

# The (Product) Red Man's Burden: Charity, Celebrity, and the Contradictions of Coevalness

by

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## Abstract

*In this essay I look at two discursive moments associated with the Product Red campaign – the July 2007 Vanity Fair issue and an 13 October 2006 Oprah Winfrey Show promoting the effort. My focus on these two discrete yet interconnected moments in time stems from a desire to explore the working of coevalness in celebrity activism. Coevalness is a term I borrow from Johannes Fabian (2006: 146) who first used it with regard to anthropological discourse. According to Fabian, at its heart, anthropology is marked by a contradiction whereby ethnographers “consistently places those who are talked about it a time other than that of the one who talks.” Fabian calls the effect of such strategies the “denial of coevalness.” This idea about coevalness can thus serve as a useful means by which to think about celebrity activism in Africa. Unlike many other celebrities, Bono and Oprah’s public rhetoric often ties their own personal history and experience to the history and experience of the people they want to help. Oprah invokes her race and gender and Bono the history of Irish colonial dispossession. The question I seek to explore is this: 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?*

## Introduction: The White Man's Burden and the Culture of Imperialism

In 1899 Rudyard Kipling (1988: 321) penned the poem, "The White Man's Burden," the first stanza of which reads:

*Take up the White Man's burden –  
Send forth the best ye breed –  
Go bind your sons to exile  
To serve your captives' need;  
To wait in heavy harness,  
On fluttered folk and wild –  
Your new-caught, sullen peoples,  
Half-devil and half-child*

In the contemporary moment, the "White Man's Burden" ideology is making a comeback, thanks to the efforts of musicians, movie stars, and models. For instance, *Time Magazine* declared 2005 "The Year of Charitainment" (Poniewozik 2005). Moreover, according to a recent catalogue produced by the upscale American clothing chain Bloomingdale's: "In Hollywood, philanthropy is the New Black. You're nobody unless you're using your fame – and your wallet – to promote good works" ("Cause Celeb" 2007: 10). Similarly, an ad for Product Red that appeared in the July 2007 *Vanity Fair* magazine exhorted consumers that "Meaning is the New Luxury."

In this essay, I examine two discursive moments associated with the Product Red campaign – the July 2007 *Vanity Fair* issue and a 13 October 2006 *Oprah Winfrey Show* promoting the effort. My focus on these two discrete yet interconnected moments in time stems from a desire to explore two instances of celebrity activism wherein the celebrities themselves reference their own history of oppression as a motivation for their philanthropy. As a heuristic device for thinking through these issues, I borrow the term coevalness from Johannes Fabian (2006: 146) who theorized the concept, critiquing anthropological discourse. As he explains:

*Anthropology has its foundation in ethnographic research, inquiries which even hard nosed practitioners...carry out with communicative interaction. The sharing of time that such interaction requires demands that ethnographers recognize the people whom they study as their coevals.*

According to Fabian, at its heart, anthropology is marked by a contradiction: “when the same ethnographers represent their knowledge in teaching and writing they do this in terms of a discourse that consistently places those who are talked about it a time other than that of the one who talks.” Fabian calls the effect of such strategies the “denial of coevalness,” which is predicated on the idea that a journey “across the space of empire [can be] figured as a journey backward in time” (McClintock 1995: 40). The “Other” lives not only at a geographical remove, but also in a different, anterior, temporal zone. We can see this phenomenon at work not only in anthropological discourse, but in Western representations of Africa found in novels, film, books, newspapers, and so on.

Fabian calls on anthropologists to formulate philosophical and epistemological practices that would better allow them to recognize the people they represent as coevals. He identifies a number of ways in which this might be done, several of which I also find to have broader utility beyond the simple reform of ethnographic and anthropological practice. Fabian describes coevalness as “recognition as cognizing *and* remembering” pointing out that “to knowingly be in each other’s presence we must somehow share each other’s past” (Fabian 2006: 144). He goes on to observe that there is a “theoretical gain to be had from pairing memory and alterity” (Fabian 2006: 144).

Unlike many other celebrities, Bono and Oprah’s public rhetoric often ties their own personal history and experience to the history and experience of the people they want to help. Oprah invokes her race and gender and Bono the history of Irish colonial dispossession. The question I seek to explore is this: 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?

Fabian’s insights were originally developed as part of an attempt to critique anthropological practice, specifically the “contradiction between empirical research and the representation of findings” (Fabian 2006: 147). However, his insights on coevalness have enormous theoretical potential for thinking about the relationship between Self and the Other more generally. Three points he makes are particularly salient. First, he makes the point that in the West we “seem to require alterity for sustenance in our efforts to assert or understand ourselves” (Fabian 2006: 148). We can identify numerous examples in Western representational practices whereby the Other has been used as a vehicle for understanding the Self. Hayden White identifies “psychic interiorization” whereby savagery is viewed as an “inner disposition common to both civilized and primitive humanity” as one of the most common. (Pieterse 1992: 37). Closely related to that idea is the notion of projection, whereby the darkest impulses of the European self are repudiated by attributing them to the Other.

Second, Fabian points out that “the Other” is most often “spoken of only *in absentia*” (Fabian 2006: 145; italics in original). Thus, Fabian’s work forces us to grapple with the problem of how to avoid having “the Other” disappear in their entirety, becoming nothing other than a projection of our own fears, fantasies, and desires.

Third, many of the same failings Fabian identified in anthropological practice can also be seen in public acts of charity we find in celebrity appeals for Africa. In these appeals we confront, head on, the problems of representation, identity, and alterity. Images abound in these appeals – war ravaged villages, hungry children, AIDS victims, and the dead or dying. These images often create the effect of an unbridgeable chasm between the First and Third Worlds. This is partly due to history.

Philanthropic rhetoric was produced primarily by Christian missionaries. As Comaroff (1997: 166) explains, missionaries “regarded themselves – and were regarded by their compatriots – as ‘friends and protectors of the natives’” and “took themselves to be the conscience of British colonialism, its moral commentators.” At the same time, missionaries were the producers of the earliest forms of ethnographic (i.e. anthropological) writing about African people.<sup>1</sup> Thus, in the images themselves we confront the problem of alterity and coevalness. For example, the kinds of rhetorical effects associated with the so-called “Civilizing Mission” were such that:

*The missionary image-building consisted of a Manichean double face, with on the one hand the demonized image of the heathen under the devil’s spell, and on the other the romanticized self-image of the missionary in the role of saviour. These two stereotypes were interdependent: for the missions to justify themselves the heathen had to be perceived and labeled as degraded creatures sunk deep in darkness who needed to be brought to the light. The glory as well as the fund-raising of the missions were in direct proportion to the degradation and diabolism of the heathen.* (Pieterse 1992: 71)

Celebrities can be seen as modern day missionaries who are also engaged in a process of image building through philanthropy. Much like their Evangelical predecessors they face the problem of what Sontag (1970: 185) called “applied Hegelianism” or seeking oneself in the Other. In religious discourse the savage “is identified in the unconscious with a certain image of the instincts. And civilized man is painfully divided between the desire to ‘correct’ the ‘errors’ of the savages and the desire to identify with them” (Mannoni 1956: 13).

Demonstrating that he had “tamed” the African savage was a way of demonstrating that he had tamed the savage within. Thus, the savior’s positive self image rests on projection and identification. He projects the most terrible aspects of himself onto the savage and thus renders himself innocent and clean once more. Then, in the process of saving the savage and purging him of his sin, the savior is further elevated and made more Godlike.

Biography played a major role in evangelical philanthropy, for as Comaroff (1997: 176) states, “[M]ission biography was mission ideology personified.” Missionary biographies were often tales of upward mobility and their personal stories “shaped the moral terms...in which they dealt with the ‘savage’ on the frontiers of empire” (Comaroff 1997: 169). Their insistence that “the road along which they were to lead the heathen was to retrace their own pathway through British society” can also be viewed as a form of applied Hegelianism which exposed the tension between alterity and sameness in the production of identity.

Contemporary celebrity philanthropic culture also has a strong biographical component. “In modern celebrity it is the self that sells” (Illouz 2003: 17). In their philanthropic endeavors, their biographies serve as a way for them to disseminate information on their intentions, expressing their “sense of self, identity, and motivation for acting in the world” (Illouz 2003: 18). Bono and Oprah represent two interesting and contrasting examples of celebrities who appear to be trying to engage in the practice of “recognition as cognizing *and* remembering” that Fabian describes. Bono and Oprah are unusual in that they reference a history of oppression as having motivated their philanthropy and thus are both more theoretically interesting and complex than a celebrity like Paris Hilton whose recent attempts to visit the Congo were immediately seen as little more than a publicity stunt. The general public, the news media, and government and political leaders have also recognized Oprah and Bono as celebrity statesmen – in part because of the size and impact of their philanthropy and in part because the ways in which they represent their own histories gives them a certain legitimacy that other celebrities lack. In a recent profile in *The Ottawa Citizen*, author Donna Jacobs (2008) concluded that, “Bono’s charity work is inspired partly from his own story...he grew up in Ireland during ‘The Troubles’ with a Roman Catholic father and a Protestant mother.” Similarly, *New Africa* noted with approval that when Oprah built the academy: “Oprah’s own difficult childhood embroiled in poverty was a point of reference” (Commey 2007: 10).

Both Oprah and Bono are members of groups who bore the mark of colonial “Other.” At the time that Kipling penned the words “half devil and half child” those words were frequently applied to Africans and the Irish. Oftentimes the groups were spoken of in tandem and subject to similar sorts of invidious comparisons.

For example, in 1862 a satirist for *Punch* magazine decried the fact that “a creature manifestly between the Gorilla and the Negro is to be met with in some of the lowest districts of London and Liverpool by adventurous explorers. It comes from Ireland” (Pieterse 1992: 214).

At various times, Both Bono and Oprah have invoked their own colonial histories as a way of explaining their interest in philanthropy towards Africans. In May of 2002, Bono was interviewed by Washington D.C. based reporter Charles Cobb Jr., about his upcoming trip to Africa with Bush administration treasury secretary Paul O’Neill. In answer to the question: How does an Irish rocker become interested in Africa? Bono replied:

*I think it’s probably – if there is such a thing as folk memory a sense that our country had a famine in the middle of the 19th century that halved our population, that two million died and two million went off to become policemen and priests in New York. I think, also, it’s from a sense of having come out from under the hoof of colonialism and having recently turned around our economy. And this is the kind of good news from an Irishman that helps meeting with finance ministers in Africa (Cobb 2002).*

Fabian (2006: 145) writes that “thinking about memory gets us to consider identity, individual as well as collective, psychological as well as cultural.” Thus, Bono brings Africa and Ireland into the same analytic field by invoking their common experience with famine and disease and asserting that Africa and Ireland share a history of tragedy, death, and forced dispersal. The level of memory he is accessing is collective and cultural. In the American lexicon, where it is understood that celebrities “perform and transform private life at the same time that [they] name and stage it” (Illouz 2003: 77), Bono’s personal story also becomes pertinent. We are to understand that he can also connect to a history of ethnic conflict and that he also has a status as a marginal or “in-between” person. The ethnic and religious war zone in which he was raised and his “mixed” heritage allow him to connect to the tragedies of ethnic conflict in Africa. The potential for coevalness lies, therefore, in a metaphorical sense or as he puts it, a “folk memory” which allows him to use history to proclaim his spiritual connection to the contemporary pain experienced by the targets of his philanthropy.

Bono does not, however, make any reference to the parallel processes of racialization which made “the hostile equation of Irishmen with blacks a routine part of American culture” (Pieterse 1992: 214). The racialization of the Irish was not limited to American culture alone, as English people also made comparisons between Irishmen and Africans.

As Kiernan (1995: 29) so aptly put it, “if the ‘native’ on occasion reminded the Englishman of his familiar Paddy, Paddy might sometimes remind him of the native.” Folk wisdom held it that “an Irishman was a ‘nigger,’ inside out” (Roediger 1991: 133). The subordinate place that the Irish occupied, due to their colonial history and the poverty and degradation that they lived in as a result, led them to be characterized as the “Blacks of Europe” – a designation so common that Bono must have encountered it at some point during the course of his young adulthood. In making the past present through memory or “pairing memory and alterity” as Fabian (2006: 145) describes, Bono can only go so far. Colonialism can be remembered as a process of economic subjugation but not as a process of racial subjugation. Nor can the relationship between the two be brought to light. To do so would introduce disabling tensions into his narrative about the “good news from an Irishman” about “coming out from under the hoof of colonialism” (Cobb 2002).

Whereas Bono studiously avoids any overt mention of race, Oprah embraces it. And when she evokes the pain of historical memory, it is immediate. It is her personal pain, caused by a history of racism and discrimination against all Africans and African Americans that motivates her philanthropy and provides a staging ground for her assertions of “recognition as cognizing *and* remembering” (Fabian 2006: 144). In a 2007 interview in *O Magazine*, Oprah Winfrey explains her motivation in building her academy:

*It is a complete full circle for my life, because I was raised exactly like them, by a grandparent, poor, in a rural community in a state of apartheid. I understand where they come from. They’ve given me a sense of great hope! Their names are unusual, some are hard to pronounce—Lindiwe, Thando, Lebohang—but I’m looking into the face of myself. (Gien 2007: 159)*

Thus, like Bono, Oprah invokes metaphors about loss and death, however she does so in an entirely different way. Whereas Oprah was “orphaned” by the poverty and social location of the rural South that made it impossible for her mother to care for her, the girls at the academy were orphaned by the same AIDS epidemic that Bono makes oblique reference to when he brings the history of the famine to bear in his discussions of Africa. In her rhetoric, however, AIDS is not represented as a social problem but rather as a deeply personal one. Instead of hordes of dying people she calls our attention to individual motherless children.

Oprah and Bono are both aware that they are engaged in a discursive practice of representing both the Self and the Other. In so doing they must engage in a process of constructing both the Self and the Other so they can be compared – what Fabian (2006: 142) called “contrastive otherness.” In order to participate in such a comparison, each must speak of how and why the Other has survived in them. Fabian might characterize Oprah as engaged in a process of communicative interaction. Much like the ethnographers that he describes “the sharing of time that such interaction requires demands that [she] recognize the people ... as coevals” (Fabian 2006: 143). We might ask, as Fabian undoubtedly would, what happens when Oprah represents the interaction? Does she, like the ethnographers Fabian criticizes, “do this in terms of a discourse that places those who are talked about in a time other than that of the one who talks” (Fabian 2006: 143)?

When Oprah discusses the construction of the academy as representing a “complete full circle” for her life she makes explicit reference to time. The girls today are like she once was – poor, dispossessed, and unloved. She has now, however, progressed beyond that stage. She is an adult – rich, powerful, and loved by millions. At first glance one might think that Oprah is simply engaged in a sentimentalized version of the nineteenth century anthropological theory of recapitulation or “the child as a type of social bonsai, a miniature family tree” (McClintock 1995: 50). In this theory, childhood provides the key for understanding how the Other survives in the Self. In other words, “the ancestral lineage of the human species could be read off the stages of a child’s growth. Every child rehearses in organic miniature the ancestral progress of the race” (McClintock 1995: 50). A major difference between Oprah’s rhetorical practice and that of recapitulation is that in the latter theory, the familial progress of humanity is “from degenerate native child to adult white man” (McClintock 1995: 49). For Oprah, it is not the native child who is a degenerate. For how could she be? To call that child a degenerate is to call herself one. Rather, it is the system, produced largely by adult white men, that is itself degenerate and operates to produce and reproduce the image of the Black woman and child as hopelessly degraded. Thus, when she speaks of coming “full circle” it is not simply that she has progressed through the evolutionary stages from disgraced child to fully realized adult, but rather it is a matter of the fully realized adult coming back to rescue the child. And it is not the degeneracy of the child that must be eradicated but rather the degeneracy of the system.

Bono also references time. Unlike Oprah, it is not his personal history that is at issue, but rather the history of the Irish people. They have not come full circle, but rather have scaled the ladder of evolutionary progress in the traditional sense. While there was a considerable time lag between the throwing off of the yoke of colonialism and Ireland’s economic turnaround, nevertheless Ireland has been on the forward march.

Thus, like Oprah, he seems to agree with Fabian (2006: 145) that “to be knowingly in each other’s presence we must somehow share each other’s past.” Similarly, they are both engaged in some version of “pairing memory and alterity” (Fabian 2006: 144). But what are they remembering?

Oprah remembers her own childhood and the immediate experience of racial apartheid. It is this experience that brings her and the girls with the “hard to pronounce names” into the same frame of reference and makes her feel that when she is looking into their faces she is looking into her own. Her cognition therefore is of the girls and herself as victims of lovelessness and loss brought about by racism, colonialism, and apartheid.

Oprah uses her biography, with particular emphasis on her struggle to overcome racism, to make the case for education as the foundation of sustainable philanthropy. She spoke at length about this idea in her opening address to the academy on 02 January 2007: “I was a poor girl who grew up with my grandmother, like so many of these girls, with no water and electricity. But I am grateful that at least I had a good education, the most vital aspect of my life” (Comme 2007: 11). Literacy functioned much the same in Oprah’s life as Comaroff (1997: 170) describes it operating in the lives of the Evangelicals for whom it not only expanded the mind but also “engaged the self in a properly profound manner...And, in the process, they came to know better both the outer world and their inner selves.” The outer world she came to know and understand was a world that was determined to place limits on her because of her race and gender. The inner self she came to know and believe in was a person with the right and the ability to control her own destiny. And it is this aspect of her life that she wants the girls at the academy to reenact. In many ways Oprah simultaneously occupies the subject position of the savior and the saved. She is the missionary, teaching by example, but she is also an example of an African empowered by Christianity, Civilization, and Commerce.

There are obvious parallels between Oprah’s idea of “coming full circle” in South Africa with the girls in her academy and that of the Evangelicals whose “careers were dedicated to the reenactment of their own lives” (Comaroff 1997: 177). As was true for the Christian missionaries, Oprah’s own biography was “built on an unremitting commitment to self-improvement” (Comaroff 1997: 168). Nineteenth century missionary rhetoric was predicated on the idea that there was some essential human nature that lay at the basis of the potential for transformation from savage to convert. While missionary rhetoric largely conceived of Africans as living in an anterior time, it also held out the possibility that, for Africans, the embrace of education and capitalism was a conduit to achieving coevalness. As the Reverend John Philip explained:

*We are all born savages, whether we are brought into the world in the populous city or the lonely desert. It is the discipline of education, and the circumstances under which we are placed, which create the differences between the rude barbarian and the polished citizen – the listless savage and the man of commercial enterprise – the man of the woods and the literary reclusive. (Philip 1828: 319)*

The ideology of the “White Man’s Burden” with its emphasis on Christianity, Civilization, and Commerce married philanthropy and consumerism. The bridge or balance between the two was always economic empowerment. Christianity would provide the transformation in attitude and personal habits that would make Africans civilized and thus provide the basis for expanded commerce. As Philip explained to Khoisan converts at the Bethelsdorp mission: “the world, and the Church of Christ, looked for civilization and industry as proofs of their capacity for improvement” (Philip 1828: 213). Thus missionaries felt their job was twofold – the freeing of souls from the sins of heathenism and the freeing of labor power from the manacles of slavery. In simple terms, Africans would be “empowered” through education to be owners and sellers of their labor power. The proceeds from the sale of the labor would then empower them to become better and more powerful consumers. Thus, the linking of philanthropy, consumerism, and empowerment that is such a powerful component of Oprah’s brand image actually has its roots in the nineteenth century.

The Product Red campaign also makes consumerism the path to empowerment. Or, as Bono calls it: “Fair Vanity” (Shoumatoff 2007: 222). In so doing it becomes the latest manifestation of a centuries old process whereby commodity culture became linked to the civilizing mission. Unlike Oprah, Bono focuses much less on individual memory and more on memory in its collective and cultural sense. In his estimation, Africans and the Irish are cultural groups that share a similar colonial heritage. What he remembers, however, is colonialism as an economic system that has adversely affected Irish and African people as a whole. Colonialism’s sin is not the sin of race prejudice, but rather of having introduced and promoted economic backwardness. In a recent speech before forty African heads of state, he explains:

*I’m Irish. We came out of colonization, we had to deal with the British, we have a lot in common with Africa. Twenty years ago our economy was down the toilet, the IMF were telling us what to do and the World Bank were down our pants. Bad management is in my folk history. (“Africa Can Learn” 2008)*

Bono's emphasis on "folk history" and Oprah's emphasis on personal history, coupled with Oprah's foregrounding race and Bono's eliding of it result in very different views about what makes charity sustainable. As will be shown in the next section, they use their biographies to make the case for two very different types of philanthropic practice. While Oprah bases philanthropy on sentiment and the individual effort and commitment writing checks involves, Bono places his faith in consumer self interest and the abstract workings of the market.

## **Biography, Sustainability, and the Politics of Philanthropy**

According to Erlmann (1999: 109), "Empire is at heart a society of the spectacle." By this he means that at the same time that colonial expansion subjected the entire globe to the Western imperialist gaze, new technologies of advertising, media, and mass culture also began to emerge. The development of modern advertising was concurrent with the "integration of colonial and dependent areas into the western economies" and the packaging and marketing of many popular products reflected this (Pieterse 1992: 188). Advertising took scenes of empire "into every corner of the home, stamping images of colonial conquest on soap boxes, matchboxes, biscuit tins, whiskey bottles, tea tins, and chocolate bars" (McClintock 1995: 209).

The efficacy of images in generating publicity had an impact on philanthropy as well. In the nineteenth century, missionaries were very strategic in how they staged, packaged, and disseminated images of African suffering. They sold medals with pictures of kneeling slaves to raise money for foreign missions and magazines produced by missionary societies could always count on increased sales if they included stories that were highly dramatic. Famous missionaries like the Reverend John Philip could pack halls with thousands of listeners who gathered to hear about the cursed heathens and damned souls he was saving in Southern Africa. If the tales he told were sufficiently moving, they would more than likely fill the collection plate with donations. As Philip Curtin (1964: 325) explains in his book, *The Image of Africa*, "missionaries lived on voluntary contributions" which tended to wax and wane, depending on the level of publicity Evangelicals were able to generate. In a world where "modern technologies of simulation and an aesthetics of the surface began to make progress" making African suffering a visual spectacle, reproduced on pamphlets, medallions, broadsheets, and books, was a way to draw attention to mission work and thus increase the rate and volume of charitable donations (Erlmann 1999: 109).

A similar type of strategy has clearly been at work in Bono's various charity initiatives, from Live8 to the Product Red campaign. In a June 2005 interview with *The Guardian* Bono states:

*This is show business; we're creating drama – this G8 is a one-off moment. Years ago we were very conscious that in order to prevail on Africa, we would have to get better at dramatizing the situation so that we could make Africa less of a burden and more of an adventure ("A Day with Bono" 2005: 7).*

Selling the spectacle of Africa as adventure is nothing new. From its start in the mid Victorian era, advertising relied on "manipulating the semiotic space around the commodity [so that] the unconscious as a public space could also be manipulated" (McClintock 1995: 213). In the nineteenth century, skillful advertisers and entrepreneurs soon discovered that these images of Africa could also be used to sell a range of consumer items. Some products were packaged with tropical scenes to denote romance, others with jungles to evoke feelings of masculine adventure. What makes the current celebrity culture that Bono describes distinctive, however, is the fact that African suffering is being used to garner heightened interest in philanthropy *and* to sell consumer items. In the nineteenth century, advertisers did not consider the suffering of Africa and Blacks marketable. Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben were preternaturally smiling and happy. Likewise, "tobacco advertising made ample use of the 'southern myth,' the amiable ambience of the 'old-time plantation' with its contented black workers" (Pieterse 1992: 190). Chlorinal bleach ads featured two black boys proudly holding their boxes aloft and advertisers sought to suffuse mundane products like soap and tea with "a radiant halo of imperial glamour" (McClintock 1995: 211).

Bono, however, wants to sell suffering *as* adventure. Bono's focus is on marketing images of African suffering as a means for stimulating "artificial wants" in the minds of American consumers. The aesthetic space around the commodity is invested with the "commercial cult of empire" by virtue of the fact that the consumer is motivated to spend because they know that a portion of the profits generated by their consumerism provides the means for lifting Africans out of poverty (McClintock 1995: 213). Charity thus becomes yet another space that has as its first priority the spectacular exhibition of commodities. As Bono explained in a 27 January 2007 interview:

*I'm calling it conscious commerce for people who are awake, people who think about their spending power and say: "I've got two jeans I can buy. One I know is made in Africa and is going to make a difference and the other isn't. What am I going to buy?" (Perry 2006).*

The idea that shopping holds the key to salvation actually originated with missionary discourse. Upon noting the “indifference with which the Hottentots regarded money,” John Philip decided that “the sight of a shop at each of the institutions might operate as a stimulus to industry” (Philip 1828: 205). After the shop opened, he was pleased to find that the “experiment” was successful:

*The sight of goods in their windows and in their shops produced the effect anticipated: the desire of possessing the articles for use and comfort by which they were consistently tempted, acquired additional strength on every fresh renewal of stimulus. Money instantly rose in estimation among them; and the women and children, finding that they could obtain what they desired by collecting the juice of the aloe, were, in a short time, seen early and late, engaged in this occupation, or in carrying the produce of their labor to the merchant’s shop to exchange it for clothing and such other articles as might suit their taste or necessities...[T]he habits of the people have been eminently improved by the addition of shops to our institutions. (Philip 1828: 206)*

Although it originated in the nineteenth century, the idea that Civilization and Shopping are inextricably wed continually reappears in contemporary discussions. In the spring of 2007, for example, *The New York Times* ran an article entitled “Citizen Bono Brings Africa to the Idle Rich,” wherein the musician was quoted as saying: “One of the things I have learned of in Africa is the crucial role that commerce will play in taking its people out of extreme poverty” (Carr 2007: C3). Unlike the nineteenth century civilizing mission, the focus is the impact of “the sight of a shop” on the Western subject. Rather than consumer goods operating as a stimulus to industry in order to encourage the savages in Africa to labor, engage in trade, and thus develop their economies, it is the civilized in the West in whom the “desire for possessing articles for use and comfort” is being stimulated. The goal of current celebrity appeals is not to create a class of African consumers as a means for lifting the Continent out of poverty. Instead, it is to create a class of Western consumers who will “save Africa.” What is sustainable, therefore, is not people’s connection to people or passion for a cause, but people’s connection to consumerism, products, and their own self-image. An ad in for the Red campaign that appeared in *Vanity Fair* put it plainly: “Be a Good-Looking Samaritan” (2007: 137). The Red Manifesto, which appeared opposite the ad, clearly laid out the link between consumer self image and sustainable philanthropy:

*We believe that when consumers are offered this choice, and the products meet their needs, they will choose (Red). And when they choose (Red) over non-(Red), then more brands will choose to become (Red). Because it will make good business sense to do so. And more lives will be saved. Red is not a charity. It is simply a business model...All you have to do is upgrade your choice. (2007: 139)*

In his many speeches about the Product Red campaign, Bono has referred to the “bad management” that has infected most charity campaigns. The assumption that underwrites the Red campaign is that relying on donors to write checks is essentially a form of philanthropic mismanagement. It is also a form of mismanagement to rely simply on donor sentiment or feeling as sentiment or feeling is not – in economic or emotional terms – “sustainable.” As Bono explained to Oprah when he appeared on her show:

*“You and lots of people here in the United States have been trying to deal with the problems of Africa in a very serious way. But you know, not everybody has time to be an activist...Or put on the marching boots. So we said, ‘well, how are we going to get the shopping malls involved’? ...Look, we don’t want to show up on your show and ask people to write another check for charity.” (“Oprah and Bono” 2006: 3)*

The show represented such a seamless merger between the two celebrities that viewers would be unlikely to question whether any differences existed in their two models of philanthropy. However, when we carefully dissect the show we see that the issue of what constituted sustainable philanthropy actually represented a significant break or rupture in the seamlessness of that narrative.

During the last segment of the episode, Bono disappeared briefly and singer/songwriter Alicia Keys came on to discuss her own work as Global Ambassador for a charity called Keep A Child Alive which is premised on the “writing checks” model. As its website (<http://www.keepachildalive.org/theBasics/>) explains:

*Keep a Child Alive is a campaign that offers people the opportunity to provide lifesaving antiretroviral (ARV) medicine and support services directly to children and families with HIV/AIDS in some of the world’s poorest countries. For just a dollar a day – or a monthly contribution of \$30 – you can help save the life of a child or a parent who cannot afford essential treatment and care.*

In her discussion with Oprah, Keys discussed the death of a young boy in a Keep A Child Alive sponsored clinic in Mombasa, Kenya. Their discussion, parts of which appear below, provided an entry point for introducing the idea of donor-recipient connection as a basis for sustainable philanthropy.

*OPRAH: Can you not feel his heart. You can feel his heart.*

*KEYS: Everyone can do it. It is so simple and so easy in Africa to keep a child alive. It's the simplest thing to save a life. Every single person can be a hero.*

*WINFREY: Last time I was here, I gave Alicia a \$250,000 check. Next, she is going to show us how she spent the money. I love to see how it's spent. ("Oprah and Bono 2006: 25)*

Unlike Bono, Oprah sees no contradiction between sustainability and writing checks. As she explained in her magazine, "When I first started making a lot of money, I really became frustrated with the fact that all I did was write check after check to this or that charity without really feeling like it was a part of me. At a certain point, you want to feel that connection..." (Commey 2007: 11). Oprah has committed to "write checks" in order to support and sustain the academy for the next one hundred years. The issue of sustainability and how philanthropic endeavors become sustainable also connects to the issue of coevalness in interesting ways. Essentially, what Oprah is saying is that sustainability is a matter of heart or feeling. In other words, writing check after check is not a problem. Rather, the problem lies with what type of sentiment or feeling exists between philanthropist and recipient.

Like the Evangelicals, she seems to feel that the making of the self profoundly shapes the way one seeks to make history. Much like the missionaries, who saw themselves as the conscience of British colonialism, and therefore felt that this "legitimized their occasional forays into colonial politics" she, too, believes that the moral sentiment that she brings to her philanthropic practice is a guarantor of its sustainability. Specifically, she sees the nature of the communicative interaction between donor and recipient, in particular what Fabian would call the "process of mutual recognition" based on a shared history and knowledge of racism and dispossession as having the potential to stimulate "changes in the knower" that "reconstitute her identity" so as to suffuse her philanthropy with the necessary sentiment to make it sustainable (Fabian 2006: 146).

The potential for disruption contained in these radically opposing viewpoints was never given any space to develop. Bono and Keys never appeared on stage discussing philanthropy. When Bono returned, the two sang a duet – “Don’t Give Up (Africa)” – and the show ended quickly thereafter, leaving no possibility for the issue to be further discussed or to surface as a visible problem.

The above is not meant to suggest that donors who write checks are “better” than those who buy Red products or that their degree of coevalness is somehow “higher.” Rather, what I hope to demonstrate is that this idea of coevalness and its connection to philanthropic sustainability is central, even though its subtleties are often missed. Coevalness has become so central an issue in the celebrity philanthropic enterprise because an even deeper tension underwrites this discussion over coevalness and sustainability – that of race – an issue that for Oprah remains central to her gestures to coevalness, her sentiments regarding sustainability, and her construction of her own biography. Bono feels exactly the opposite way. For Bono, achieving these goals is predicated on eliding race.

### **Race, Philanthropy, and the Contradictions of Coevalness**

In 1988, KRS ONE, a rap artist and outspoken critic of American racism, released an album entitled *By Any Means Necessary*. The cover recreated the iconic image of Malcolm X, standing at a window, weapon in hand. One of the songs on the album, “Stop the Violence” gave lyrical expression to the idea of a common racial outsider status shared by all people of color:

*You shoot to kill, come back and you’re a veteran  
But how many veterans are out there pedaling?  
There’s no telling, ‘cause they continue selling  
As quiet as it’s kept, I won’t go into depth  
You can talk about Nigeria, people used to laugh at ya.  
Now I take a look, I say “USA for Africa?!”*

The final line referring, of course, to a 1985 celebrity philanthropic effort, United Support of Artists for Africa, under the auspices of which, forty-five artists (most of whom were American) recorded the hit single, “We are the World.” The profits generated by the record went to the USA for Africa Foundation, which supported famine relief efforts in Ethiopia. KRS ONE gave voice to a sentiment that resurfaced again in the wake of the 1994 Rwandan genocide where the fecklessness of Clinton’s response was attributed to racism. This issue is surfacing yet again in light of the new interest in Africa sparked by celebrities.

Tavis Smiley, an African American journalist and social critic has been the most active in bringing these issues to the forefront, particularly with African American celebrities. In an interview with Don Cheadle, who was nominated for an Oscar as the star of *Hotel Rwanda*, Smiley put the issue of race directly on the table:

*SMILEY: I am asking unapologetically a question about race – to what extent, then, do you think that race has anything to do with the fact that it's Africa, has anything to do with the foot-dragging, for lack of a better word, happening as we speak on this issue?*

*CHEADLE: Well, I always think where Africa is concerned – and we don't even have to talk about opinions, we can just look historically and say there's always been a level of, "Well, we'll get to it." And if people don't believe that there's – if politicians don't believe that there is a political cost for their inaction, then they don't move. And they have always been able to deal with Africa in that context. ("Don Cheadle, John Prendergast" 2007)*

Thus, Cheadle and Smiley suggest that African Americans have a wholly different understanding of Western philanthropy towards Africa. In their estimation, Western philanthropy towards Africa has been a poor substitute for political dedication to the continent. Indeed, they imply that the West has often hid its lack of political commitment behind the cloak of philanthropy. The "foot dragging" that Smiley mentions refers to such spectacular failures of political will as the failure to intervene in the Rwandan genocide, the genocide in Darfur, and the North-South conflict that waged in Sudan for over two decades. Cheadle ties this failure directly to American racism and the disenfranchisement of Black people. Because African Americans have so limited a political voice, politicians do not feel that they have to answer to them or the constituency they represent. American racism is responsible for the disregard for Black life that exists in American political culture such that politicians "don't believe there is a political cost for their inaction." Thus, for Cheadle and Smiley, Africans and African Americans cannot be anything but coevals. The same logic that would seek to render Africans anachronistic humans, biologically and culturally, is the same logic that renders African Americans subjects, rather than citizens, in the land of their birth. Racism sets the stage for Africans and African Americans sharing one another's past. They do not need to seek the Self in the Other for the simple reason that a common set of discourses around phenotype, intelligence, and sexuality operate to "seal the Black man in his Blackness" (Fanon 1967: 9).

A second, related issue that often remains unarticulated, but nevertheless informs these debates at their core, is the question of whether whether African Americans, even if they feel this sense of coevalness, have the will or the inclination to carry on a sustained philanthropic effort. In other words, should white philanthropists be seen as having stepped in and filled a void? Or have they overstepped their boundaries and usurped the effort? This exchange between Smiley and Cheadle also touched on this issue when Smiley asked Cheadle the following:

*SMILEY: Don, a fair question for the two of us, as African Americans is what we think about the activity or inactivity of Black Americans on this particular issue. And again, I don't want to excuse Black folk on this issue, because this is our homeland. This is our issue, if it's anybody's issue. At the same time, Black folk have to deal with the most intractable issue in this country every day, called racism. ("Don Cheadle, John Prendergast" 2007)*

Smiley thus acknowledges and attempts to account for the fact that Whites have seemingly played a more prominent role in helping Africa than African Americans have. He makes the case that African Americans should be at the forefront of these issues because Africa is their "homeland." And because Africa is their homeland, they must bear the responsibility for managing Africa's future. An unfortunate impediment to this goal, however, is racism which ostensibly keeps African Americans so mired in poverty that they cannot mobilize an effective political constituency for Africa nor can they exert the type of economic pressure that might help to bring about an alternative political dispensation.

Speaking at the Clinton Global Initiative MTV roundtable on 26 June 2007, Keys was asked how poor, disenfranchised people would become compelled to make a change in Africa when many of them felt like they should be the ones receiving charity. In her reply she stressed that the very experience of being disenfranchised provided the basis for coevalness and opened the possibility for sustainable philanthropic engagement: "I feel like when you can understand being disenfranchised you can relate to others who feel the same way. I understand that feeling. I've been around that. I've grown up seeing it. I've felt it myself. That makes me empathic... This is what drives me to support Keep A Child Alive." ("Alicia Launches" 2007).

In Keys' speech the race of the "poor and disenfranchised" that were referenced was not named. And yet, because the interviewer was, himself, African American and did not address the same type of question to Bono (who had been interviewed directly before Keys) and given Keys answer, it is safe to assume that the real issue at hand was race – both as it affects the worldview of the donor and the recipient. Why did race remain both spoken and unspoken? Could a white host have asked Keys such a question? Would that question be asked of a white celebrity?

Smiley's comments suggest it would not be. His statement to Cheadle can also be read as tacitly supporting the view that White celebrities, especially those who are American, support Africans in far-off locales, yet ignore the plight of poor people of color close to home. *Time* magazine was one of the few media outlets that dared to mention the potential contradictions posed by the fact that "many celebrities have found that working on international causes (say, civil liberties or poverty overseas) is a safe way to indulge a more palatable liberalism that operates at a safe remove from controversial issues at home (say, civil liberties under the Patriot Act or poverty in Newark, New Jersey)" (Poniewozick 2005: 1). Even *Time*, however, did not make explicit the racial dimensions of the poverty in Newark, a city that is fifty-four percent African American. Undoubtedly, many African-Americans feel that for some Whites, the same ethnographic and social practices that Fabian (2006: 143) identifies whereby "the discourse consistently places those who are talked about in a time other than that of the one who talks" works effectively to remove Africans from the current political and economic context and its attendant racial views. In other words, a journey across the space of empire is a journey backward in time and thus absolves the philanthropist from having to deal with the thorny contemporary issue of race.

Bono can be seen as engaging in exactly this type of practice – of attempting to sidestep the uncomfortable and messy question of race – choosing to focus on his Irish ethnicity as a way of defusing questions and criticism. Shortly after he launched the Red campaign, for example, he fended off critics, who pointed to the possible contradiction raised by his race and class position, by declaring that his drive to fight on behalf of Africans was "an Irish macho thing, I really don't like losing" (Perry 2006). Thus, Irishness came to silently confer racial "Otherness." This "Otherness" was given further legitimacy when it was supplemented by his claiming of a "macho" (read: working class) masculinity. Irishness is re-asserted as "macho" in *Vanity Fair's* humorous column "the Coaster Correspondence," which is arranged on the page so as to resemble a series of notes scribbled on hotel stationery from across Africa. The recreated "note" on the "Grand Hotel Kinshasa" stationery uses the stereotype of Irish people as having a propensity for drinking as a bridge that connects Bono to Africa:

*Democratic Republic of Congo, formerly Zaire. My first time here since the Ali-Foreman fight. I remember a little dive in Kinshasa – a shebeen, they called it – where LeRoy Neiman and I used to pound back huge bottles of Primus beer. Bono tells me ‘shebeen’ is an Irish word: ‘You see Ed, we Irish are down with the Africans.’ (Coaster 2007: 150)*

The pages of the *Vanity Fair* magazine that he edited, however, are the site of some very disruptive moments of silence and unintended disclosure around the issue of race.

The masthead of the magazine annotates each staff member (the majority of whom are ‘White’ by contemporary social and legal standards) with a hoplogroup that indicates their genetic connection to Africa. The masthead works interactively with a story in the magazine, “Out of Africa” which opens by daring readers to ask themselves: “Do you think you know who you are?”

*Maybe Irish, Italian, Jewish, Chinese, or one of the dozens of other hyphenated Americans that make up the United States melting pot? Think deeper – beyond the past few hundred years. Back beyond genealogy, where everyone loses track of his or her ancestry – back in that dark, mysterious realm we call prehistory. What if I told you every single person in America – every single person on earth – is African? With a small scrape of cells from the inside of anyone’s cheek, the science of genetics can prove it. (Wells 2007: 110)*

What we see here is yet another attempt to dis-articulate Africans, African Americans, and Blackness. The first three groups referenced in the quote – Irish, Italian, and Jewish – all had to engage in a historical process of repudiating Blackness and adopting attitudes of extreme prejudice towards African Americans in order for them to become, on one level, “hyphenated Americans,” and on a more fundamental level, White.

Roediger (1991) and Pieterse (1992) make the point that the Irish, Italians, Jews, and Chinese were all considered to be interchangeable with Africans and American Blacks. According to Pieterse, “virtually the whole repertoire of anti-black prejudice was transferred to the Chinese: projected on to a different ethnic group which did, however, occupy a similar position in the labour market and in society” (1992: 216). Roediger (1991: 134) asserts that “it was by no means clear that the Irish were White.” Their insecure status came about because “the two groups often lived side by side...they both did America’s hard work...both groups were poor and often vilified” (1991: 134).

The United States became a melting pot, in the words of Toni Morrison, “on the backs of blacks.” According to Morrison (1992), the most enduring and efficient rite of passage into American culture is to engage in “negative appraisals of the native-born black population...Only when the lesson of racial estrangement is learned is assimilation complete.” Thus, the same hyphenated Americans that gained their status by repudiating Blackness are now invited to claim their Africaness by *genetically* (rather than politically or historically) uncovering the “Other that has survived in us” (Fabian 2006: 142). Science and genetics stand in for politics as the political and cultural elements of a shared past that Fabian identifies as so necessary for establishing coevalness are completely submerged and forgotten. Contemporary Africans are also rendered invisible, in favor of their far distant and long dead ancestors. Once again, Africans are “spoken of only in *abstentia*” (Fabian 2006: 145).

Perhaps the most striking difference between colonial and contemporary discourse can be found in the ways that race and its role in evolution is referenced – both covertly and overtly. Missionary and colonial discourse was always explicit in its linking of race, progress, and geography. Theories of African backwardness, degeneracy, and inequality were inevitably associated with and relied upon the notion that racial inequality had a biological basis. Scientific racism put Darwinian evolutionism to use in lending pseudo-scientific validity to the division of the world's geographic regions and their associated ethnic and racial groups into the categories of “advanced” and “backwards.” Africans were “viewed in a framework constructed out of biological determinism and moral-political admonishment” (Said 1979: 207), as were the Irish. Contemporary discourse deals with race very differently. For the most part, in celebrity rhetoric, race is never explicitly mentioned and is never overtly cited as a contributing factor to Africa's inferiority and the West's superiority. While it is implied that Africa and Africans are lagging behind the causes are generally attributed to social factors other than race – political culture, economic systems, and social mores (especially Africans' attitudes toward gender and sexuality) are frequently cited.

Avoiding any mention of race as having played a factor in Africa's political and economic backwardness goes in tandem, however, with the complete elision of any role that racism might have played in Africa's troubles in the past and in the present. Introducing discussions of race, racism, and Whiteness into a comparison of British colonialism in Ireland and Africa has the potential, however, to introduce moments of incoherence and inchoateness. While it is true that ideas about biological inferiority were used to justify colonialism in both instances, it was equally the case that the two million Irishmen that did not die, but “went on to become policemen and priests in New York” that Bono references, also tended to embrace White supremacy. “Instead of seeing their struggles as bound up with those of colonized and colored people around the world, they came to see their struggles as against such people” (Roediger 1991: 137).

Bono is focused on the possibility of progress. Ireland and Africa must both bear the yoke of colonialism. However, if Africa follows Ireland's example, she too can lift herself out of poverty. Commerce and economic development hold the key. What goes unspoken, of course is the fact that the ascendancy of the Irish was also linked to their becoming White

On the page following the masthead, readers are shown a picture of Bono as a toddler. The caption reads: "Before he was Irish." The picture itself is placed strategically between two maps. The one to the left showing the migrations of his matrilineal ancestors from Africa to Europe, the one to the right, those of his patrilineal line. The article ends by inviting all readers to see themselves as Africa's "coevals:"

*The world population that was spawned in Africa now has the power to save it. We are all alive today because of what happened to a small group of hungry Africans around 500,000 years ago. As their good sons and daughters, those of us who left, whether long ago or more recently, surely have a moral imperative to use our gifts to support our cousins who stayed. (Wells 2007: 110)*

This statement, while it appears to be bringing Africa up to the level of the West, indeed making Africa responsible for the genesis of the West, the ultimate effect of the discourse is a complete denial of coevalness. There is no possibility for communicative interaction because the salient parties – the "small group of hungry Africans" that are referred to, have all died millennia ago. Their present day "cousins" are atavistic throwbacks, awaiting the arrival of a Western savior. There is no possibility to even consider that Africa and the West could ever be coevals. Africa's contribution came millennia ago in the form of a genetic gift given to the peoples and cultures that are destined to sail forth and make history. People living on the Continent today, must simply sit and wait, with the hope that someone will take pity on them and write them into history. This is Sontag's "applied Hegelianism" taken to the extreme. The Other completely ceases to exist except insofar as a tiny remnant of her survives in us. The Other is not even a memory, she is only the vaguest genetic trace.

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<sup>i</sup> “To a significant degree the missions were responsible for the transition from the image of the ‘noble savage’ and the ‘noble negro’...to a stereotype of the ‘ignoble savage’...Terrifying tales about heathen rituals, idolatry, and human sacrifice traditionally play an important part in missionary image-building about the non-western world” (Pieterse 1992: 69).