

The End/s of America: a Review of Kathryn Mathers' *Travel, Humanitarianism, and Becoming American in Africa* (2010)

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Abstract:

Sarah Jane Cervenak reviews *Travel, Humanitarianism, and Becoming American in Africa* by Kathryn Mathers, and finds Americans treating Africa as an enormous mirror. Their driving question seems to be: "Do I look good in this?"

Keywords: Book Review | Cultural Studies | Africa | America

Article:

[Picture 1 Omitted]

John Locke once mused, "In the beginning, all the world was America." Kathryn Mathers' book powerfully critiques the way that this universalizing conceit of empire continues to hold sway. She does so by interrogating the ways that Americanness becomes the world through a particular set of ethics and behaviors. The suffocating, planetary reach of Americanness as a presumably shared set of ethics, politics, and values is brought into relief by Mathers' critical account of American study abroad students' experiences in South Africa (1999-2002). What this scholarship does is demonstrate how the mobilization of America as object becomes clearest when it travels into the phantasmatic space of its putative opposite, Africa. More specifically, Americans become visible as subjects, as ways of being, and as ethical actors through a particular humanitarian comportment toward Africa. Just as the United States becomes visible through its (great white) hopefulness, Africa becomes invisible through its despair.

Interestingly, Mathers begins with the exemplary figure of American hopefulness, President Barack Obama. The story President Obama tells about himself, as Mathers importantly observes, is made possible only when an American narrative of "shared ideals and values" takes precedence over his own genealogical, historical, geopolitical, and economic specificities. Put another way, Obama's history as American can only be told once Africa as a particular reality is absent. Beginning her book in this way powerfully establishes how it is that Americanness becomes itself through the disavowal of difference and how such disavowals have been at the core of its neocolonial relationship with "Africa."

Indeed, for Mathers, the idea of "Africa" as an undifferentiated, generalizable imaginary characterized by interminable need and suffering is crucial to the consolidation of American (hegemonic) identity:

In these post-9/11, war-torn years, Africa was increasingly presented as a place of both hopelessness and hope; hopelessness for Africans suffering the horror of AIDS and war, and hope for Americans who could find themselves doing good for these Africans.

What is more, such condensations of the African continent allow for its geopolitical, cultural, linguistic, psychic, and economic specificities to be nullified. The space for becoming American plainly overwhelms all other difference. This is instructive too in that, as Mathers observes in her interactions with young Americans studying abroad (the principal subjects of her analysis), the new wave of travelers to Africa "came of age where the idea of a national American identity was outmoded...so for them a hyphen was always a part of how they identified themselves." Mathers is interested in how the part of them that is American becomes visible as such, not only to themselves, but also to those with whom they interact. Engaging with this process is enormously important because just as Africa has never *not* been an object, or, more specifically, a blank slate for the imperial, ontological becomings of America, America has rarely been regarded as an object in Africa. To regard America as an object and as a mode of subjectivity is to isolate and contain its reach and perhaps, in that way, prevent further injury. What Mathers promises is not an end to American geopolitical violence, but rather the establishment of new ethical relations that resist the iconographic reductions that enable such violence.

These new ethical relations are, in some ways, forged through Mathers' careful analysis of the entanglements between ethnography and tourism. In chapter one, "Moving Fieldwork with Americans to and from Africa," she examines the nexus of tourism and ethnography in moments of transition, translation, and misrecognition. For Mathers, ethnographies of travel often deprioritize the movements of choice and privilege that tourism implies, focusing instead on coercive experiences of geographical, cultural, and identity displacement. By "dismiss[ing] tourists as uninteresting mobile subjects," whole domains of subject-formation and figurations of power are left unaddressed. In other words, for American travelers to Africa, travel describes the occasion for the critical interrogation and reconstitution of a particular geopolitical subjectivity in the post-9/11 world. For the group of various travelers with whom Mathers worked—political

tourists, study abroad students, and vacationers—Africa became a "space to find what was good and true about American values and practices." So then, a critical ethnography of the psychological dimensions of tourism allows for a sustained engagement with the Africa of experience. The Africa of experience is coterminous with Africa as experience, and interestingly shapes how travelers and national subjects become recognizable to each other as such. For example, Mathers, as a white South African national and anthropologist who studied in the United States, witnessed firsthand how the idea of Africa made her unrecognizable in certain ways.

[Picture 2 Omitted]

Not only was she rendered by American travelers in Africa as capable of providing "special access to understanding [South] Africa," but figured as inauthentic and illegible as an African in America because of her race. In both cases, the returned gaze of her American subjects offered glimpses into the ways that static, phenotypically, culturally, and geographically undifferentiated concepts of Africa shape the interpretation of her movement as much as it does the subjects with whom she worked.

Moreover, an American media apparatus profoundly shapes this complicated relationship between America and Africa, between Americans and Africans. Along with an African American relationship to western regions of the continent and an American activist investment in South Africa, other kinds of interest in the continent emerged at the turn of the twenty-first century. Promotions of luxury game parks joined more obviously political advertisements of stays in Soweto, "most famous for images on American television screens of scenes of the clashes between anti-apartheid activists and the armed forces of the apartheid government." The individuals with whom Mathers worked and travelled were, as she powerfully argues, influenced by this media apparatus. They were at once deeply invested in South Africa as a political icon, and existentially moved by what they imagined Africa (the larger generality) could offer to their senses of self. In the chapters that follow, the desire to be and inhabit the politically, erotically, and existentially radical space said to characterize Africa visibly moves study abroad students and codifies their experiences.

Indeed, as Mathers astutely observes, the American media's engagement with Africa over and over again reduces the continent to a singular landscape, political formation, country or set of countries—and to an insufferable

[Picture 3 Omitted]

epidemic, AIDS. Importantly, Mathers takes care to position the reflections and desires of the study abroad students within this context, revealing the deep connections between America's insatiable demands (economic, consumerist, psychological, sexual) of Africa and its presumed willingness to oblige. In chapter two, "Vexed Ties: Africa in and out of America," Mathers instructively links a range of development projects with sex and heritage tourisms,

asking how all of them, each in its own way, often depends upon the absence of a specific African subject that has needs and desires of its own. For example, her engagement with the controversy surrounding Ghana's infamous Elmina Castle reveals the collision between the Africa sought and the Africa that refuses the seeking. As Mathers observes, Elmina's memorialization was pulled between two political interests: the African American desire to commemorate the site as a stronghold of the Transatlantic slave trade, and the local, Ghanaian investment in associating Elmina with a spirit of anti-colonialism. These debates are provocative on multiple levels, but what Mathers is particularly interested in are the ways that a "reverse gaze [on the part of black Africans] disrupted the Americans' assumptions about their relationship to Africa and to Ghana."

With the return gaze, Africa and Africans chip away at the suffocating generalities forged by the needs of others, especially Americans. What is more, Africa's refusal to act as supplement for what postcolonial, post-9/11 American selves seek has profound implications not just for the continent and its inhabitants but also for its seekers. But Mathers reminds us that despite the presence and potentially transformative force of the return gaze, the presumption of an Africa ready and willing to be what Americans need still holds powerful sway. Mathers keenly engages with the pervasiveness of an idea of Africa and of an authentic African experience characterized by the absence of modernity and the ever-presence of danger and adventure. Beginning her third chapter with a beautifully detailed description of the safari tours at Florida's *Disney World*, Mathers establishes this highly sophisticated capitalistic production of Africa as the barometer for authenticity, animating the desires of the students with whom she worked. "Africa, according to Disney, is a single homogenous place where everybody speaks Kiswahili, dances to the sounds of West Africa, wears Kenta cloth, and lives in attractively distressed eighteenth century European buildings." Further, along with *Disney*, television producers and the organizers of travel orientations alike participate in the codification of Africa as the ultimate stage for physical competition and danger. For young American travelers steeped in this rhetoric and imagery, this idea of Africa as metonymic with blackness, primitivity, wilderness, and uncomplicated joy and danger is as contested as it is presumed. As Mathers powerfully observes, "While these young Americans actively and constructively engage and challenge their own expectations based on experiences in Southern Africa, in the end they just want to go where it is hot." This is a powerful structuring tension in Mathers' analysis. Even though the production and enactment of American identity requires a set of illusions where Africans were ostensibly irrelevant, many young Americans were troubled by this phenomenon. The irrelevance, decontextualization, and objectification of Africans, essential to "a genuine encounter with their imagined Africa" presented moments of crisis when that irrelevance was mobilized and commodified by Africans themselves. As Mathers astutely observes, the reverse gaze often manifested itself in Africans' self-conscious staging of "traditional ceremonies" for tourists as well as through charging for having their photograph taken. Once the touristic gaze and its ethical conceit—that the African existed only for the American—was revealed, many young travelers felt discomfort with their complicity in these levels of objectification. Turning to the assignments and journal entries of

study abroad students as examples, Mathers argues for the complexity at the heart of their discomfort. On the one hand, some students realized the ways in which touristic ventures "reduced people to objects." On the other hand, their unease with such objectification seemed less concerned with the injury sustained by the Africa and Africans of their fantasy life than with the implications of such injury for their own senses of self.

What does it mean that the consolidation and rehabilitation of American identity are predicated on the misidentification of an African other? How is this misidentification sustained and countered by reevaluating Americanness? Mathers queries the extent to which the comforts of home—American systems and values (hegemonic and counter-hegemonic)—shaped an experience of unsettledness in South Africa. This is a productive unsettledness, though it is often resolved through the deployment of American categories to make sense of a putatively unenlightened Africa. For example, in chapter four, Mathers observes that "study abroad impact assessments [tend] to show that students are more likely to gain a better understanding of their own society and of themselves than of their host society." This is reflected in some travelers' refusal to explore the differences in the operations of racism, patriarchy, and hetero-normativity in South Africa. From refusing to take on the veil upon entering a mosque to distrusting South Africans' narratives of racial difference, experience, and categorization, many young American travelers remained obstinate in the fictitious conceit of an American progressivism. So too, the assumption that being *away* from home meant a particular freedom from structure often manifested itself in blindness with respect to class and privilege. Still, as Mathers poignantly observes, the fact of being unsettled, even if it wound up reinscribing American perspectives of South African difference, was importantly productive. As encounters with "South Africa" required a reevaluation of America, such reevaluations often particularized the country. These particularizations, however temporary they were, agitated against an America that was invisible, inconsequential, and ostensibly everywhere because nowhere at all.

[Picture 4 Omitted]

In chapters five and six, Mathers elucidates the implications of this particularization for young travelers' sense of self. Brilliantly, Mathers examines how Americanness gets embodied by those otherwise imagined as its less-than-ideal representatives. Whereas in the United States proper, for example, being a person of color, queer, poor, or disabled renders one's citizenship fragile, suspect, and secondary, *being* and *looking* American abroad endows those otherwise marginal identities with new social capital. In her interactions with students for whom Americanness was secondary to their "cultural selves," Mathers explores "the many different ways that individuals can be American." Such Americanness, as Mathers astutely observes, was measured by the "reverse gaze" of South Africans for whom differing enactments of wealth, affect, and social comportment made such citizenship acutely visible.

In chapter six, Mathers observes that "[i]n a country where black bodies were so recently repressed, black Americans often appeared particularly confident, taking up space in a way that

in South Africa had generally been the province of white men." Confidence here is a particularly rich and productive performative category; on the one hand, in the United States, *being* and *looking* black is the occasion for one's relative immobility, where the demonstration of confidence itself is often subject to differing levels of surveillance and policing. In an African context, however, what gets perceived as greater room for the expression of racial freedom is often instead the recognition of Americanness-as-property/capital/imperial entitlement. Americanness, in the case of the young black American student Corey for example (discussed in chapter five), is paradoxically visible as geopolitical rather than racial performance. In other words, as Mathers importantly concludes, the movement of black Americanness in Africa is as much the enactment of empire as it is the expression of its rejection.

This complexity—embedded in the different kinds of movement and comportment made possible by leaving the United States—is at once liberating for the improper citizen and damaging for those on the other side of the window, camera lens, and gaze. In this way, the recognition of one's complicated relationship to Americanness and American identity can work in the interest of new ethical relations, where the particularity of America is situated in the context of empire and geopolitical and economic privilege. As Mathers observes, the recognition of American specificity could spell new forms of danger when an awareness of its imperial privilege becomes entangled with imperial guilt. In other words, when America becomes recognized as particularly endowed with global, humanitarian duty, Africa becomes particularized as the needy object of such service. In the concluding chapters of the book, Mathers troubles the notion that Africa longs for the paternal hand of America. By disaggregating ethical accountability of geopolitical privilege from capitalist-humanist narratives of saving/helping/completing/guiding/raising Africa, Mathers attempts to particularize America and, in that way, particularize Africa. What this counter particularization of Africa means is a postcolonial acknowledgement of its internal diversities and the different relationships of different countries with structural adjustment, global capital, agency, and western narratives of modernity.

Strategically, as an expression of American identity, the humanitarian gesture flattens out Africa into the face of a grinning-but-dying child. By questioning why Africa is required in post-9/11 recuperations of America, Mathers advances a series of astute ethical questions rarely asked of humanitarianism and its believers. She does so in a way that doesn't dismiss the humanitarian ethic, *per se*, but queries the contradictions embedded in feeling good while taking care of Africa. These ethical quandaries bring the aim of the book to its resolution. By questioning why the smiling, suffering, orphan child of the bush is Africa, she asks why America longs to be her parent. In so doing, the complicated disguises and performances of America are productively revealed so that, this time, when it turns to look at itself, Africa and the African get some relief.