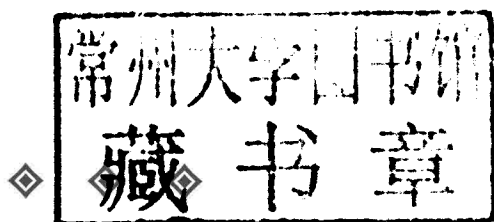# Africa in the American Imagination

Popular Culture, Racialized Identities, and African Visual Culture

Carol Magee

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For Newt,
without whom everything would be less meaningful

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Africa in the American Imagination

1.

Introduction

*Popular Culture, Racialized Identities,
and African Visual Culture*

Objects are one means, then, by which humans shape their world,
and their actions have both intended and unintended consequences.
—KRIS L. HARDIN AND MARY JO ARNOLDI, *African Material Culture*

"I am African" declares the full-page, black-and-white advertisements featuring David Bowie, Gwyneth Paltrow, Gisele Bündchen, Lucy Liu, Liv Tyler, Alicia Keys, or any one of nine other celebrities from the worlds of film, music, and fashion. Despite this declaration, the majority of viewers know that most of these individuals are not African in any commonsense understanding of what being "African" means: they were not born on the continent, have not established citizenship in an African nation, and do not live there now.[1] But the designers of this campaign want to stress that, *genetically*, we are all from Africa; human life evolved in and moved out of Africa to populate the world. We therefore share not only a biological heritage but also a general humanity. If we are all African, we all have a stake in what happens there. Africa *means* something to us. Given this, the ads urge us to give our money to the Keep A Child Alive organization. The small print says, "Help us stop the dying. Pay for lifesaving AIDS drugs that can help keep a child, a mother, a father, a family alive. Visit keepachild alive.org to help." This 2006 campaign was created with the best of intentions. It did not have the best of results.

In a world where Africa is the focus of much charitable attention, skeptics see such moves as exploiting African crises to bring more visibility to the celebrity. Counterimages soon circulated on the Internet. One in particular addresses the perceived superficiality of celebrity participation.[2] It is a black-and-white photograph of a dark-skinned female (identified only as "an African woman"); "I am Gwyneth Paltrow" is written across the bottom

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of the image. Underneath this, the small print declares, "Help us stop the shameless famewhores from using the suffering of those dying of AIDS in Africa to help bolster their pathetic careers now that they're no longer dating Brad Pitt and no one gives a shit about them. Just kiss my black ass to help." Despite such critiques, the Keep A Child Alive organization kept using the campaign, and the images were still present on their Web site in 2008.[3] While the media have reported on the controversy surrounding these images, very little attention has been given to their visual elements, the emotional and social reactions they trigger, and what they say about how Africa is imagined for and by mass media consumers.

The imagining of Africa through popular culture is the subject of this study. Myriad American cultural products incorporate African visual culture, peoples, or landscapes. This book focuses on three case studies, each of which repackages African visual culture for American consumers: Mattel's world of Barbie, the 1996 *Sports Illustrated* (*SI*) swimsuit issue, and the Walt Disney World Resort. In particular, it analyzes the ways in which visual culture reinforces, challenges, and represents social relations, especially as they are articulated around racialized identities in the past twenty years. Two major threads run throughout this study. In the first, I analyze how these companies' uses of African visual culture generate ideological understandings of Africa for an American public. The second thread runs parallel to and, at times, is interwoven into the first; here I investigate the way that African visual culture, such as textiles, jewelry, architecture, and sculpture, focuses American self-understandings, particularly around black and white racialized identities. The time period for this study, the 1990s through the present, reflects an increased visibility of previously marginalized groups (women, homosexuals, blacks, and other people of color) within American society, a visibility that plays into what I suggest is a current crisis of identity for America. This crisis is mediated through popular culture forms, around racialized identities, and in relation to other cultures. In short, this set of case studies reveals not only the multiple ways that Africa functions in an American imagination, the multiple meanings it embodies, it also examines the conditions that gave rise to, and consequences of and implications for, such imaginings.

Although not the focus of this study, the "I am African" advertising campaign succinctly reveals many of the issues I engage, and demonstrates their presence and relevance beyond the material that is the core of this book. It therefore merits further consideration. "Painted" (digitally) on the face and/or head of each of the celebrities are broad strokes of color that

match the "I am African" text. Two horizontal lines (dark blue on top of light blue) cover the top of Paltrow's left cheekbone. Bright blue dots on Keys's forehead follow the lines of her eyebrows. An orange stripe runs the length of Bowie's nose. These color elements heighten the contrast with the black-and-white photograph of the celebrity. While these painted areas serve as color accents, creating a more visually interesting composition, they also evoke notions of difference. Facial painting (apart from makeup) is not part of everyday American cultural norms. It is not part of everyday African cultural norms either, nor are the patterns used in these advertisements direct replications of patterns used in African ceremonial contexts that might include some sort of facial painting. Yet imaginings of Africans with painted faces are commonplace. As such, in this context the facial painting positions these celebrities as African, thereby visually reinforcing the claim of the text. This association is further established through clothing and jewelry. The women appear to be wearing no clothes; viewers see their necks and bare shoulders.[4] This exposure suggests both naturalness and sexuality, while emphasizing the adornment of their bodies with the paint and drawing attention to the jewelry they wear. Indeed, the majority of the men and women wear beaded jewelry. Liu wears a flat-disc necklace, while Keys wears a beaded headdress.[5] Even if consumers can recognize those pieces as Maasai or Okiek, they were meant to read them simply as African, for in reading the celebrities as African, and at the same time recognizing and connecting with them as celebrities, viewers will, ideally, identify with Africans and willingly support the cause.[6]

Regardless of the intentions of the campaign, these various elements say much about the way Westerners frequently conceive of and understand Africa: it is primarily a place of nature, not culture; when cultural, it is exotic; Africa is a place of wildness that is frequently presented in terms of savagery and/or abundant sexuality; Africa is one cohesive entity—often referred to as a country not a continent, and cultural differences are subsumed under a general African identity. The face painting, unclothed bodies, jewelry, and the slogan "I am African" visually evoke these ideas and the associations they engender. In short, here Africa and Africans are positioned as representing those things that the West, in its view of itself, is not. Despite its intention to highlight European and American ties to Africa, the Keep A Child Alive advertising campaign's visual elements emphasize difference. In drawing on and reproducing reductive and stereotypical conceptions about Africa and Africans, these images do little to create nuanced and meaningful links to and ideas about Africa.

In this it is problematic. Simultaneously, I fully support both their overall goal—bringing everyone's attention to the AIDS crisis in Africa—and their underlying premise—we are all connected to Africa. These bonds may be genetical, but they are also emotional, political, and cultural. It is vital to comprehend these connections, for they shape American perceptions not only of Africa and Africans but also of themselves. This book highlights and disentangles these complexities.

As the title of this book suggests, I focus on *imaginings* of and *ideas* about Africa as they are manifest in an American context. This is not about presenting an African reality, though of course it will be necessary to refer to specific African contexts and cultural practices in presenting an analysis of their evocations in American cultural products. Nor is this meant to be a history of how such ideas came to circulate, as others have already compiled such histories.[7] Nevertheless, some discussion of the historical development of these ideas and images will be necessary in examining their contemporary use. The set of cultural products I consider here frequently present stereotypical and reductive ideas of Africa, as did the "I am African" advertisements. Yet my analysis suggests that, like the "I am African" advertisements that produce both negative and positive meanings about and associations for Africa, these cultural icons are complex representations that embody multiple perspectives and speak to various social-political-historical contexts: the Cold War, civil rights, and contemporary eras of the United States; the apartheid and postapartheid eras of South Africa; the European era of African colonization. At the same time, they are firmly embedded in their own historical moment. As occurred with the "I am African" advertisements, representations of Africa in these popular culture forms can be both problematic (stereotypical and reductive) and constructive (offering new ways to think about Africa).

I have regularly encountered misconceptions and stereotypes about Africa in casual conversations both inside and outside of an academic setting. I encounter surprise at photographs of African urban areas, for it is commonly thought that Africans live in grass houses in jungle villages. People refer to Africans as primitive, or propose their state of economic underdevelopment as a result of laziness that is inherently linked to their black skin. These latter ideas are particularly troubling for the way they imply that Africans, and at times African Americans, are inferior to (white) Westerners. These perspectives stem from ideas that, while not invented in the past 200 years, were solidified then. It was during the European colonial era, largely, that these ideas had mass dissemination and became part

of the popular imaginary, though they are no longer solely linked to that discourse. New discourses, such as those of globalization, likewise position Africa as inferior.[8] Significantly, these perspectives have been so integrated into an American worldview that they seem common sense (more on this later). To illustrate this, I offer the following small example. In 2005 the Exploris Museum in Raleigh, North Carolina, held an exhibition that highlighted the ancient kingdoms of western Africa: Ghana, Mali, and Songhai.[9] As part of an interactive experience, elementary school children who visited the museum were asked to draw pictures of Africa. Despite the fact that schools are integrating studies of Africa into their regular curricula, and despite the fact that the curators of this exhibition had taken great care to present factual views of these cultures' ways of life, the vast majority of the resulting drawings depicted elephants, giraffes, and monkeys as well as Africans dressed in grass skirts and holding spears, none of which pertained to the exhibition. Though regrettable, it is not surprising that such reductive images of Africa predominate, as this look at popular culture reveals. Indeed, that children have such images in their mind suggests both the prevalence of them throughout society and the early age at which children are socialized into them. The resulting misconceptions and partial knowledge affect not only an understanding of the past but also of the present, and thus future.

This is not a minor issue, for there is a strong presence of African culture—sometimes fully embodied, sometimes as a trace—in the American world. Along a similar vein, objects and images have lives that extend beyond the contexts in which they were first made and consumed.[10] These lives add meanings to those objects. African visual culture, whether in a museum, a private home, or a popular culture form, has meanings and values that pertain beyond local meanings and values (those relevant to the culture that produced it). While the value of African visual culture in these non-African locations and contexts is often celebratory, the celebration does not necessarily do enough to counter news media images of Africa as a place torn by civil war, famine, coups, and AIDS, or offered by popular culture of Africa as a place of jungles, animals, and "primitive" peoples (among other things). For example, thinking of Africa in terms of animals and the adventure of safari is not necessarily negative, especially in the way that images of political chaos can be. Neither is it necessarily constructive, however, in terms of how it positions Africa in the imagination.

As the "I am African" campaign reveals, cultural associations often conjure Africa as exotic and tribal. There are many instances in which

Americans encounter African culture that reinforce ideas about tribal Africa: an African drumming or dance performance or class; *National Geographic* or any of the coffee-table books offered by photographers Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher; documentaries on the Discovery Channel; museums where the majority of objects are ceremonial or ritual, not paintings and other works that are more widely recognized as fine art. Such cultural representations that emphasize the tribal frequently position African culture as "traditional." This positioning often evokes ideas about simpler ways of life where one is more in tune with one's past and/or one's natural environments, and where cultural change is slow or nonexistent despite the fact that most people will acknowledge that traditions are invented and reinvented, adapting and changing over time.[11] It enables and engenders idealization and romanticization of the cultures depicted. In juxtaposition to American culture, which commonsense understandings see as modern (urban, industrialized, progressing), Africa as traditional, and therefore nonmodern, suggests a relative inferiority vis-à-vis American life.[12]

These tensions between nature/culture, traditional/modern, or negative/positive imagery are present in a majority of representations of Africa. This study examines ways these tensions exist in dialogue or contradiction with one another, often in the same popular culture form. In the remainder of this chapter, I explore the analytical components (popular culture, racialized identities, and African visual culture) that make up this study along with their various intersections, establishing the ground on which I build my arguments. Before turning to this, I want to comment briefly on some terminology.

Four terms in particular need attending to: *Africa*, *America*, the *West*, and *visual culture*. At the most basic level, the first three are simply shorthand ways for signifying in the text the complex locations I discuss. Yet because of their monolithic and homogenizing nature, they are also part of the problems against which I am writing, and against which I offer this analysis. Given this, I employ these in the tradition of Edward Said and his use of the term *Orientalism* to identify a body of knowledge that shapes how regions and peoples are understood and represented.[13] I am indebted also to those scholars whose critiques of Said's work have amplified and made more precise understandings about how such bodies of knowledge are produced and disseminated, and how they act upon the world.[14] In the course of researching and writing this book, I found much that I discuss is imagined through Africa, America, and the West; therefore I have chosen to retain use of these terms here, not to reproduce the problematics of the

concepts and implications of these terms, but to nuance their meanings and possibilities.

Despite the continent's enormous political, cultural, ecological, and historical diversity, Africa exists in the imaginary as a single entity. Each semester, for instance, I have students who refer to the *country* of Africa, even when they know better. Africans are seen as one homogenous group with a shared history or culture. The news media and even government policy perpetuate this.[15] For such reasons I use *Africa* here as shorthand to talk about its peoples, animals, and cultural products, and to signify the continent that is comprised of over fifty nations and hundreds of ethnic groups.

At the same time, I am using *America* as shorthand for the place, peoples, and cultural objects of the United States in much the same way I use *Africa*, recognizing, of course, that America can also refer to the rest of the countries comprising the North and South American continents. Yet the citizens of the United States refer to themselves as Americans, and I will therefore use America and the United States interchangeably. I explore the ways that this national identity, this sense of being American, is formulated through both ideas of commonality (what Americans share) and difference (both within and outside the geographic borders that define the nation).[16] Most Americans would argue, and rightly so, that there is no such thing as *an* American imagination; this country is too large, the peoples and beliefs too diverse, to be able to pinpoint and characterize such a thing, even when there might be shared understandings of concepts such as "the American Dream." And yet there are ways of perceiving and talking about the world that dominate within American culture. There are commonsense beliefs that are held, and there are hegemonic propositions that dominate ideas about American life and culture, even when there are groups that dissent and disagree with those characterizations or that work to undo those dominant representations. I reference all these things when speaking of America and the American imagination.

The *West* is also used as shorthand in this book. Here, the West is meant to signify those cultures that identify largely with a European cultural and political tradition, those cultures that are seen to have more in common with one another than they are seen to have in common with Africa (or Asia, for instance). America is one of those countries; its mainstream culture is understood to derive from and/or grow out of European culture. Sometimes in this text it is important to specify Europe as distinct from America because of the historical circumstances under discussion; at other times I refer to their shared traditions and approaches as "the West."