacency in pervading neocolonial dynamics through his presence in the region through ongoing interruptions to the narrative featuring Postema debriefing moments in production where he potentially "did something neocolonial". Ultimately, the purpose of Postema's project is in pursuit of an investigation into the degree in which a Western filmmaker is capable of engaging with communities in places like Goma, DRC. In the opening minutes of the film, short clips of the city of Goma flash across the screen as Postema's voice narrates:

"Ten Years ago I first went to Goma... to make a film for one of the 250 western NGOs in the city. I could only film from a Jeep; the streets were too dangerous. I slept in a heavily guarded compound. Northeastern Congo felt like the most dangerous place on earth, an image that keeps being confirmed by the news from the region we get to see and the films that are made there. A few years later I went back, this time with a local organization. I slept in a hotel without security could go wherever I wanted and got to know a totally different city. My western image of "hell on earth" clashed with the Congolese reality. Can I, as a western filmmaker, portray this world?" (00:02:13 - 00:03:06)

*Stop Filming Us'* opening monologue reveals that Postema's Western-influenced perception of Goma prior to his first visit to the city failed to align with the Congolese reality. The stark contrast in his two experiences with Goma serve as one way in which humanitarian imagery emerging from Africa for a Western audience may not be in pursuit of actual commentary about Africa, but in pursuit of aiding a Western agenda. As Mbembe would suggest, the images, stories, and narratives

that informed Postema's initial understanding of cities like Goma (presumably emerging from national news outlets and other humanitarian projects) were not seeking to engage in a holistic representation of the complexities of the city, but in depicting scenes that would garner further Western support. Because of the significantly different experiences between his trips, Postema posits his project as an investigation into the reasons why the Western understanding of the city is so radically different than the Congolese reality, and if he, as a Western filmmaker, can assist in reframing the narrative for a Western audience.

The remainder of the film attempts to provide an answer to the final question featured in Postema's opening monologue, and he uses three types of scenes while seeking an answer; scenes featuring local Congolese artists discussing their artistic approach, scenes of local individuals talking to each other about western modes of representation, and scenes with Postema engaging in conversations about his own personal involvement with representation through creating *Stop Filming Us*. The first type of scene deployed in pursuit of this agenda is to feature a variety of local artists, photographers, and filmmakers and the work they are creating. The visibility of African creative voices is, perhaps, the most constructive element of the film with regards to decolonized futures. Postema succeeds in showing that Western understandings of African communities funneled through humanitarian marketing strategies are not the only way to interpret these people or communities. One of the main voices featured throughout the film is Mugabo Baritegera, a photographer and artist seeking to build an art studio and host an exhibit featuring other Congolese visual artists. When describing the motivation behind his filmmaking process, Baritegera says that "I realized that images from Goma... had very little truth in them... When I wanted to recognize myself in images, on the internet [and] all I saw was this negativity, I told myself: Take a camera, go out into the street and look at life as it is. Something I can identify with and other people can

identify with too” (00:08:15). Baritegera is presented as a leader among the artistic community in the way he is shown developing an art studio, planning art exhibits, engaging with conversations with other artists about how best to represent their city, and empathetically engaging with the individuals he photographs throughout Goma.

Baritegera is not the only artist featured throughout the film. Several scenes surround the students at Yole! Africa, “an educational center that fosters social innovation through art” (Yole webpage). Like Baritegera, the students help signal to Western audiences that there are African storytellers eager to engage in stories about their city in methods that deviate from the Western norm. In the film itself, the students at Yole! Africa help schedule screenings of the final version of *Stop Filming Us*, as well as engage in photography workshops to learn how best to represent their community. During one of these moments, the students are shown two separate photos of women living near Goma. The first photo features a close-up portrait photograph of a woman wearing a yellow Kitenge-patterned headdress stretching to the top-right edge of the frame. The photo displays her strength through a soft, but proud smile and the students describe the person as “express[ing] pride” (00:28:24). The second photo features a wide shot of a primary-school aged girl standing with a background of rolling green hills and mountains far in the distance. The girl’s forehead is furrowed, she doesn’t smile, and her expression seems to express discomfort with being photographed. After viewing the two photos, the students are then asked, “Who took this picture? A local person or a foreigner?” (00:28:36). Each student agrees that the first photo was taken by an African photographer and the second by a western photographer working for an NGO. The instructor communicates that both photos were captured by Ley Uwera, a Congolese photographer from Goma.

The scene transitions to an interview with Ley where Postema asks her about her own photographic intentions when capturing images like the second photo shown to the Yolo! Africa students. Postema states, “What I see is this typical cliché refugee photo we always see in the west” (00:36:20). Ley responds by admitting that “People have been used to seeing images like that for many years but...I think that [when] people are in certain situations, in a bad situation... you have to talk about it” (00:38:07). Ley goes on to communicate that she does not want to ignore these bad situations or to “have to hide or avoid talking about things that go wrong” (00:38:19) simply for the sake of changing the African image. Furthermore, when this singular photo is contextualized within the rest of her work, including the first photo shown to the Yolo! Africa students, Ley’s own representation of Goma boasts a broad range of photographic styles and features Congolese across various life stages highlighting the many varied experiences found within one African town. Ley’s photography challenges western monocultural renderings simply in representing a wide variety of experiences, outlooks, and perspectives in her work.

The first style of scene Postema uses seems to challenge the singular narrative presented through the humanitarian African aesthetic. In each of these scenes, different artists with differing styles and perspectives begin to unveil the numerous artistic forms present in Goma as well as the alternative ways the city of Goma should be represented. But what seems clear is that in these local forms of representation, scenes of poverty or narratives that could confirm Western misconceptions of the region are not welcomed. Students at Yolo! Africa seem to be in opposition to any form of the humanitarian African aesthetic pervading their own ways of depicting their city. Similarly, street vendors and other pedestrians that encounter the film crew explicitly express their dissatisfaction with the ways their photos have previously been used by shouting, “Why do the whites take our picture?” (1:07:53) and “You’re thieves, you steal from our country!” (1:08:24) In solidarity with the

main voices present in the film, Postema begins to favor these understandings of Goma as true and authentic, positioning them as the ways stories about the city should be conveyed.

However, in signaling that these stories are the way towards a decolonized future, Postema actively discredits Ley's photography as able to contribute to the movement of local representation of Goma. Despite her commitment to tell a full complex story engaging with both the strength and abilities of the Congolese people as well as the experiences of poverty and violence that, she claims, you cannot ignore, Postema fixates upon her images from refugee camps. Throughout the interview with her, he seems to insinuate that nothing containing anything that could possibly be interpreted as from a western photographer or in service of a Western agenda could be productive in challenging Goma's global image. To further confirm his own agenda, when students are shown Ley's images at Yole! Africa, the conversations surrounding the photos do not reveal that both images are Ley's. Instead, the negative image is confirmed as her's, but the other is attributed to a "local photographer in town".

Though attempting to highlight the importance of local stories and ways of communication, Postema and his crew still draw parameters around what should be done in narratives surrounding African communities, ultimately asserting their own expectations onto the local voice. Though local voices are an answer to new ways of knowing, the way in which *Stop Filming Us* gravitates towards one specific non-humanitarian, anti-western strategy of doing so reveals the limits of his own imagination of the ways these stories can be constructed, shared, and understood.

The second grouping of scenes feature conversations between Congolese artists explicitly discussing the Western renditions of their country and their town. One of the most notable instances of this occurs while Baritegera is preparing for his art exhibit and has gathered several

other artists to discuss the show. Prior to finishing the meeting, a conversation arises about neocolonial impacts through western media renderings.

“How to deal with the concept of neo-colonialism – Artist 1

It’s a reality, it’s not a concept, it’s a reality – Artist 2

So it can be a mental thing? - Artist 1

Yes. It’s a mindset we’ve created. – Artist 3

We have adopted all their opinions, they stick in our minds. Is there no way to remove them? – Artist 4

But your mind is your own... It starts from something very simple, but it will grow slowly. I’m sure it will create a consciousness. – Artist 1

Many values, many stories to tell.” - Artist 5 <sup>3</sup>

Though Postema is presumably behind the camera when these conversations take place, he is never seen on screen as Goma artists discuss these issues. By allowing these conversations to unfold without his imposition, such as might be the case in an interview setting, Postema identifies a dissatisfaction among local communities that connect directly to his own observation of poorly-executed humanitarian films. Furthermore, by allowing these conversations to unfold organically and without Postema’s intervention, the camera reveals that this is not an isolated opinion on this matter. Throughout the film, dozens of filmmakers, artists, street-vendors, drivers, and other Congolese citizens express a discontentment about Western imposition into their culture and the shortcomings of the ways in which their town is portrayed to a global population.

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<sup>3</sup> The film does not list the names of the speakers in this discussion. Because there are over 10 people standing in a circle while engaging in the conversation, with certain shots not showing the person speaking, I have chosen to list each speaker as “artist” with a corresponding number for the order in which they speak.



The specifics of this imagery are continually defined throughout the film through clips of conversations like the one listed above. Yola! Africa students, Ley, and Baritegera all express frustration concerning “incomprehensible, unacceptable” images like naked children (39:13) or violence or poverty (common features of the humanitarian African aesthetic) being used to depict the region. When these scenes are placed alongside the first style of scenes, several overriding tones emerge. Not only does the audience of this film begin to see that the African artistic movement is vibrant and that local storytellers are engaging in producing innovative narratives about their communities, but also that these stories are emerging as an alternative to the humanitarian African aesthetic. The importance of remedying the misrepresentations is clear and should signal to humanitarian groups that their current storytelling models are incompatible with a localized way of understanding. By including each of these types of scenes, Postema is able to communicate “a tiny bit of awareness in western audiences” (01:00:28) about the reality of the impact their representation has on local populations.

However, while allowing these conversations to unfold organically and without his intervention, Postema’s third strategy provides a more overt example to western audiences about their own direct involvement in neocolonial filmmaking practices. Between scenes with the local artists, Postema addresses his own guiding question of his personal belonging in this space. During one day of filming, while discussing the negative impact of Western NGOs on Goma’s local population among the film’s crew, Postema posed the question of whether they thought all NGOs should leave the region. He followed this question by asking if he himself should leave. The results were split, but Gaius, one of Postema’s translators, stated he thought Postema should leave. That evening, Postema asked Gaius specifically why he believed Postema should return to Europe – Gaius maintained that the presence of a Western filmmaker like Joris is part of a systematic issue of

misrepresentation and that Joris, by creating this film, relied on these preconstructed modes.

Postema agrees to this, and even theoretically concedes to the suggestion that they should “give the money to a local director” to make films like these but that doing so is “impossible [because] our system doesn’t allow this.” (1:01:49). At this moment, the audio man interjects and says that “it’s not impossible...” and that if the same scene was given to a local director as was given to a Western filmmaker, that “you’ll see it will be different” (01:02:19). Notably, Postema agrees, and the following scene features a short film directed by Baritegera. Though as a whole the experiment is inconclusive due to the lack of inclusion of Postema’s own version of the short film in the final cut of *Stop Filming Us* and an unclear connection for what the prompt of the scene was, the most useful elements of this experiment lie within the conversation between Postema, Gaius, and the audio man. In these sections, Postema turns the camera upon himself and fosters roundtable discussions with his Congolese film crew about his own role in creating this particular film. Of the three major categories of scenes in the film, this one is in closest pursuit of what seems to be his own personal desire in creating the film – showing western audiences ways in which they can take the posture of a student and trust locally inspired visions.

This scene, and the third grouping of scenes, provides an image of how other creators who might identify with Postema’s own positionality could posture themselves when engaging with local communities. Postema’s attitude throughout this scene and other moments like it in the film reflect a desire to pursue decolonized storytelling ideologies. Postema is willing to ask deeper questions to understand why individuals like Gaius feel his actions are problematic and rooted in colonial and neocolonial forms. By displaying the moments of his own processing in the final edition of the film, Postema highlights the types of questions that other Western filmmakers seeking decolonial futures should be asking of local communities. In considering this alongside his feature of African artists

and Congolese ideology about the humanitarian presence in their town, Postema presents a compelling collection of considerations for those seeking to represent Congolese communities that are not members of those communities. Though the act of considering one's position within these contexts is important, it is not enough to be considered decolonizing. As with many elements of the film, Postema fails to present avenues through which Western filmmakers can wholeheartedly continue to engage in contexts like Goma, but do so in a decolonized way. In the end, he confirms a New York Times assessment of the film that describes *Stop Filming Us* as “hand-wringing” and “a toothless display of white guilt” (Girish 6).

In some ways this is true – Postema's engagement with such sensitive topics ultimately result in a conversation about the gawking (and as Postema might conclude, insurmountable) problem that decolonial storytelling practice faces. In this way, the focus of the film remains on the Western consciousness rather than providing creative and generative solutions for supporting Congolese and other African filmmakers. Awareness is, according to Gaius, “[a] good start.” but “if you don't scratch deep...then you create awareness and then what? People come rushing thinking the problem is here, but actually the problem is not here” (1:00:44). Gaius's critique is exactly right – conversation is important, but must be matched with action. Though Postema does seem to value the local voice and is aware of the issues with Western intervention, his posture in the end seems to accept these dynamics as complexities beyond anything that can undergo foundational change. The conversations he fosters do begin the work a Western filmmaker would need to undergo in order to engage in a decolonized way, but do not offer pragmatic steps with which these understandings are applicable. One final example illustrates this well.

Bernadette, one of the featured artists, attempts to secure funding to complete a documentary about the colonial history of Goma from a local's perspective. At the time, she had

been attempting to secure this funding for over 2 years. Postema strategically included conversations between Bernadette and a representative at the French Institute. After asking about potential grants and artistic funds available, the French Institute representative fails to provide valuable connections to Bernadette and advises her to finish making the film on her own and to screen it in Goma before returning to ask about more funding potential. Though there is no overt animosity displayed between the two, the scene serves to detail the barriers that still exist for local artists to represent their own communities among a Western population. Postema speaks to these same barriers in an interview following an online screening of *Stop Filming Us*. Postema admits that “There is a big problem of finance for artists in Goma... to make what they really want to make ... so I think it’s really important that films are seen made from people there, but then how to get them is a problem.” (Kuno 00:05:53). Postema’s practical disposition in this scene reflects one opinion of why a transferal of agency in humanitarian storytelling is unlikely to occur with the present system. It also reveals a small portion of the deep complexity imbedded within an overthrow of current systematic barriers that would limit the reach of African-produced and directed films. *Stop Filming us* not only shows how theoretical considerations such as rejecting neocolonial mindsets will be challenging, but also the challenge of practical components of the production process. Unfortunately, Postema’s own perspective seems to accept these complexities as beyond anything that can undergo foundational change.

*Stop Filming Us* combines a focused study of the African artist alongside a conversation about western neocolonial involvement in the region and this coupling is productive for a number of reasons. Primarily, the film exposes the shortcomings of Western representation of African spaces as well as a failure to genuinely create systems that would support more African-led filmmaking initiatives. The film highlights this through the conversations between the various collections of

individuals, but also through deeper and more subtle critiques of the system at large. Many elements of the film are productive, instructive, and useful for those seeking to decolonize their storytelling models, but the film is not without issue.

Beyond limiting the way that the new Congolese story should be told by misrepresenting Ley's work and admitting overall systematic defeat, the most problematic feature of *Stop Filming Us* is the recapitulation of Western-centric ideology and importance through the framing of the film. A short description of the film illustrates this well. If describing the film in a two-sentence summary, I might describe it as follows: "*Stop Filming Us* is a documentary about neocolonial impositions by Western filmmakers onto the international perception of Goma, DRC. The film follows both Congolese artists as they discuss their personal vendettas against Western representative forms as well as a Dutch filmmaker seeking to discover the true impact of his (and other Western filmmakers) presence in the region." With a description like this (which is quite similar to synopses found on streaming services, festival descriptions of the film, and in newspaper articles written about the film)<sup>4</sup> the language signals that the film is ultimately about Postema and the West rather than the artistic ventures of the Congolese artists. Postema also confirms that these are his intentions when he claims that *Stop Filming Us* as "really about how I, as a Dutch filmmaker, encounter all kinds of privileges while making this film." (Kuno 00:06:23).

Though Postema may have sought to reveal the problems with a Western presence in the region, he instead recapitulated the same referential problems Mbembe critiques when he says that

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<sup>4</sup> Doxy Films, one of the sponsoring agencies of *Stop Filming Us* described the film, in part, as follows: "The question arises whether a Western filmmaker is able to capture anything of truth about this complex, damaged and beautiful country. Is this even possible after the way the Western imagery has been used? Is the filmmaker part of the 'white savior complex' and just wants to clear his conscience? Do Western 'good intentions' only cause destruction and frustration? With the open confrontations that the filmmaker enters into with the characters and the local crew, he tries to bring the mutual (subconscious) assumptions to the surface; the prejudices provide a deeper insight into the inequality of power that lies under the mechanism of Western imaging."

“Africa is the mediation that enables the West to accede to its own subconscious and give a public account of its subjectivity” (3). Postema uses the African subject to confirm his own suspicion about Western ideological and representational impositions, but in doing so renders the African subject null. One might argue that the cost of reinscribing these dynamics in this particular film might discourage other Western filmmakers working in the region in the future, but as for the isolated success of the film in this referential sense, *Stop Filming Us* falls short. If Postema had considered framing the film in this alternative way, perhaps the same referential dynamics typically found in humanitarian films could have been avoided: “*Stop Filming Us* is a documentary about a growing Congolese artistic movement and the ways in which this movement has inspired artistic communities across Eastern and Central Africa. Political Activists, brilliantly creative artists, and proud Congolese compose the cast of characters as they seek to rewrite the narrative about their communities.” If my slight reframing of the film had been the guiding motivation behind *Stop Filming Us*, a very different type of film would have been created. By pointing to the Congolese voice as the primary motivation for creating the film, this form of orientation would have made the commentary about the Congolese voice in Goma rather than about Postema’s voice in the West.

In sum, despite the notable referential problems found throughout the film, *Stop Filming Us* does succeed at providing an honest (though, pessimistic and defeated at times) look at the complexities inherent with a Western creator depicting African spaces. *Stop Filming Us* not only shows theoretical challenges such as rejecting neocolonial mindsets, but also practical ones of the production process. *Stop Filming Us* also uniquely discusses an undercurrent emerging in the ways in which Western creatives are beginning to understand their role in engaging with the African context. Other Western filmmakers have considered the problems of this misrepresentation and attempted to

reorient their own narratives to reject immediated humanitarian African aesthetics and instead provide a template for new referential forms to emerge.

The question becomes whether or not it is possible to produce a film that doesn't reorient the referential dynamics to be an exclusive commentary to a Western audience or the Western filmmaker in Africa, but instead to Africa and African filmmaking. Recently Charity Water, a U.S. based nonprofit organization working on "bringing clean and safe drinking water to people in developing nations" (Charity Water) created a video about one community in Northern Uganda that has benefited from their work. The film, titled *The Legacy of Helena Apio*, tells the story of transformational growth that Helena's community experienced after receiving clean water access. However, the short film creates a beautiful example of a nonprofit video that successfully allows the Ugandan community to comment on their own experiences rather than rendering their voices in service to their own agenda.

The video opens to a framed photograph hung on the wall of a Ugandan hut of a Ugandan woman named Helen, presumably the leader of the home. In the background, a woman speaking Acholi (the local language of Acholi land in Northern Uganda where the film was shot) says "I am healthy today because of Helen. I have kept my home health. All because of the teachings of Helen." (00:00:24). Slow-motion B-roll footage of blooming flowers, sunlight peeking through trees, and children riding bikes fill the screen as other community members begin to share about the Helen's impact on their community. "What I learned from her is to always teach those behind me" (00:00:32) says one woman. "She raised us into adults" (00:00:50) says another. The video then transitions to discussing the change that occurred when a borehole was installed in their village, dramatically decreasing the prevalence of water-borne illnesses in their community and acting as the catalyst to allow their town to flourish. After each of these beats of the film occur, only 2:23 seconds

of 7:12 film have passed – the remainder of the film returns to people relaying Helen’s impact in inspiring her family and neighbors to pursue things like education and business, helping to improve their community and leave a promising legacy for the next generation. Community members credit Helen with things like “teaching [them] how to do business” (00:03:13) and “how to bake bread” (00:03:28) and describe her as “a God-given gift, a leader.” (00:06:19). The film ends with the Helen’s family hanging a second photo next to the photo of Helen that opened the film, along with the confirmation of a suspicion that rises throughout the film – Helen passed away. The film’s overall tone is that Helen was committed to the success of her community and her death leaves an important gap in her community. But because of the strength that she instilled in her community, her legacy will live on through the people she loved and supported throughout her life.

Several fundamental elements are critical in this film being an example of the types of Western-produced films that support a movement towards decolonized representative modes. Primarily, the narrative construction of *The Legacy of Helen Apio* is driven by the testimony of local Ugandans as they speak on behalf of the inspiration of Helen. The film orients the audience as a witness to the success of Ugandan initiatives, rather than a Western agenda, and in doing so, position Western interests as secondary to the Ugandan interests. The effects of these creative decisions establish a referential dynamic that is self-contained within the Ugandan community rather than one that depends on the Western voice and presence for validation. This comes through clearly in several ways.

First, from the beginning of the film, Helen is positioned as the person inspiring change in her community. As described above, the film opens and immediately identifies Helen as the focus of the film. The opening voice-over narrations all speak to Helen’s positive impact on the growth and success their community now experiences. The opening shot of the film features a portrait



photograph of Helen located in the center of a picture frame. The shot-composition places the photograph in the middle intersecting third of the video frame. Within 20 seconds of the film's beginning, Helen is immediately established as the most critical character, and the film's opening confirms this in its aesthetic qualities as well as the narrative construction.

Her centrality to the story persists further through the testimony provided by other community members speaking both on her behalf and on the behalf of the community as a whole. Based solely on positionality, the fact that Helen is spoken about by her friends, family, and community from her village confirms that this film is not speaking about some other place or some other people. This allows for the referential dynamics to be self-contained, pointing both to the leadership inspired by Helen as well as the continuation of this success enacted by community members that are still living in the village. Because of this strategy, the presumed western audience is able to witness a Ugandan community speaking on behalf of their own experience and success, led by their own initiatives, rather than witnessing the African voice speaking to the success of a Western-led agenda.

Beyond simply the demographics of those speaking to the experiences of Helen's community, the type of witness provided continues to strengthen the referential forms that the film constructs. Testimony is the primary manner in which stories about Helen and the community are communicated. As Naomi Paik has outlined, testimonies are true and authentic narratives that are conveyed in the first-person by the individual whose perspective of the witness who provides the narrative (Paik 14). Members of Helen's community are the ones speaking on her behalf rather than individuals from a neighboring village or some other investigative body (such as a journalist or news agency). Helen's community members are speaking about their personal experience from a first-hand account, strengthening both the validity of the narrative and the referential ties.

Testimonies also consist of an individual experience, but speak for a collective that is shared by the other individuals who have experienced the same situation (Paik 14). Numerous individual testimonies, that are unique to each person's interactions with Helen as well as their own unique skillsets, highlight the individual elements of these experiences. But, each story connects in a meaningful way in movement towards an overall theme found in Helen's legacy. As the number of testimonies about Helen's impact increases throughout the film, the individual experiences become a community-wide narrative is that the referential connections begin to connect to other members in the community as well. For instance, as the film crescendos to its closing sequence, one of the community members fondly relays that "people who live here have come from different places. People from various traditions say that this trading center has united them like a home and that has made them live together in love" (00:06:16). As the nostalgic reflection drives the audio, shots of numerous children from the community flicker across the screen. The combined audio and visual sequences point to the ways that Helen's impact is currently influencing their community, surrounding communities who now travel to trade in their town, and generations to come. These signals draw the narrative further than solely talking about Helen's influence, but also the movement towards growth and autonomy found among many members of their community. As a whole, this allows the internally-driven referential dynamics to point to a locally-led initiative rather than further galvanizing an international influence and intervention strategy.

The third quality of this film that gestures to the possibility of a decolonized future is the refrain of the filmmakers from directly signaling to Charity Water as the source of change for the community. Most notably, as community members mention the impact that clean water has had on their community, they speak phrases like "The borehole has transformed our lives so much" (00:01:40) instead of "Charity Water has transformed our lives so much." Though perhaps not a

specifically identified immediated trope by Rangan, Western humanitarian intervention serving as the ultimate catalyst for African success is frequently utilized in nonprofit films. But, at no point in the film do any members of the community mention Charity Water's presence in their community, nor are there visual hints at their presence (like a jerrycan with their logo, or a community member wearing a charity water shirt. Instead, water is the catalyst for improvement and Helen is the person through which the change can take place. Again, because this information is provided from Ugandan voices speaking to the leadership of Helen, without mentioning Charity Water as the mode through which success was obtained, the signifying power remains Ugandan-led.

Furthermore, in conveying the need of clean water, in which many organizations might rely more heavily on the humanitarian African aesthetic in order to convey the direness of their situation, the film actively pushes against these sorts of images. Though for 45 seconds, community members describe the poor water conditions prior to the borehole being installed, the film only shows close-up shots beneath the surface of water and rejects imagery of people being subjected to poor-water conditions.

Together, the interview strategies, depiction of a connected community experience, and the fundamental referential dynamics of the film provide a helpful contrast to *Stop Filming Us*, which utilizes the Congolese voices to reconfirm Postema's own agenda. As was discussed, though the conversations surrounding neocolonialism, Western humanitarian impacts, and representative modes surrounding Goma were ones the local artists wanted to engage with, Postema used these conversations to evoke the same modes of empathy and guilt that plague many Western humanitarian renderings of African communities. However, *The Legacy of Helen Apio* carefully navigates these systems and produce a referential system within the film that confirms a Ugandan-centric narrative. And, because the film features Ugandans speaking on behalf of their own

community and to the honor of Helen without mention of Charity Water, the film upholds a narrative structure confirmed and upheld by the Ugandan voice.

Undoubtedly, the film has been, and will continue to be, used by Charity Water for fundraising efforts across their network. Their website's landing page features the video alongside links to donate to their efforts to dig boreholes and revitalize broken wells throughout the developing world. As such, *The Legacy of Helen Apio* is ultimately in service of the Western organization's own agenda. Furthermore, as Rangan might critique, the camera is positioned as the subject that renders the subjects able to speak. Simply put, the underlying fact that a Western filmmaker uses the camera to highlight this community reinforces the power of the filmmaker and the camera to create and present these narratives. But, in some ways, these qualities are the unavoidable limits for a Western organization communicating their work to a Western audience. As will be highlighted in the final chapter, the best way to continually diminish the western influence over the narrative constructions is through locally led production. Furthermore, to push against Rangan's own analysis, the implication that the camera can grant power and agency would suggest that the depiction of others possesses a performative agency that overpowers the already-existing relational connections between members of the village and surrounding communities. Regardless, for a video composed by Western storytellers, *The Legacy of Helen Apio* is unable to completely distance itself from some of the power dynamics imbedded in neocolonial storytelling modes due to the crew behind the camera (but not the camera itself).

Fortunately, because of the structural components that compose the narrative in the film, the influence of Charity Water in this video is ultimately second to the internally-led growth and vitality of the Ugandan community. Because the strength of connections between testimonials about their own experiences, the overall experience of others in their community, and the ultimate

influence of Helen to foster long-term sustainable growth, the ultimate success of the film is found within the Ugandan communities' own efforts rather than Charity Water's impact.

*The Legacy of Helen Apio* offers a useful example of the ways in which Western storytellers can recalibrate their position to subjects in communicating stories about the beneficiaries of Western humanitarian efforts. External factors that influence the film's creation (such as the film being in ultimate service to fundraising agendas and Western interventionist measures) will most likely be closely at-hand in the majority of Western sponsored humanitarian aid videos. But, by carefully constructing a narrative system that is driven by the local voice and testimony, is sustained by other local members, and restrains from overtly inserting the Western presence into the discussion, local representations may be able to overshadow the overtly Western presence. In a best-case scenario, if filmmakers continue to consider these techniques, a growing understanding will begin to see the more complex, broad, and internally-led modes of understanding found among villages like Helen's in Northern Uganda. Pursuit of these narratives will ideally aid the blossoming of a decolonized future and can begin to reshape the way Western audiences consider their position to Ugandan, Congolese, and other East African nations.

## Chapter 4: Audacious Futures: African-led storytelling possibilities

Perhaps the clearest solution to the problematic consequences of Western-produced and directed nonprofit content is to seek non-western creatives to lead these projects. Reliance upon African storytellers to craft stories and narratives that are able to capture their circumstances in a more authentic and considered manner could be one potential avenue into rewriting the humanitarian African aesthetic. As insinuated in the previous chapter, Western directed nonprofit videos in service of Western humanitarian organizations will more than likely be unable to fully engage in a radically African-centric narrative. But, African storytellers are (and have been) masterfully crafting narratives that convey their experiences and offer potential avenues for reframing nonprofit aesthetics. Isaac Oboth, a Ugandan-born filmmaker and entrepreneur, is one of the storytellers who is currently championing local voices and African autonomy over the ways that their story is told. Through his media companies Media256 and African Storytellers, he has a mission to “rewrite the story of Africa using film” (African Storytellers).

The best introduction to Oboth and his filmmaking techniques is through his short film *Lights Out*, an autobiographic story retelling the beginnings of his entrepreneurial journey and introduction into film production. The film takes place at a boarding school in Uganda where Oboth was a student. *Lights Out* tells that when Oboth’s family lost their primary source of income and would be unable to pay Oboth’s school fees, Isaac crafted a business solution so that he could stay in school. The film portrays the details of this early business idea as Oboth works with Mr. Matovu, the home economics teacher, to learn how to bake and sell rockbuns to his classmates. Oboth’s success with this venture inspires further ingenuity and he decides to create a photo slideshow during the school’s prom and sell the DVDs to his fellow classmates in the days after the event. As with the rockbuns, Oboth’s photo project is a success, and he begins to imagine the extent to which

he could push the limits of video. The film ends with a scene the year after Oboth graduated from the school. Over several months, he taught himself how to shoot video by watching YouTube videos and returned to his alma mater to again film the prom. Again successful, the film fades from the fictionalized version of Oboth's story into images of the actual Oboth, as would follow the majority of "based on true events" films. Alongside these images, screen text provides information on the growing success of Oboth's media venture including the facts that in 2017 "Media256 was the largest freelance producer of feature Africa shows on CNN international" (00:18:25) and that "Isaac Oboth was listed by Forbes as one of the top 30 under 30 entrepreneurs in Africa 2014, 2015, and 2017" (00:18:32). "Ugandan Success story" might be the most efficient way to describe *Lights Out* but the film, and Oboth's work more broadly, is much more complex than what this phrase may communicate.

*Lights Out* boarding school locale not only presents the background for the film, but also serves as an analogy for the ability to communicate the importance of an insider perspective. Oboth lived the life of a boarding school student and would have been privy to the details that are unique to this experience. As such, Oboth is thus able to effectively capture and communicate elements of this experience to an audience that likely does not share the uniqueness of a Ugandan boarding school background. By communicating the experiences associated with this perspective, Oboth allows his audience to witness moments that might one expect in such an environment, such as standing for roll call at the beginning of the school day (00:02:06). Furthermore, he also details moments that individuals who have not been to boarding school might not even think to consider like the late-night feasting on leftovers brought by family members on visiting day (00:03:45), or the structure of morning schedules and routines (00:00:10). The attention to these seemingly subtle details, but details that convey the fullness of the experience help to layer a rich texture onto the

story. The representation of these events seems authentic and so the story, enriched through a robustness of both expected and unexpected details effectively secures a trust with the viewer of the film to accept Oboth's presentation of these events as genuine.

Metaphoric treatment of the boarding school is useful for considering the authorship dynamics that have guided large portions of the argumentative components of this project. Like Oboth is an insider to the life of a boarding school student, he is also an insider to the experience of being a Ugandan storyteller in a way that no Western filmmaker would be able to match. This affords him (and other local artists and storytellers) the ability to think beyond the tropes that readily lend themselves to the Western storyteller's narrative quiver. In many ways, the ability to engage with authentic and personal stories through locally imagined terms is foundational both to Oboth's work, but also to the methodological considerations at play in Mbembe's introduction to *On the Postcolony*. As Mbembe called for academic engagement on African terms, Oboth engages with his own story on his own terms. Effectively, the referential system that is so frequently misaligned by Western creatives is recalibrated in *Lights Out* in a way that is favorable to Oboth. But Oboth's craft extends much further than simply his ability to render the scenes from an insider perspective.

A storyteller's power to offer his or her voice in pursuit of contributing to or reshaping a certain perspective is a radically brave and necessary act, especially in the postcolonial context with which we have been discussing. Oboth chooses to contribute to the reframing of an understanding of African story in *Lights Out* and does so without overt or direct commentary about the decolonizing movement. Furthermore, he rejects many of the narrative strategies that a Western audience might expect as he presents his success story. And yet, despite the overwhelming benefits associated with a local director like Oboth, biographic considerations of authorship are not the only considerations required in pursuit of a decolonized story.



As I discussed earlier about *Stop Filming Us*, when Yola! Africa students were asked whether the photo of the refugee child had been taken by “a local person or a foreigner?” (00:28:36) they presumed that it had been taken by a Western photographer. The Yola! Africa students offered this opinion before finding out that Ley, a local Goma photographer, had taken the photo. Without recapitulating our entire discussion on *Stop Filming Us*, Ley’s photography project and the complexity seen across her entire collection, or the specific details particular to the Congolese discussion, this example simply shows that localized demographics is not the only step required to achieving a fully decolonized story.

In fact, insisting that local artists are the sole voices to speak to decolonized issues can instead reinscribe the problematic referential cycle Mbembe describes, as well as place an incredibly weighty burden upon African storytellers to achieve a narrative that is accepted as new, innovative, decolonized, or in service to a new understanding of the African moment. Artists may (and do) speak to these issues, but a fully decolonized storytelling movement must be pursued without the implicit pressure to only create and communicate stories that speak directly to decolonization or an elimination of Western presence. To do so qualifies the types of stories that are expected and thus fail to achieve any sort of productively different outcome than those present with the monolithic nature of the humanitarian African aesthetic.

Furthermore, to credit the importance and success of *Lights Out* to Oboth’s personal background would be a severely limited interpretation of the quality and value with which he engages in storytelling. Conscious decisions made while crafting the narrative structure of the film offer new possibilities for the Western audience to imagine the African experience. Notably, the film

provides a story of success and innovation that contrasts many of the way similar stories are told by nonprofit organizations. Additionally, the utilization of a blended language form further focuses the importance of the film on the active Ugandan agent rather than the Western consciousness.

*Lights Out* presents a narrative subject that is an active agent in his story rather than a passive subject. Oboth is presenting his narrative as he wishes for it to be seen, understood, and interpreted, and his methodology effectively minimizes the potential for an audience to perceive his character in an “othered” framing. Recently, stories of success have been prominent in the marketing content pushed by nonprofit and other humanitarian organizations. Examples like the Action Against Hunger video, utilize these forms of narrative presentation. In these films, the narrative trajectory trends towards success. But, before the protagonist experiences success, the humanitarian African aesthetic is deployed to show direness of their previous situation, rendering their experience and existence as bordering on inhumane and necessitating interventionist measures. Consequentially, before the subject is seen as a successful hero, they are seen in a problematically “othered: and troped manner. Success is then offered through the programming of the particular organization, serving as the mediator through which the subjects’ humanity is offered.

This dynamic rearticulates the foundational argument throughout Rangan’s own assessment in the ways in which humanity is gifted through humanitarian interventionist measures. But Oboth’s film expertly avoids these tropes and is able to offer a powerful presentation of a Ugandan subject with agency in his own situation and achieving success. Furthermore, *Lights Out* removes the ability for the subject’s humanity to be contingent upon Western programing, humanitarian intervention, or government aid. Oboth’s character is presented as a typical school-aged boy as might be presented in a contemporary television show or film and his success is not contingent upon humanitarian assistance or programming. Instead, the source of change is Oboth’s own spark of

ingenuity, community guidance through Mr. Matovu, and a group of piers willing to support his various business ideas through consuming his products. By choosing to frame his story in this manner, Oboth does not need to actively discredit the deep-rooted systematic presence of humanitarian efforts in the surrounding regions. Instead, he shows a different story – one from a local origin, with community support, that resulted in the betterment of the greater local collective. These strategies do not require that Oboth speak directly to issues of decolonization or a western neocolonial presence. Instead, Oboth chooses a different story and tells it in a unique manner that highlights his own experiences and perspectives.

Similarly, elements of language also allow for an increased Ugandan-centric perspective to pervade throughout the film. Thiong’o places the highest importance upon considerations of language in reclaiming a decolonized perspective. He states that “Communication creates culture: culture is a means of communication. Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world.... Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world” (15-16 Thiong’o). If we consider this quote within the parameters of how Oboth refigures the presence of language in *Lights Out*, we will find that Oboth is enacting a return to localized language that Thiong’o emphasized as critical to decolonial movements.

The opening scene of the film, as the boarding school prefect awakens the students, is delivered with a mixture of English and a local Ugandan language. Emphatic lines like “Wake up” are delivered in English, but the remaining instructions about which boy has received which chore for their morning routine is delivered in their local language. The chore assignments are delivered with more complete sentences rather than parsed sentence fragments, and the completeness of the

sentences seems to require a more thorough translation in order to understand the context of the scenario. However, in these scenes, subtitles are not used for translation, notably situating the primary audience of this film as local Ugandan viewers rather than a Western audience.

English becomes more dominant after the opening scene; many lines are delivered from Oboth in a voiceover narration in the present day, reflecting back on his experience in boarding school. These critical moments reflect the normalcy present in each day – English is connected to the mundane, the ordinary, and the routine. Creative depictions of time through the usage of static shots make this clear. One example of this is when a wide-angle nighttime exterior shot of the boys dormitory shows the boys shuffling to bed. The open-air hallway clears, indicating the students are asleep and the passage of the night. But, without breaking the shot, the unmistakable prefect moves across the same hallway, dressed, and ready to wake the boys up in the same way as was depicted in the film's opening scene. Moments like these help establish what is typical, the foundational background that Oboth's character will inevitably contrast.

But, after establishing the daily lives in the dorm (again, delivered mostly in English) Oboth's narrative prowess intercedes. As familial circumstances necessitate innovation, Oboth begins speaking with Mr. Matovu about prospects of starting a business. Notably, these conversations take place not in English, but in their local language, communicating that new ideas, prospects of success, and possibility of a future can be found through locally sourced ways of understanding, communicating, and creating. As the film continues and Oboth's rockbun business gains momentum among his fellow students, English is used with decreasing frequency and the local language becomes most common. Though subtitles are used (likely due to the fact that the film is produced by the Mastercard foundation, inevitably implying at least a partial Western audience for the film) the usage of English seems to be secondary to the ways of local expression.

Oboth is actively engaging in the creation of culture in his film, and local language is one of the ways in which this culture is communicated. By recognizing the importance of this act, he utilizes local language to preserve and inspire a localized understanding of the culture being created rather than simply using language as a function of utility. In these ways, a literal understanding of “language” (as in, a system of language like English or Luganda) is being used in pursuit of a decolonized form of storytelling. However, as was implicit in the theoretical stages of this project, his greater body of work also gestures towards a decolonized “language” or storytelling methodology that can inspire future nonprofit and humanitarian film projects. If we are to understand the aesthetic dimensions, the narrative methodology, and the familiar “tropes” of the humanitarian African aesthetic as the building blocks of the nonprofit “language” then Oboth provides an alternative language in his discussion of humanitarian work. And so, by identifying the features with which Oboth speaks about humanitarian work, perhaps his fluency in a local nonprofit “language” will begin to carry a new culture of the ways in which nonprofit work is conveyed back to Western storytellers and audiences, and in Oboth’s work this is best seen in *The Audacious Ones*.

*The Audacious Ones* is a 7-part mini-documentary series produced and shot by Oboth with his media company African Storytellers<sup>5</sup>. Each episode, roughly 3-4 minutes in length, features an entrepreneur or local leader who has developed a business, product or nonprofit that is directly meeting a specific need for their local community. Fundamentally, these vignettes appear to be similar in form to a typical nonprofit video featuring the organization’s founder speaking about the history, purpose, and vision of their group. But several key elements (including several that have been highlighted in other parts of our conversation).

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<sup>5</sup> A trailer for the film markets the series as containing 7 episodes. However, only 4 are available online. I have chosen to focus on these 4.

Overall, *The Audacious Ones* reclaims the language of nonprofit storytelling by recalibrating the typical narratological aspects of a nonprofit success-story film. At first, the structural style of each vignette contained in *The Audacious Ones* is comparable to films produced by and for western organizations. Upbeat, high-key music flits behind interview clips of jovial subjects discussing the positive effects their organization has had on their communities. In the first episode of the series, Joan Malubega, founder of the Ugandan company Uganics, describes how her Uganics hand-soap, infused with mosquito repellent, has helped lead to decreased malaria cases in some of the communities around Mpigi district, Uganda (*The Audacious Ones* episode 1). Though interesting and well-produced, these episodes could be categorized topically as pathos-laden branding videos ultimately with a capitalistic agenda rather than a pursuit of rewriting the nonprofit narrative. The videos also do not completely eliminate some of the tendencies of nonprofit films to ascribe the success of an individual to their particular solution rather than their own capacities. For instance, Ifrah Mohamed Arab, the founder of Super Mom, a “social enterprise that empowers women in marginalized communities into creating a salesforce that distributes fastmoving consumer goods within their communities” (*The Audacious Ones* Episode 3), positions her organization as the stimulant for change among women in her community. In some ways, this affirms a linear trajectory towards success as a direct result of the benefits of her program. In this way, *The Audacious* drifts slightly towards ascribing the success of a product or group, and thus ascribe the recipients voice in service to the product rather than offering space for their commentary to be completely uncensored. Some of these issues are simply due to the length of each episode hindering the ability to fully describe the complexly interconnected portions of each community and story. However, more likely the narratological structure of nonprofit films elicits a certain treatment for a video about one individual organization.

Because of Oboth's presumed familiarity with a western led and produced nonprofit success-story film and the associated narrative style, his invocation of this genre effectively works to subvert traditional usages of the "language" blocks that create these videos. By using these strategies but ascribing their usage to his own creative direction, he reclaims the nonprofit video form as his own. This is clear, in part, due to his reassignment of the authoritative voice in each vignette. For these videos, the speaker is a local African entrepreneur speaking on behalf of the organization that they founded. For the stories told about Ugandans, Oboth shares a national background, and for the others, he shares a background as a fellow African. And third, the film seems to be addressed towards a predominantly African population. Alongside these factors, the videos are not requesting financial contributions for fundraising efforts or seeking immediate help to alleviate a crisis.

By exemplifying an understanding of this genre, an understanding of the way they are typically performed, and invoking the form through clear stylistic decisions allows Oboth's critique and correction of the nonprofit form to emerge more overtly. Each available video features one element that, when combined, offer a strong method through which humanitarian films can be reconsidered in a decolonial framework. Throughout *The Audacious Ones*, the elements that emerge allowing for future interventions in the nonprofit video style includes a use of the collective voice, expression of cultural sensitivity in a way that contributes to a productive solution, community support contributing to a community solution, and a direct expression of the ability for African-led projects to be scaled in a way that will be able to assist large portions of the population. Oboth's comprehensive method shows that African storytelling and African solutions speak to both the individual and a large collective community by joining together to develop internally constructed theories and strategies for change, and each episode of *The Audacious Ones* helps illustrate these specific steps towards success.

Joan Malubega, founder of Uganics, begins the entire series of *The Audacious Ones* by saying, “Everyone has a story, and its very, very, very important for *us* to reflect where we are from and where *we* are going” (00:00:12 Ep. 1 emphasis mine). Immediately, Malubega invokes a collective voice through the usage of “we” and “us”, speaking as one individual as part of a collective. As the series progresses, it becomes clear that this “us” she refers to is not only the people in her community that benefit from Uganics, but the voices of innovative, audacious, African leaders featured in the other episodes, and beyond the video’s scope. Oboth and Malubega immediately impose the video’s framing as representative of a greater collective experience and dismiss any potential of any of these stories being perceived as exceptional. Instead, Joan’s story, the six other stories contained in the series, and the greater swath of communities these stories reflect individual iterations of a more widespread presence of African leaders and a collective growth across the continent. By framing her narrative in this manner, it allows each of the seven videos to strengthen one another, showing that stories of success, of innovation, and of creative solutions are common across Uganda and Kenya and Rwanda and other African nations. Oboth begins to craft a different level of African led success that is more widespread than the confines of a single organizations influence, showing that the ultimate power for change emerges within the people rather than within the intervention strategies of Western humanitarian efforts.

George Bakka, the founder of Patasente, “a new merchant platform that enables businesses to buy or sell credit” (00:00:40 ep. 5), continues to propel this sentiment. George identifies how he started on a small level, meeting and working with small scale farmers like Kiggunduu Steven (00:02:06). But, since starting with 10 farmers, he has grown to working with over 2,000 farmers (00:02:31), showing, as George rightfully articulates, that “what we are doing has capacity to scale and that his contribution as a person is going to be building something that moves a full ecosystem



further forward” (00:03:41). George’s story, when combined with Malubega, highlights that the success of African leaders is not isolated to one featured individual in a video campaign, or (in this case) seven individuals. George identifies a movement of success across Uganda among thousands of farmers. Through the collective voice, established through Malubega, and the George’s articulation of the ability for the success to scale, several important factors emerge as part of the storytelling agenda.

The story of an individual speaking on behalf of a greater collective community is a staple among nonprofit video communication strategies. In the examples we’ve discussed (such as the video from Action Against Hunger) organizations highlight the story of one individual or community to represent the potential for growth and success of their work on a larger scale. These strategies attempt to create a level of trust between the potential partners of the organization and the organization itself, but often are seeking to strengthen their own presence and work rather than the communities they serve. Oboth’s framing shows that African voices speaking on their own terms strengthen the collective whole of African leaders, entrepreneurs, and local solutions, is that a truly decolonized effort in media representation will seek to galvanize the African potential beyond the scope of the organizations own effort. By joining in a greater voice and clearly highlighting the successful ventures across geographic regions, Western audiences will begin to bear witness to macro-level, non-western growth. Effectively, the narrative structure will begin to reshape Western intervention as a self-preservation, moralistic undertaking, and instead remove Western blinders and allow them to see the ways in which African organizations and stories are already alleviating regional issues.

While calling for a recognition of the widespread efforts currently being enacted by African leaders, Oboth simultaneously presents a deeply localized and communal avenue through which

these solutions are developed and implemented. Overall, Oboth's storytelling is working towards identifying a holistic system developed with a highly localized understanding and perspective, but that can be scaled to support other communities. In other words, projects that can be successfully scaled, according to Oboth's assessment, emerge from within community-led and culturally considerate initiatives. To accomplish this, Episode 3 of the series focusses on Ifrah Mahamed Arab, the CEO of Super Mom.

Super Mom is a social enterprise organization training local women in business practices. Because of the close relationship in style between her organization and the work of many nonprofit and NGO organizations, Ifrah's featurette provides a comparison for why locally led initiatives (filmmaking included) are more successful when they emerge from the local level. First, Ifrah describes how her project began after seeing Western NGO intervention in her communities and surrounding areas, she "didn't feel like a solution was being created by offering free handouts, free money, it wasn't solving the key issue." (00:03:17). Super Mom instead utilizes a deep understanding of local cultural customs in order to develop long-lasting efforts towards equality and change. We see this when Ifrah describes having to schedule meetings with a village elder with another person because of her age. She explains that she, being young, was not allowed to approach the elders on without another person. But, because of an understanding of this cultural value, she is able to more capably understand how to approach her community in order to develop a methodology to train women how to perform business tasks and earn a living for their families.

Ifrah does not directly position her own success as a direct result of cultural understanding and a Western failure as due to a lack of understanding. But, the repetitive failure of Western efforts to mitigate challenges in Ifrah's community and inspire transformational impact would suggest the inadequacy of the Western-led efforts. Ifrah has seemingly been able to meet a true need of her

community quickly and effectively. Oboth also recognizes these dynamics at work and thus layers the various interview segments in the video to insinuate that Ifrah's knowledge of how her own community operates and functions will far surpass the immediated forms of assistance that would most likely come through international humanitarian efforts. Underwriting these details and descriptions is the suggestion that the same factors would be applicable to professional storytellers communicating the story of nonprofit work. Oboth insinuates that locally led solutions are more able to address specific issues present within a population and the nonprofit storytelling practice is no exception. Oboth does not explicitly make this distinction in the video itself, but throughout the body of his work, the importance of connected, local leaders continually emerge as critical to his imagined solution for reframing the narrative of the African continent. His insistence on local talent continues to emerge in the final video of the series, focusing on Thiofhi Lambani, a South African woman who founded Spotless Cleaning.

Lambani describes her dish soap as "a really great product at an affordable price" (00:00:43 Ep. 4). Beyond just the product, Lambani presents her family-run company as wanting to provide affordable solutions for low income homes in her community. Throughout the discourse of the video, we see Lambani driving through her town to try and sell their soap to convenience stores. We learn that this is one of Lambani's first sales, that the company is still in its beginning stages of production, and that there is little momentum behind an established sales market. In other words, Spotless cleaning is a startup in the earliest phases of its life. But despite the embryonic stages of the company, the video identifies a successful sales day within their community.

Lambani's feature shows the high value of community support – when solutions emerge from individuals within that community, there is a much greater potential for local buy-in. Lambani's successful sales day shows the immense value of being able to understand a problem from a local

solution and the ways local support can propel the future success of these initiatives. The same implications are found throughout the videos, suggesting the much greater levels of efficiency and effectiveness found in local organizations.

These are not revolutionary ideas – small businesses across the Western world are highly dependent on local and community support to sustain their important place in the community. Oboth's commentary on these hyper-localized, small-scale businesses is no accident, and by communicating the success of a localized business model in South Africa mirrors the ways a localized business model would operate in any town in the West, he is able to convey the likelihood of African-led success in African communities. Again, as the other referential strategies present in his work highlight, this recalibrates the focus of the work onto the active agents in African nations rather than Western interventionist measures. Though he doesn't completely dismiss secondary assistance from Western donors (as seen by the sponsorship of the video being the Mastercard foundation) it is clear through *The Audacious Ones* that Western assistance should not overcome the localized centrality of either solution or story.

By structuring a video told by and for Africans, while using a familiar narratological structure as might be found in western nonprofit videos, all while being primarily sponsored by a Western for-profit entity, Oboth provides an incredibly clear picture for how future humanitarian work can and should be portrayed by Western cultural producers. He first provides a methodological approach for ways in which referential dynamics can have a story driven by African agency. He then shows how the usage of a collective voice, ability for heightened cultural sensitivity leading to effective change, emphasis on community-led initiatives, and the ability for African solutions to be sustainable on a large-scale helps ensure the capability and capacity of the African leaders in these initiatives. By collecting 7 stories in total, and focusing on each one individually, Oboth is able to communicate

that African leaders from across the continent are innovative, solution-oriented, and capable of meeting the needs of their communities, and that the change found in these initiatives has the potential for large scale growth across the region.

Oboth's strategy for conveying these important stories is a primary example for the ways that Western storytellers should be engaging with African communities and organizations. Even if the story is in service of a Western agency, organization, or humanitarian group, Oboth demonstrates the possibilities available for focusing on stories of African success and growth without reinscribing the Western player as the primary possessor of agency and authority. Oboth creates a system within his videos that is in pursuit of a new representative form of African communities, and these strategies will enhance a more balanced, global understanding of the complex and holistic experience of being a member of an African community. Furthermore, Oboth is able to do so without relying on the humanitarian African aesthetic and without positioning community members as desperately in-need of interventionist measures. Throughout Oboth's videos, he establishes the authority, desire, and agency with which these individuals pursue change for their own communities. As a result, Oboth presents a new form of African story and aesthetic, one in which the humanitarian African aesthetic might be reimagined with African agency in representing, communicating, and framing their own story.

Oboth's work indicates the potential for future decolonized ways of imagining within the nonprofit media context, and the works discussed in the second chapter suggest that Western filmmakers may be willing to begin moving towards these epistemological and narratological structures. But, as long as there is a Western presence in the region, there will likely be a tension in choosing how to represent African people and places by Western organizations. Furthermore, African filmmakers shouldn't be required to utilize their voice, skillsets, or creative abilities to

reframe a Western understanding of their communities unless they so desire. Doing so could possibly place a burdensome onus onto African storytellers in a way that reinstated a Western agenda. Yet filmmakers like Oboth provide a helpful blueprints for how Western storytellers can continue bettering their storytelling practices. If Western filmmakers pursue an allied position in conjunction with local storytellers, several productive outcomes occur. First, by seeking to represent African communities in a matter consistent with the ways the communities might represent themselves, Western storytellers can allow space for local filmmakers to create and present stories that they wish to tell rather than being pressured to engage directly with nonprofit organizations, decolonial stories, or narratives centered upon the Western presence in the region.

Secondly, if the system is created by and for holistic and accurate forms of representation, Western filmmakers could potentially replace previous humanitarian tropes and engage instead in a way that works towards a decolonized future. As this process begins to take root, Western storytellers should always look towards storytellers from the region in which they work in order to strategize how their work can move away from moral, western-centric savior narratives and instead towards a more decolonized future. In this way, an idealized collaborative space would be mutually beneficial between the guidance and leadership of African storytellers and the implementation in part by Western storytellers alongside African peers willing to engage in the ongoing cultural production emerging in humanitarian efforts.

If successfully implemented, perhaps a Western understanding will begin to shift in a way that deconstructs neocolonial understandings of the continent and seeks an understanding deeply saturated within the rich stories, art, and cultural traditions that fill communities across the continent. In 2021 various authors from the continent were awarded the Nobel Prize, the Booker prize, the Prix Goncourt Prize, and many other prestigious literary awards (brittle paper). Creatives

were featured in new book alerts, film adaptations, and book tours, revealing the beginning of a global recognition of the African continent beyond Humanitarian tropes (ibid). Though of course the goal for African artists is not to appease or inspire a Western audience, the fundamental recapitulation of a Western understanding of the continent could be the first step towards a radical restructuring of the deeply flawed humanitarian system and culture that continues to permeate itself across African nations. The potential for African-led and Western-supported dynamics of storytelling production could have potential impacts on future representative forms of Africa in both international considerations of the continent, but also across various genres.

Continual movement towards change is critical as geopolitical intervention in Africa continues (and will continue) to shift. Issues of representation continue to be pertinent to the contemporary moment, and Chinese forms of representing African emphasize this thoroughly. Big budget Chinese-made films set in Africa are increasingly emerging alongside the PRC government's growing neocolonial influence in the African region. With a growing interest in African resources by Chinese stakeholders, what many commentators have referred to as "The New Scramble for Africa," films like *Wolf Warrior II* rely on a "Chinese savior" template (reminiscent of Hollywood films such as the Rambo films or *The Fast and the Furious*). These films work to justify the PRC's extractive neocolonial presence throughout the continent as evidenced through global projects such as the One-Belt-One-Road initiative.

Leng Feng, a former Chinese special forces soldier, is living in an unnamed African country when bloodthirsty African mercenaries threaten the stability of the country and the Chinese nationals living within its borders. Leng is tasked with saving the Chinese citizens scattered throughout the country, but along the way he also saves many Africans, cures a previously incurable disease, and thwarts the mercenaries quest to overrun the nation. The film is filled with racialized

depictions of African characters, Chinese militaristic propaganda, and is clearly in pursuit of a “Chinese savior” narrative structure. To be clear, as a fictionalized, high-intensity action film purposed as a consumeristic big-screen hit, *Wolf Warrior II* falls into a radically different genre category than the small-budget, nonprofit films we have been discussing throughout this project. The film was the second largest grossing film in China at over \$870,000,000 USD and had a production budget of \$30,000,000 USD, immediately distancing itself from the microscale budgets often found with nonprofit videos (IMDB). Its primary interest is to depict the capabilities of the Chinese military in protecting its citizens and demanding submission on a global scale. Yet despite the thematic, financial, and narratological differences making it seemingly impossible connections to nonprofit films, *Wolf Warrior II* is intimately dependent upon humanitarian African aesthetic tropes to support the (paper-thin) narrative arc of the film.

Films like *Wolf Warrior II* threaten to construct an understanding of Africa and African communities that is dependent upon Chinese intervention to move towards a modernized world. Similar to the ways that Western organizations have sought to insist upon their presence in Africa through films rendering African bodies as in-need of Western intervention, China may employ impose similar ideologies upon their own people’s understandings of the continent. For these reasons, continued insistence upon African authority in constructing the narratives emerging from and about the region are the best chance possible of troped contemporary and future international media appearing misguided and in pursuit of a capitalist or neocolonial agenda. African-led narratological systems that reject the humanitarian African aesthetic and provide new avenues through which global understandings of the African experience will undermine troped imageries that may continue to emerge in commentary about the continent. Remediating these tropes remediates ideological violence enacted on the people and places from these regions and offer the potential for



others to see the holistic humanity rightfully imbued in each and every individual that calls Africa home.

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