

(Product)Red: (re)Branding Africa?

by

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Enter (Product)Red: Meeting Africa through *Vanity Fair*, Bono, and Oprah

"Look," her finger wags wildly, as she did what the Nigerians refer to as the "yabis," mock jabbing, and rap crying furiously at an image of the magazine's editor, Graydon Carter, shown here with the Africa issue guest editor, rock missionary Bono in his office with the Manhattan skyline as a backdrop.

"A-f-r-i-c-a?" she pauses, aghast. "Look at this!" she points mockingly. "What do you see? . . . What do you expect? Two white men. Two middle-aged white men at the helm of it. Where are the Africans?" Though she did not ask, my ears chose to hear her demanding to know: "Where's the African brain trust?"

Bongani Madondo 2008, p. 170

As a postgraduate student at the University of Cape Town's (UCT) Centre for African Studies, I wanted to love Vanity Fair's "Africa Issue;" artists and activists I held in high regard graced some of the twenty covers, and as a literary scholar, I couldn't resist being excited about African authors, such as renowned Nigerian author Chinua Achebe, featured in the magazine. In the end, I left the edition with colleagues in Cape Town, returning to the Oakland Bay Area only to be overwhelmed by the life-sized (Product)Red Gap billboard that graced the 101 and the countless Red product commercials that plagued my TV viewing. Adopted children (i.e. Zahara Marley Jolie-Pitt (adopted 2005) and Madonna's "Baby David" (adoption papers filed 2006, but not finalized until 2008) and Hollywood movies (i.e. The Last King of Scotland (2006) and Blood Diamond (2006)) were one thing, but the rebranding of a continent? I e-mailed friends and colleagues in Cape Town, asking if anyone had heard or read about (Product)Red. No one knew what I was talking about – how can a continent be represented in the age of globalization and information technology without being involved or consulted? Why wasn't this edition of Vanity Fair being sold in South Africa? Why wasn't (Product)Red being transparent if it sought to help Africans? Surely, affluent people also live on the continent. Perhaps they might be interested in buying a T-shirt or cell phone. Maybe they might even have something to say about the campaign and how they are represented. I e-mailed Danai the www.joinred.com link, some YouTube clips, and a brief description of what I was seeing in the US and promptly posted a copy of Vanity Fair to her.

One lazy afternoon, I watched curiously as Oprah Winfrey, alongside pal Bono, "painted the town Red." My initial deliberations on this episode were not dissimilar to my usual reaction to Ms. Winfrey's shows on Africa. I thought, "Why do rich people think that they don't have to know anything about the things they talk about?" I studied in the United States as an undergraduate and recall the dis-ease I felt about the lack of public discourse on the subject of AIDS or AIDS in Africa in the communities I lived in at the time. In fact, I still display a rather dramatic photograph of myself at a 2003 anti-war rally in Washington D.C., where I am holding up a scruffy banner stating "this African woman wants to know, where is the war on AIDS?" Now a postgraduate student in South Africa, witnessing this spectacular introduction of (Product) Red, I wondered if the public dialogue I once longed for had finally come to fruition. So Natasha sends me an email, "Danai, what do you think?" What do I think? To be frank, I found the Oprah Winfrey show on RED rather distressing. My first question was not unlike Natasha's, "why are African people excluded as consumers or at the very least, potential consumers of these products? What does this imply?" The website, www.joinred.com, despite efforts to employ revolutionary rhetoric, fails to capture my support. I just don't buy the "buy, buy buy" approach to making a better world. The "Africa" issue of Vanity Fair, is self-congratulatory and problematic in my estimation. Yet, while I have a decided position on this campaign, as a young African feminist and scholar, finding the language to critically engage with (Product)Red and its implications has proved challenging.

Understanding Red

In an acquisitive society wealth tends to corrupt those who possess it. It tends to breed in them a desire to live more comfortably than their fellows, to dress better, and in every way to outdo them.

Julius Nyerere 1987, p. 5

If you don't already know, (Product)Red is a new business model created by U2's frontman, Bono and Kennedy clan's, Bobby Shriver:

With the engagement of American Express, Apple Converse, Gap, Emporio Armani, Motorola, and now Hallmark, Dell and Microsoft, consumers can help HIV/AIDS patients in Africa. They can do so simply by shopping, as a percentage of profits from Product RED lines goes to support The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. (Richey and Ponte, 2008:711)

Tapping into corporate advertising and marketing budgets, Red encourages Western consumers to “shop until it stops” (Menkes, 2006; Sternberg, 2006)ⁱⁱ – “it” being HIV/AIDS in Africa. In order to help Africa on a global scale, as Red proposes to do, African *and* Western knowledges need to be represented. This spend/buy model represents a particular worldview that exacerbates global inequities, representational and otherwise, by advocating a consumerism in one society that enables another society to survive. Within this context, Nyerere's words, published in the first edition of *JPAS*, have particular resonance.

Initially defined by pop culture and mainstream media as “frictionless capitalism” (Kim, 2006:1) “punk rock capitalism” (Worth, 2006), and “Brand Bono” (Conlin, 2006), (Product)Red has gained major power and influence, raising more than \$100 million for the Global Fund. Moreover, in addition to Bono and Shriver, as well as major corporate funding and support, the campaign also boasts the backing of renowned economist Jeffrey Sachs, medical celebrity Paul Farmer (Richey and Ponte, 2008), and most recently, Microsoft millionaire, Bill Gates (2008). (Product)Red is dominating how Western popular culture and media represent and understand HIV/AIDS in Africa and while it is our opinion that the Red campaign is problematic, at best, we cannot overlook the importance and significance of an initiative that has raised millions and garnered unprecedented intellectual, activist, and celebrity support.

We also cannot ignore a campaign that is but a single layer of its parent organization – the Global Fund – which received \$650 million from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and, more significantly, \$8.9 billion from governments (Richey and Ponte, 2008:725).ⁱⁱⁱ

Furthermore, according to Gates (2008:1), Red is just the beginning of *creative capitalism*: “an attempt to stretch the reach of market forces so that more companies can benefit from doing work that makes more people better off.” Gates’ description is telling, for companies – not people – are at its center. Moreover, he quickly adds, “We need new ways to bring far more people into the system – capitalism – that has done so much good in the world.” Certainly, there are millions of people who would disagree with Mr. Gates, who virtually ignores the horrifying tragedies that capitalism has had a hand in creating. After all, for Gates (2008:3), “The world is getting a lot better. The problem is, it’s not getting better fast enough.” This rush towards immediate solutions is undoubtedly motivated by self-interest, which Gates acknowledges as one of “two great forces in human nature” (2008:3), for one of the major obstacles in making creative capitalism work are the very countries that need help, but Gates “can’t wait” for governments to do “more to guarantee property rights, cut red tape and so on” (2008:5). Thus, although not overtly political, what Red can do and is doing has undeniable political implications for those living in Africa, as well as those who identify as African.

Enter JPAS – The “Red” Issue

It is up to us in Africa and those concerned about the continent to ensure that our voices are heard, our ideas debated, and our theories engaged.

Keyan Tomaselli 1998, p. 146

We decided to approach Itibari M. Zulu about a special edition of *JPAS* that focused on the Red campaign because of the journal’s history and continued commitment to creating an “international medium of African culture and consciousness” (Zulu, 2006:2) – a medium that is academic in nature, but also hospitable to organic scholars, activists, and artists, as well as multiple methods and forms of knowledge production. Moreover, culture and consciousness are precisely what the (Product)Red campaign is severely lacking. Otherwise, the “Africa Issue” would have looked very different, “hosting a conversation of sages – say, between Maya Angelou and Chinua Achebe” and “stories by and from a vast pool – sea, rather! – of the finest pop cultural and literary narrators, ranging from Manthia Diawara, Mahmood Mamdani, Njabulo Ndebele, Knox Robinson, Gret Tate, Alexander Fuller, Rian Malan, Colson Whitehead, Chimamanda herself, Paul Gilroy, and Athol Fugard, to Ngugi wa Thiong’o” (Madondo, 2008:177). Africa and, to borrow from Michael Hanchard, “Afro-Modernity” is not engaged, represented, or gestured toward in Red’s advertisements, commercials, website, videos, TV specials, or “special editions.” Hanchard (1999:245) defines Afro-Modernity as:

consist[ing] of the selective incorporation of technologies, discourses, and institutions of the modern West within the cultural and political practices of African-derived peoples to create a form of relatively autonomous modernity distinct from its counterparts of Western Europe and North America. It is no mere mimicry of Western modernity but an innovation...Its contours have arisen from the encounters between people of African descent and Western colonialism...

Of crucial importance to our decision was also the “universal” access *JPAS* offers in cyberspace (Zulu, 2006). As we have stated, we were deeply disturbed by the palimpsest of absences and silences evident in the (Product)Red campaign. However, as postgraduate students, we certainly did not have access to Red’s multi-million dollar budget and thus, were limited in the ways in which we could begin a discussion that could be made accessible to everyone. Olu Oguibe’s *The Culture Game* (2004:172) acknowledges the limits of cyberspace, explaining what he calls the emergence of the “digital divide:”

It is increasingly evident that as we connect, we become part of a new ethnoscape, what one might call a netscape or cyberscape, where information and individuals circulate and bond into a new community. As this community broadens in spread and significance, we are effectively implicated in the relativization of the rest who remain on the outside of its borders. Inconsequential as it might seem, this situation nevertheless has broad cultural implications, not only for individuals and groups already in the network but even more so for those others who exist on the outside.

As *JPAS* guest editors, we participate in “a new community” – the *JPAS* community – making information and knowledges accessible to this literate, English-speaking community, which may extend outwards to the World Wide Web, but inevitably excludes millions of people of, to, and, at times, for whom we speak. However, as postgraduates we suffer from idealism, hoping that *JPAS* readers and Internet searches eventually will ensure that this discussion reaches a multitude of voices that Red has made absent and silent in its quest “to eliminate AIDS in Africa” (Worth, 2006:16).^{iv}

In a gesture towards recuperating these voices, this edition features an array of authors and literary forms. Before collaborating on this edition of *JPAS*, we worked together to co-edit a peer-reviewed postgraduate journal with a focus on the multidisciplinary study of Africa and have brought many “*postamble*” sensibilities to *JPAS*. This edition is undeniably multidisciplinary, drawing from Cultural and Literary Studies, Anthropology, Art History, Sociology, Communication and Media, Women Studies, Medicine, and History. Moreover, while the authors featured in this edition are based in these disciplines, their work possesses interdisciplinary relevance.

Additionally, as postgraduate students, we are keenly aware of our situatedness “in the awkward in-between space, of being accomplished enough as scholars to be conferred the honors of degrees, yet somehow not yet fully qualified in the formal sense of passage through the academy” (Himmelman, Luty, Murray, Wildman, and Whitaker, 2005:1). We believe that our “in-betweenness” benefits from a spectrum of academic work, scholarship, and inspiration. Thus, we have chosen to include undergraduate, postgraduate, freelance, and academic scholarship in order to encourage a multi-perspective exchange of experiences and knowledges.

However, while our “*postamble*” sensibilities are reflected in this diversity of contributions, they also are evident in a strong South African intellectual base. Although our Call for Papers was extensively circulated, papers are almost exclusively from scholars in the United States and South Africa. We acknowledge the ways in which this limits the kinds of discussions we can have about (Product)Red, for although the campaign seeks “to eradicate AIDS in *Africa*,” at the time of publication only four African nations, which are not specifically discussed in this edition, benefitted from Red – Ghana, Swaziland, Rwanda, and Lesotho. Nonetheless, we welcome any and all feedback, comments, and narratives that may enhance or bring depth to our current discussion.

While the papers included in this edition of *JPAS* express a range of views and opinions on and about Red, we feel that the knowledges presented are generally absent, silently present, or decontextualized in the Red campaign. Divided into four sections – “What is (Product)Red?,” “Seeing Red? Seeing Hope?,” “Creative Capitalism Discove(red),” and “REVIEWS: AIDS in Africa Explo(red)?” – the issue begins with three papers that provide a closer look at the Red campaign, what it is, and what it is doing. Margaret Sarna-Wojciki’s “Refigu(red): Talking Africa and AIDS in ‘Causumer’ Culture,” examines the consumer community that Red brand is creating and mobilizing through marketing and advertising strategies. “At the center of this discussion lies a question of authority: From where does the (RED) brand derive authority in representing ideas of transparency, political activism, and community when talking about AIDS in Africa?” In “Shoppers of the Wold Unite: (RED)’s Messaging and Morality in the Fight against African AIDS,” Norma Anderson also provides insight into the community that Red is creating. Through content analysis of the (Product)RED website and its MySpace comments, she “examines how (Product)RED constructs a moral/common sense imperative, using long-held cultural tropes and schemas of Africa to do so.” Bringing “What is (Product)Red?” to a close, but opening it up to the opinion pieces that follow in “Seeing Red? Seeing Hope?,” Marinus van Niekerk’s “(Red) mythology” critically analyzes and reflects on how Red recenters Western representations of Africa, as well as the possibility and potentiality for relief.

“Seeing Red? Seeing Hope?” features two opinion pieces from the continent that demonstrate drastic divergences of opinion. These opinion pieces serve to contest the absence and silencing of African women’s voices, as well as those of the “African brain trust,” in the Red campaign. Unlike *Vanity Fair*’s Africa issue, their voices are not limited to captions and quotations.

Privileging the relief that van Niekerk discusses, Ayoade Olatunbosun-Alakija's "(RED) Spells H. O. P. E." brings voice to those in favor of Red. While we obviously disagree with Olatunbosun-Alakija's stance, we acknowledge her willingness to engage in discussion as a reflection of her commitment to seeking out solutions to the AIDS pandemic in Africa. Understandably, physicians, like Olatunbosun-Alakija, privilege a particular kind of knowledge,^v for within medical discursive ideology it is one's physical well-being and survival that is prioritized. In contrast, Teresa Barnes' "Product Red: The Marketing of African Misery" lambasts Red for its "more, more, more," hyper-capitalist ideology. She argues that "the HI virus spreads and proliferates, and AIDS kills because of the diseased relationships of the social body, not because of the biomedical state of the individual body." In spite of divergent opinions, when put side-by-side, both Olatunbosun-Alakija's and Barnes' contributions reveal complexities that the Red campaign fails to address or acknowledge. The three essays in the section that follows – "Creative Capitalism Discove(red)" – confront these silenced complexities, as well as others, by contextualizing (Product)Red within specific discursive terrains.

Percy C. Hintzen's "Desire and the Enrapture of Capitalist Consumption: Product Red, Africa, and the Crisis of Sustainability" opens this third section, explaining how in order to participate "successfully" in the capitalist political economy Africa must "be redeemed from the narrative of abjection, destitution, and chaos." However, the only acceptable alternative narrative within "the project of globalization" is *attraction*: "Erotic desire for the black body needs to be transformed from transgression through the trope of liberation." In "Shop and Do Good?" Katarina Jungar and Elaine Salo also interrogate the limitations of how Africa can be made iterable within particular discursive contexts. Through a comparison of the strategies employed by (Product) Red and the South African HIV-activist group, the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), Junger and Salo "ask whether it is possible to mobilize "northern" consumers with an approach that does not create a dichotomous world of "us" and "them" and further construct Africa as the dying continent. Zine Magubane's "The (Product) Red Man's Burden: Charity, Celebrity, and the Contradictions of Coevalness" also questions constructs of "us" and "them" within the Red campaign, but in conversation with celebrity activism, specifically that of Bono and Oprah. Focusing on two discursive moments associated with the Red campaign – the July 2007 *Vanity Fair* issue and an 13 October 2006 *Oprah Winfrey Show* – Magubane asks: "When Oprah and Bono invoke their own connections to a history of colonial subjugation as an explanation for what motivates their philanthropy, can it be read as an attempt to 'share in the other's past' and, in that way, stake a claim for their coevalness?"

In an effort to further contextualize the numerous discursive terrains that Red invokes, the final section "Reviews: AIDS in Africa Explo(red)?" spotlights significant artistic, journalistic, and intellectual works that productively engage with complexities surrounding HIV/AIDS in Africa. Sarah-Jane Johnson's review of the "Home Lands – Land Mark" exhibit at the Haunch of Venison in London bears witness to the presence, interest, and iterability of African knowledges in the so-called West that (Product)Red has thus far, chosen to ignore.

Featuring the works of David Goldblatt, Guy Tillim, William Kentridge, Berni Searle, Nicholas Hlobo, Vivienne Koorland, and Santo Mofokeng “illustrat[es] the contrast between the optimism of the newly democratic country and the realities of AIDS, poverty, corruption, and the leftovers of the previous [apartheid] regime.” Babalwa Sibango’s review of Helen Epstein’s *The Invisible Cure: Why we are losing the fight against AIDS in Africa* resonates with Barnes’ opinion piece, but as a molecular biologist, Epstein’s work is more closely aligned with Olatunbosun-Alakija’s discursive terrain, thereby providing valuable insights into both opinion pieces. Emma O’Shaughnessy’s review of Jonny Steinberg’s *Three Letter Plague* adds to this knowledge, further revealing multi-layered socio-political complexities that enable the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Africa. Additionally, she interrogates the significance of coevalness that Magubane discusses. However, rather than using coevalness as a tool for unpacking celebrity activism, O’Shaughnessy critically analyzes and subsequently applauds Steinberg’s work for bridging the “us” and “them” divide: “Steinberg, by allowing his own position to be challenged by what he finds in Pondoland, prevents this kind of relationship from developing.”

Superseding “Center Stage”

With its mix of stunning photography, in-depth reportage, and social commentary, Vanity Fair accelerates ideas and images to center stage.

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To perpetually counter a center is to recognize it. In other words discourse – our discourse – should begin to move in the direction of dismissing, at least in discursive terms, the concept of a center, not by moving it, as Ngugi wa Thiong’o has suggested, but superseding it. It is in this context that any meaningful discussion of modernity and ‘modernism’ in Africa must be conducted, not in relation to the idea of an existing center or a Modernism against which we must all read our bearings, but in recognition of the multiplicity and culture-specificity of modernisms and the plurality of centers.

Olu Oguibe 2004, p. 4

Although the *Vanity Fair* Africa issue, and (Product)Red in general, has brought certain images and knowledges about Africa to “center stage,” the papers in this edition serve as a gesture towards “dismissing, at least in discursive terms,” a particular narrative legacy of and about Africa, Africans, and HIV/AIDS in Africa. As a whole, it is our belief that this edition of *JPAS* has superseded (Product)Red’s discourse by creating a space in which multiple knowledges and centers can converse. Beyond the pages of this edition, however, we realize that we have a long way to go. However, we are confident that discussion and dialog will continue. The upcoming “Africa on the Move” Conference at the University of Copenhagen reinforces our optimism. We hope that more voices will come forward and that (Product)Red will be listening.

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Notes

ⁱ I would like to thank and acknowledge the support of the A.W. Mellon Foundation.

ⁱⁱ Ashley Judd reinforces Bono, stating, “I like Bono’s comment: Shop until it stops” (Freydkin, 2006:5d).

ⁱⁱⁱ It is important to note what the Global Fund is and how it was created:

Officially [the Global Fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria] is a partnership involving governments, non-governmental organizations, the private sector and affected communities. Since it was founded in 2002 it has become the main international organization through which spending on these diseases is disbursed...The Global Fund is the creation of the leaders of the world’s richest countries rather than a grassroots movement. The idea was floated at the G8 summit in Okinawa, Japan, in 2000. It was ratified by Kofi Annan, the secretary general of the United Nations, at a special session of the General Assembly in 2001. Then it was formally launched at the G8 summit in Genoa, Italy, in 2001. (Ben-Ami, 2006)

There have been several controversies surrounding (Product)Red’s business structure as it relates to the Global Fund. For instance, in “Courting Consumer Dollars,” Peter Panepento (2007:13) explains that:

While many charities use a simple formula for setting up royalty agreements with companies, Product Red has a more complicated structure: Whenever a product is sold, a portion of the sales price goes to the Global Fund. The companies selling the products also pay fees to Product Red, a newly created company that administers the campaign. That structure means that Product Red does not have to report the same information a charity would provide to government organizations and the public...

Furthermore, on 17 September 2007, *The Australian* reported a corruption scandal: “Britain’s Serious Fraud Office has been sent a file on alleged corruption involving programs run by the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB, and Malaria, worth \$10 billion.” (Leppard, 2007).

^{iv} This phrase is frequently used in the Red campaign. For instance, referring to “Bono’s Big Idea” Oprah.com (2006) states, “(RED)TM is a revolutionary program designed to eliminate AIDS in Africa.” Additionally, all Red American Express cards read “designed to eliminate AIDS in Africa” (“American Express Joins the Product Red Revolution,” 2006).

^v For more insight into how (Product)Red has been received within this discourse, refer to the heated debate about (Product)Red took place in response to Colleen O'Manique and Ronald Labonte's "Rethinking (Product) RED" in *The Lancet*. See O'Manique, Colleen and Ronald Labonte. 2008. "Rethinking (Product) RED." *The Lancet*, 371, 10 May 2008, pp. 1561-1563; "Correspondence: Seeing (RED)." 2008. *The Lancet*, 371, 31 May 2008, pp. 1835-1836.; and O'Manique, Colleen and Ronald Labonte. 2008. "Correspondence: Authors' reply." *The Lancet*, 371, 31 May 2008, pp.1836.

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