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## Gambian-American College Writers Flip the Script on Aid-to-Africa Discourse

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## Gambian-American College Writers Flip the Script on Aid-to-Africa Discourse

*Elenore Long, Nyillan Fye, and John Jarvis*

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This article analyzes a group of Gambian-American college writers creating an alternative public to challenge the patronizing norms operating in prevailing “aid-to-Africa” rhetorics. These young rhetors evoked performative genres and hybrid discourses so that members of their local public (the African nationals, African American professionals, white educators, fellow students, Muslim elders, conservative Christian community leaders) might themselves embody more productive self-other relations as they considered together the issue that drew them together publicly: the often hidden and insidious ways that cultural gender norms limit young African women’s ability to thrive, whether in the U.S. or in the Gambia.

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Efforts to yoke writing and democracy bear witness to our personal and professional commitments to participate in democratic discourses and practices. The contested relationship between writing and democracy highlights not only that “writing democracy” merits our best thinking to date, but also that, as Leo Panitch notes, no one has “a foolproof blueprint for a new type of political and economic democracy” (43). Rather, this project calls for our disciplined imagination, “an imagination which is”—as Noah De Lissovoy and Peter McLaren see it—“synthetic and philosophical, responsible to the particularities of its immediate surroundings yet intent on elaborating a vision of a common project beyond those particularities” (176).<sup>1</sup>

As much that stands to be imagined here, one thing is clear: *writing democracy* involves rewriting the power-laden terms of what Michael Warner calls stranger-relationality (76)—the self-other logics that govern how we relate to one another in public. That power circulates in self-other relations is perhaps inevitable (cf. Young 41); yet, contrary to prevailing scripts, these self-other power dynamics need not reinforce the rigid binary of unearned privilege. So in writing this piece, we join scholars whose research has named and interrogated the self-other norms of public life, whether those are norms that structure welfare reform debates (Flower, “Intercultural”; Higgins and Brush); urban renewal projects (Coogan; Swann); risk communications (Grabill and Simmons; Sauer); gatekeeping encounters (Cushman; Long, “Educating”); or college writing classrooms—“fashion[ing]” as rhetorical education does “the souls required for a public life” (Greene 434). Further, we argue that nowhere is the need to flip the script on stranger-relationality perhaps more important than in the United States’ cultural imaginary of global citizenship where patronizing norms hold such sway that it is almost impossible to imagine and enact more humanizing alternatives so that citizens, in a spirit of mutuality, listen and learn from one another. In this study, we ask, *How do rhetors call together a public to address*

*issues of shared concern when the prevailing norms for public deliberation thwart rhetorical engagement by undercutting the agency and expertise of those most affected by the practices under question?*

Under the leadership of co-author Nyillan Fye, a loosely organized group of Gambian-American students has come together for the past four years to script and to host annual public events advocating girls' secondary and tertiary education in the Gambia and access to schooling, including college, here in the U.S. The dozen students that came together for the 2009 action-research project featured in this article were at that time enrolled in various colleges and universities up and down the New England seaboard and positioned in a whole host of different ways to lives "back in Gambia." Additionally, they had organized the event over the Internet and had come together for a very brief interval—a handful for a full weekend, but most just for the evening. Thus, the entirely student-run annual event, held in the multipurpose room of a suburban Catholic high school, was an impressive organizational feat in its own right.

As we will elaborate below, the event called on writing teachers and other college educators—including the other authors of this piece, John Jarvis and Elenore Long—to circulate what resources they could. However, the script and other plans for the event were not developed in a college classroom or through a single community-university collaborative project. Rather, these students came together in the spirit of what Jenn Fishman et al. in Stanford's longitudinal writing study refer to as performative "out-of-class [...] self-sponsored" literacies (244). Thus, in a special issue of *Community Literacy Journal* focused on writing democracy, our argument does not pertain to the work of a given university writing program *per se* or even a given set of rhetorical interventions, as important as such scholarship is (cf. Ackerman and Coogan; Flower, *Community*; Goldblatt, *Because*; Kells). Rather, our point here is that college writers like Fye have a lot to teach those of us who teach rhetoric about this highly inventive public discourse that is taking place with or without us.

The rhetors in this study co-constructed a complex rhetorical stance—the dynamics of which can be understood in terms of what Linda Flower calls "scripts of empowerment": *speaking up*, *speaking against*, and *speaking with* (*Community* 123-49). On the one hand, they were "up to" a great deal (Flower, *Community* 130). That is, they were "*speaking up about*" education for women at the same time that they called audience members to enact and to imagine with them gendered ways in the world capable of significant cultural work in our transnational age (Flower 130). In addition to speaking with Gambian young people for their personal and collective well-being, these rhetors were also "*speaking against*" the social conditions that limit the life chances of many Gambian children to thrive (Flower, *Community* 127-31). They themselves were also "*up against*" a great deal—including norms of public life that would cast them as recipients of international aid rather than as actively engaged public rhetors. Finally, the student rhetors also modeled how people in "*relative institutional privilege*" can speak wisely and persuasively for social change (Flower, *Community* 149). Especially because of the relative privilege they are negotiating, these rhetors have a great deal to teach us as they disrupted reductive self-other norms toward international aid and activism even as they negotiated—as must we

all—the noise (Gee, Hull and Lankshear 27), greed (Wood 230-31), and existential anomie (Crawford 186) of transnational new capitalism. These rhetors called for more inventive, playful and imaginative ways of relating to one another publicly. They suggested that in this inventive play may well reside not only the material fabric of the here and now, as well as relationships that need to continue to span generations and geographies, but also glimpses of yet unrealized futures.

## Available Means of Persuasion

The event itself—cast as a beauty pageant—highlights what a tenuous rhetorical enterprise Fye and her colleagues had undertaken. If they were going to disrupt aid-to-Africa discourses, they'd have to begin by flipping the script attached to the very venue that organized the participants and attendees.

Of course, beauty pageants are often criticized, and for good reason. The United States has a relatively long history of college-age women protesting pageants on the basis that one would think might matter most to a group like Fye's, promoting as it does girls' and women's empowerment: that such pageants objectify women and cast them in passive roles for the benefit of male voyeurs. Additionally, internationally cultural critics have exposed the colonizing logic behind some pageants—for example, those that make speaking English a measure of beauty and, thus, of worth (Billings; McAllister). One might reasonably ask, then, if the pageant is so controversial, why invoke its trappings anyway? Why take these risks? Why knowingly agree to walk into such a symbolic mine field?

These may be the questions that come to mind for us as readers, but actually another set of contextual conditions were more pressing to Fye and her colleagues. In planning the event, the question before Fye was less, *Is the pageant appropriate?* And more, *What's an available cultural form? A form, that is, that's at once capable of drawing an audience and flexible enough to be adapted to our purposes?* That is, as rhetors, Fye and her colleagues had to invent an occasion to which others would likely come—in fact, one for which people would travel great distances by car and even plane to attend. Further, she needed a venue that would likely invite the participation of both women and men—behind the scenes, on stage and in the audience; an event that could be organized inexpensively and at a distance with other people investing all different levels of time and commitment. In the context that Fye knew firsthand, other venues—such as a symposium or town meeting—were far less likely to create such a draw. This was an argument Fye herself was accustomed to making, for no one approached the pageant with greater scrutiny than some of the contestants' Muslim parents who blessed their daughters' participation only in light of what Fye and her colleagues were doing with the pageant.

In the end, the pageant that Fye and her colleagues hosted that evening was undeniably hybrid. Sure, the playful contest among the contestants created a plot line. Further, this pageant invoked the precedence of other political projects across the continent of Africa, such as the Stigma-Free Miss HIV Pageant, that use the beauty pageant to accomplish significant critical cultural work (Luginaah, Yiridoe, and Taabazuing; Wolfe, Weiser, Leiter et al.). For Fye's purposes, the pageant proved a flexible enough genre to incorporate prayer, feast, talent show, and the call-and-

response of audience engagement. That is, the pageant could support Fye's purposes of casting imagination among all the disparate strangers to be together for the evening in this highly inventive way. And as bell hooks reminds us, that cultural work is often most effectively cultivated not within more formal institutional spaces but within the hospitality of a public homeplace. Toward this end, the pageant fit the bill.

But this is not to say that readers aren't right to be concerned. As global citizens, we are right to watch vigilantly for the ways discourse affects how we relate to one another in public. Carolyn Miller writes: "[W]e need a rhetoric that helps build social trust" (33). If anything, the Miss-Gambia-USA pageant speaks to the risks rhetors often take to go public: in this case, the risk of hosting a poorly attended event; the risk of unintended consequences; the risk of being misunderstood. Yet for Fye and her colleagues, these were risks that had to be negotiated in real time if they were ever going to take on the larger challenge of disrupting prevailing self-other norms of aid-to-Africa discourse. This challenge was not something Fye and her colleagues could address entirely preemptively—as a precondition to their public work. Rather, as Miller concludes: "[S]uch a project cannot be a global or programmatic one: it must be risked one situation at a time" (33).

### Stranger-Relationality in Aid-to-Africa Discourse

The problem space in which these Gambian-American college students worked is highly charged, for a crisis of public imagination limits how Americans tend to relate to Africans "in need." In talk and in practice, aid to Africa most commonly invokes the stranger-relationality of *noblesse oblige*, celebrity refeudalism or neoliberal economics. Here's the most maddening thing: on the one hand, these discourses thread within and around one another—binding them to one another and strengthening their resolve on the public imaginary. On the other, they push out or appropriate other discourses from which it would be easier to cast more humane and inventive self-other relations. Mutually reinforcing one another as they do, these discourses inscribe a dehumanizing doer/done-to relationship between those giving and those receiving the aid.<sup>2</sup>

#### Noblesse Oblige

The generous benevolence of *noblesse oblige* refers to a social code obligating the wealthy or noble to perform service for others (Goldblatt, "Van Rides"). Though this stance dates back to the noble princes depicted in Homeric myths, *noblesse oblige* still holds sway today, perhaps nowhere as dramatically as in aid-to-Africa discourse. Consider, for instance, *American Idol's* recent "Event to Benefit American and African Children in Poverty." Referring to the wealth accrued through the show's popularity, the show's host, Ryan Seacrest, celebrated the benefit event as an opportunity "to give something back" (Rocchio n.p.). Evidence of his benevolence, the prominent talent scout Simon Cowell, whose own career was catapulted into the far reaches of the tele-sphere by the show's commercial success, told his television viewers with uncharacteristic humility: "[Traveling to Africa] was something I'll never ever forget. Seeing some of the most appalling conditions I've ever seen in my life, and

then we met some of the nicest people I've ever met. So mixed emotions, *but I'm glad that we can do something to help these guys*" (Rocchio emphasis added).

As Eli Goldblatt elaborates, *noblesse oblige* is a familiar trope for structuring stranger relationality within any kind of outreach, emphasizing as it does unequal exchange: "the fortunate give assistance to the dispossessed in exchange for a feeling of righteous accomplishment" ("Van Rides" 79). In relation to the tenacious, structural issues of poverty, illiteracy, and social fragmentation that have brought colleges and communities together, colleges and universities have often assumed their expertise, research agendas, and curricula could be readily exported to the community. As Flower explains, past or present, what often foils such partnerships are the logics motivating them. For instance, the logic of cultural mission puts patronizing distance between the learned "doer" and the community "receiver" or "done to"; the logic of technical expertise assumes the tools of academic research are the only viable ways to frame solutions and structure relationships; and the logic of compassion fosters an "intensely individual consciousness" quite separate from "public action" ("Partners" 97-100). It's not that colleges and universities aren't sites of useful expertise and technological resources. Instead, the challenge is figuring out how to get these resources into circulation in ways that are responsive to community needs (Mathieu 20-22), supportive of their own interests (Goldblatt, *Because* 128), and grounded in inquiry (Flower, "Partners" 100; Peck, Flower and Higgins 205) and mutual learning (Long, "Rhetoric" 303). Our point here is that if rhetors are going to flip the script of *noblesse oblige*, they have to flip the self-other relationality that drives it.

#### Celebrity Refeudalism

Another discourse that the rhetors in this study were up against was celebrity refeudalism. In "Rogue Cops," Susan Wells observes that prominent models for going public tend to focus upon large-scale, media-driven public arenas where the only real movers and shakers are either celebrities or politicians, *not* the likes of "you" and "me." As a result, ordinary people get cast as a mere prop in a politician's speech. Recall the typical state of the union address in which a president's speech writers have planted in the audience a "representative citizen" who waves during a quick camera scan (Wells 329). The president's speech sketches a bit of this citizen's biographical information to represent his or her endorsement of the president's political policy, whether it be on health care reform or homeland security measures. But it is the politician's agenda, not the citizen's situated knowledge, that's the focus of attention (Wells 329).

Jürgen Habermas called the worst of this phenomena *celebrity refeudalism*, those "modern forms of mediated publicness, where the powerful parade once again their power before a communicatively emasculated [sic] audience" (Cottle 412). If *noblesse oblige* casts stranger relationality in terms of the benevolent giver and grateful receiver, celebrity refeudalism turns on an even more insidious relationship among the politician-celebrity, mediated spectacle, and the consuming public (Habermas 175).

Under celebrity refeudalism in aid-to-Africa discourse, "consumption, trade and aid wed dying Africans with designer goods" (Richey and Ponte 711).

Celebrity refeudalism allows, for instance, for George Clooney to travel to Darfur as a humanitarian and return to the U.S. “the sexiest man alive” (*People*). Worse yet, in prevailing aid-to-Africa discourse, the mediated spectacle of this public display objectifies the passive needy and casts them as the backdrop against which the celebrity acts, as demonstrated in the photo op that Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie staged for their newborn recently to turn America’s attention to poverty and disease in Namibia (Smith 61). Sure, celebrities sharing their wealth and leveraging their social capital is not all bad. What is problematic, however, is that such versions of publicity tend to depict global citizens not as listeners or learners but as zealous consumers of publicity stunts and other “staged display[s]” of public life (Habermas 206).

The discourse of celebrity refeudalism posed additional challenges for the rhetors in this study. This discourse suggests that since there’s no better alternative than celebrities shaping the direction of international aid discussions, there’s no legitimate way to publicly point to or question the implications that follow from it. One scholar who has tried is Dambiso Moyo, the Zambian-born, Oxford- and Harvard-educated author of *Dead Aid: Why Aid is Not Working and How There is a Better Way for Africa*. A critic of “Western aid to Africa and its recent glamorization by celebrities,” she argues that “Western aid to Africa has not only perpetuated poverty but also worsened it” (Solomon n.p.). As Moyo explained in a recent interview: “I object to this situation as it is right now where [...] celebrity rock stars [...] have inadvertently or manipulatively become the spokespeople for the African continent” (qtd. in Solomon n.p.). Moyo contends that celebrity-led aid to Africa has led to corruption, waste, and a debilitating sense of agency.

Public reception of Moyo reflects the sway of celebrity refeudalism. Some background is in order here. Moyo is a free-market economist; she conceives of a global free market where rock stars aren’t shaping foreign aid policy. Now, as we would expect, critics of her book criticize her faith in the free market. What’s ironic, however, is that critiques of her economics aren’t framed primarily in relation to other economic models but rather in defense of the stranger relationality that Moyo finds so abhorrent: celebrity refeudalism as epitomized by the Irish rock musician and activist Bono, who launched Project (RED)<sup>TM</sup> to “rebrand Africa” as a site where “companies selling the RED products [could ... ] make a profit by helping the poor” (Richey and Ponte 713).<sup>3</sup> Take, for instance, the final line in Niall Ferguson’s foreword to *Dead Aid*. Ferguson writes: “This reader was left wanting a lot more Moyo, and a lot less Bono.” Regardless of Ferguson’s intent, that choice between Moyo and Bono has served as the central trope in subsequent reviews of *Dead Aid* as analysts debate the relative merits and flaws of Moyo’s scholarship (cf. Hamm; Solomon; Watkins). As a consequence, Moyo’s urgings to rethink the stranger relationality behind foreign aid have been silenced or worse yet even turned against her, as evidenced in Kevin Watkins’ “Why Dead Aid is Dead Wrong.” Watkins concludes his piece: “More Moyo and a lot less Bono? Thanks but no thanks”—as if celebrity refeudalism were both the only viable solution to poverty in Africa and, because of the shroud of glory that surrounds it, in a league of its own, protected from the rigors of critical scrutiny.

### Neoliberal Economics

The rhetors in this study were also up against the sway of neoliberal economics. Neoliberal economics seriously reduces the complex and often contradictory relationship between democracy and global capitalism. Here, stranger-relationality turns on the generosity of citizens from “developed” countries to extend resources to the “developing” poor. In public life, neoliberalism trumps other ways of conceiving public engagement and how people would configure themselves for such engagement. It assumes when people gather publicly, their interests are primarily monetary, so the main reason for getting together in public is to promote, pump up, and stage the transfer of funds. Thus, this economic transfer creates both the plot for the event and the stranger-relationality among participants. If *noblesse oblige* obligates the wealthy to give back and if celebrity refeudalism markets a corporate Cool Factor to those who do, then the stranger-relationality of neoliberal economics extends the glorification of the humanitarian celebrity to the United States Everyman. And what is it that this Everyman bequeaths onto others by offering capitalist charity or by micro-financing entrepreneurial efforts? Empowerment.

In rhetoric and composition, empowerment is largely understood as a complex dynamic that can be manifested in numerous ways under various if daunting constraints and conditions. Consider, for instance, Michelle Hall Kells, Valerie Balester, and Victor Villanueva’s *Latino/a Discourses: On Language, Identity and Literacy Education*. Essays throughout the volume dramatize versions of empowerment that re-imagine relationality to honor the linguistic diversity Latino/a students bring to writing classrooms and to challenge the linguistic racism that still permeates mainstream culture. In the name of such empowerment, Villanueva celebrates the capacity of discourse to bear witness to diverse cultural legacies. Recognizing the multiplicity of differences across Latino/a discourses, he urges readers not only to honor differences but also to bear witness to shared experiences of struggle, exile, displacement, and servitude. In coming together to understand their Latino/a discourses, Villanueva argues that he and other readers of Latino/a Discourses can receive the respect that is rightly theirs.

But neoliberalism has a voracious appetite. It gets its fill by co-opting the values we care about—such as empowerment—for its own gain. James Gee, Glynda Hull and Colin Lankshear explain this phenomenon in relation to the fast capitalist economic theory that promotes neoliberalism:

[P]art of the way in which fast capitalism texts “grab us” is that they use words that name things which nearly all of us like but which, on reflection, are seen to mean slightly (and sometimes *very*) different things in fast capitalism texts than they might mean to many of us: words like “liberation”, “empowerment”, “trust”, “vision”, “collaboration” [...].  
(29)

With this slight of hand, current economic conditions go unquestioned. Behind the scenes, however, those conditions not only support the system that glorifies financial generosity but also intensify the need for its display.<sup>4</sup> Worse yet, neoliberalism threatens the dignity of everyone positioned on the spectrum from the wealthy few

who benefit from it to the increasing number of poor people it presses down on and often downright exploits. As Gee, Hull and Lankshear point out, neoliberalism is inherently insulting; instead of paying people what they're worth, it offers membership in a club where the privilege of membership is the honor of working harder for less. Rather than live with the recognition of how insulting this logic is, the tendency is to accept the allure of neoliberalism's magnetism. Neoliberalism insists we must agree to both the new meanings accorded our core values and to the loyalty it demands of us; otherwise, we are all fools. The siren song of neoliberalism is that to have any dignity, we must keep re-inscribing the neoliberal script.

We can glimpse the bankrupt stranger relationality of neoliberalism through the work of transnational feminists who offer careful analyses of foreign aid to poor women. Their deepest critique is that this neoliberal discourse foregrounds and glorifies the agency of those giving the aid without recognizing the numerous material and intangible ways women already contribute to the health of their communities, often under the most dire of circumstances. For instance, in *Networking Arguments: Rhetoric, Transnational Feminism, and Public Policy Writing*, Rebecca Dingo explains that such aid tends:

- to be top-down, welfare-based and basic-needs oriented
- to focus on individual women and their choices as agents for economic change
- to make standard particular gendered ways of acting and to homogenize women's experiences
- to frame the empowerment of women as a means toward an end—particularly a nation's economic stability, well-being, and global contribution
- to be linear in concept whereby technological advancement, industrial development, and formal labor participation mark a nation's success. (cf. Rowlands 12-13)

Neoliberal economic policies tend to put women in “developing” countries in a double bind, responsible for both preserving the integrity of the family unit and for gaining employment outside the home to secure the family's economic independence (Dingo, “Linking” 491). In this context, neoliberalism fails to recognize that efforts to integrate women into the local and global economics do not always alleviate women's oppression. It also overlooks the fact that women's well-being is affected by a complex and nuanced relationship among development practices, local culture, geopolitical factors, gender relationships, and resources (Grewal 23).

And yet the stranger-relationality that neoliberal foreign aid invokes is popular and alluring. It appears, for instance, on our campuses when universities sponsor and then promote students' social entrepreneurial ventures where the deepest purple robe of agency is clearly wrapped around generous and concerned students who have reached out and made possible the initiative of individual enterprising others. For instance, at one of our schools this past fall, the administration circulated a Sharepoint slideshow as an exemplar for student groups to follow when submitting their ideas for a social entrepreneurial contest. In this exemplar, the innovative students were individuated if highly stylized as urban, successful movers and shakers: the young women in short skirts and long flowing hair, the young men in Miami-Vice haircuts and deep pocketed suit jackets. The students' plan offered to “inoculate Africa” against meningitis—the population of which was represented not as people

let alone as individual persons with experiences and expertise, but rather invoked repeatedly through a map of the entire continent.

Neoliberalism supports the free market fiction that drives privatization, sidestepping the fact that this very model is in worldwide crisis (cf. Solomon; Stiglitz 295). The cultural workers that matter to this discourse are—as Wells points out—celebrity politicians whom we, as global citizens, are asked to consume or mimic, as an alternative to seeking out and listening to the people most affected by the international policies and transnational practices under discussion.

In sum, then, the student rhetors in this study had to contend with how *noblesse oblige*, celebrity refeudalism, and neoliberal economics mutually reinforce the distinctive self-other relationship that circulates in aid-to-Africa discourse. In this script, the liveliest actors are the benevolent givers of the aid. The script masks the givers' own power and privilege by casting it—even glorifying it—as benevolence. In order for these givers to remain benevolent, the hierarchy that structures this relationality has to remain in place. Thus, the giver of aid may say and write things that speak to the underlying issues that the aid is meant to assuage, but only in ways that reinforce the self-other relationship and preserve the hierarchical structure that holds that relationship in place. Exemplifying this dynamic was the July 2007 issue of *Vanity Fair* that Bono guest-edited, “unapologetically promot[ing] status, capitalism and conspicuous consumption in the name of ‘helping’” (Richey and Ponte 713-14). Lisa Ann Richey and Stephano Ponte explicate the fallacious logic behind this stance:

Given the legacy of slavery and colonialism and the history of extraction of resources and supply of armaments to the continent, it is difficult to imagine a time when the rich have not been interested in Africa. Assuming that Africa is far from the minds, lives, and income-sources of the rich readers of *Vanity Fair* contributes to the myth that there is no real linkage between the rich and the poor, between the entrepreneurs and Africa, or between capitalism and disease. (713)

Such discourse “mask[s...] the social and environmental relations of trade and product that underpin poverty, inequality and disease” (711).

Within this rhetorical vortex, the underlying structures that perpetuate injustices do not change. This is Amarpal Dwaliwal's argument: “The inability of radical democratic inclusion politics to deal with inclusion retaining peripheralization is a key limitation, especially given that, in many liberal democratic societies, many subordinated groups have been ‘included’ by being accorded certain formal rights like the right to vote” (44). Such a limitation also lurks in international aid. For such aid may profess inclusion—hopes of bringing more people to the center—and, in fact, this desire to be inclusive may be a genuine sentiment. But this version of inclusion is an invitation that those at the margins conform to norms, values, and practices that maintain the pre-existing privileges, deprivations, and power relations. Dwaliwal continues:

If inclusionary attempts often reaffirm “a hegemonic core to which the margins are added without any significant destabilization of that core”

or continue to valorize the very center that is problematic to begin with, it is clear that the motivation to include needs questioning. The governing assumptions or conceptual logic guiding gestures to include must be interrogated in order to grapple with oppression in the form of appropriation, commodification, fetishization, and exoticization, to name a few. (44)

Thus, these norms of stranger-relatedness that circulate in discourses of *noblesse oblige*, celebrity refeudalism, and neoliberal economics pose a serious challenge for the rhetors in this study.

### The Miss-Gambia Action-Research Project

In June of 2009, a group of Gambian-American college writers hosted the fourth annual Miss Gambia-USA Pageant. The event was attended by a loosely organized network of strangers. The African American attorney from Harlem who sat next to Jarvis and Long, for instance, had read about the event on Facebook and had come to check it out. In the audience of just under eighty people, some of the African nationals had come to the U.S. not by way of Gambia but Nigeria or Senegal. That evening in June—a few weeks after finals week for some and graduation for others—was also a reunion of sorts for college friends offering an excuse to get together.

As is clear from its motto—crown a miss, educate a child—the 2009 Miss Gambia-USA Pageant focused public attention and resources on educational opportunities for young women in Gambia, a small Muslim country in West Africa that runs in the middle of Senegal along the Gambia River.<sup>5</sup> Fye and her Gambian siblings and cousins who participated in the event in various ways are Muslim, as is 90% of the Gambian population. Public primary and secondary schools in Gambia are largely Muslim; typically, even small village schools will have their own leading imam. Although traditionally families could afford only to educate their sons, since the late 1980s the government has subsidized the education of girls through the primary grades. And yet, even though it is subsidized, primary education is not to be taken for granted, especially among girls whose traditional roles keep them at home. Traditional roles aside, affording daughters' schooling beyond these years taxes many poor families (Perfect 430). In the rural region of the Gambia called Barra, some of the madrassas for orphan boys make daily stints of begging a condition for enrollment. In real and persistent ways, drug and sex trades threaten the exploitation of poor children. We are not suggesting the education of girls is politically neutral or uncomplicated, but it does defy the commodification of them. As a contestant, who finished high school here in the U.S. after doing most of her schooling in Gambia, announced during the pageant, finishing high school was her “most noteworthy accomplishment.”

The Miss-Gambia USA organization promotes the education of girls by raising money for students' tuition, by providing school supplies and books for a community library, and by sending the winner of the Miss Gambia pageant each December or January of her “reigning year” to a set of schools in the Barra region to talk to students about her education and to encourage them in theirs.

We do not contend that this 2009 Miss Gambia-USA Pageant did or could expunge from its event all consumer-driven impulses toward international aid. Discourse doesn't work that way. Nor do we mean to suggest that the pageant is entirely free from prevailing inclinations toward aid, or that it set out to exemplify some radical brand of neo-Marxist politics. But the pageant did actively negotiate these norms of relatedness as it invented discursive space where global citizens could venture together to name—to co-construct—some of the terms of a yet uncharted future.

### Turning *Noblesse Oblige* on its Head

If *noblesse oblige* makes benevolent, honorable generosity the responsibility of persons of high birth or rank, then the Miss Gambia USA pageant began subverting this self-other norm the moment the event's project manager, Sutaye Jarju,<sup>6</sup> launched into his invocation. Jarju's epideictic rhetoric turned on the theme of nobility. His remarks acknowledged that nobility was accessible not only to everyone in the room but also to the people on whose behalf they had gathered. Jarju framed the pageant as an “auspicious occasion,” one that “stands against oppression and injustice” in his home country by standing for the education of girls. He continued:

There is nothing more noble than helping young people to turn their dreams into realities. There's nothing nobler than trying to inspire young people to become great future leaders. And that is what makes this program very unique, as it is run by young people ourselves.

Echoing Martin Luther King and John F. Kennedy, Jarju concluded: “We must live together as brothers or we will all perish as fools. [...] Each time a man stands up for an ideal that improves the lives of others or strikes out against injustice and oppression, he stands for hope. And this is what the Miss Gambia pageant stands for.”

In conventional aid-to-Africa discourse, participants are included under the aura of nobility as long as the celebrity is there bestowing empowerment onto others. This is false or cheap inclusion Dhaliwal criticizes in her analysis of the “relationships between discourses of race, rights, representation, and democracy” (43). Such inclusion is temporary and contingent on the glorification of the capital-S Self acting against the backdrop of the passive other. But the nobility Jarju referred to changes the very criterion of nobility. Participants are noble not because there was a celebrity among us but because of the ways we enact our concern for the well-being of others. This is driven home when, toward the end of his remarks, Jarju quoted the remarks of a young girl in the Gambia whose education has been underwritten by the Miss Gambia-USA organization. He drew attention to this young girl's comments in the context of a slideshow he introduced:

You will hear young people speaking. What those young people are speaking about is what they want to become after they finish school. Gratefully, I was not surprised when one of them said that “I want to become Miss Gambia.” She said she wanted to become Miss Gambia to

help other young people like them. That personally brought so much joy to me because I came to understand, Oh, young people understand exactly what we are trying to do [...] and they want to do that for other young people. And I believe that is a trend that each of us must take.

The mutuality the girl expresses here humanizes givers and recipients as it interrogates the division between the two.

## Currency and Capital

According to the logic of global capitalism that governs international aid, “work produces the value that is itself the sense and substance of this system (i.e., capital) and by which alone the system is reproduced” (De Lissovoy and McLaren 163). Aid to Africa participates in this reproduction when it masks “the social and environmental relations of trade and production that underpin poverty” (Richey and Ponte 711) by selling to consumers the allure of the Bono-fide “cool quotient” (711). As a corporate strategy, “celebrities and consumer-citizens unite [...] to do good by dressing well” (712), whereby “perpetuat[ing] the disengagement of ‘needy’ recipients in order for us to become benefactors with bling” (726). Thus, in marketing an antidote to Western white-collar workers’ alienation under the guise of “heroic shopping” (713), the logic driving this discourse further “alienates [...] imaginative potentiality from the subject and shuts the latter down into a finished and singular positivity” (De Lissovoy and McLaren 163).

In contrast, the Miss Gambia USA pageant circulates a relationship among labor, meaningful work, and cultural capital that is marked not by the transcendent “hard commerce’ sex appeal” of Project (RED)<sup>TM</sup> (Richey and Ponte 725), but by the situated accounts of ordinary people building meaningful and purposeful lives with and for others (Wood 230). Consider, for instance, the introduction that the Mistress of Ceremonies, Yahar Ceesay, extended to one of the pageant’s judges, Mr. Wilson, a professor at a nearby college. Wilson was honored with the opportunity to serve as a judge not because he himself is such a snappy dresser or has some distinctive fashion sense that would qualify him to somehow evaluate the contestants’ performances. Rather, as Ceesay explained, he was selected for the pageant because of his track record working—over the course of his “thirty seven years” a college professor—to put young Gambian-Americans in touch with educational programs and other resources that they have found genuinely beneficial. Ceesay announced: “He is actually my mentor, so I’m very proud to have him here tonight.” She crafted Wilson’s introduction in terms of these programs and resources, and made information about them available orally over the course of the evening and in print through the flyers distributed at the pageant’s end.

Likewise, before announcing the pageant’s winner, Miss District of Columbia Sarena Royce explained her involvement, as an American college student, in the Gambia where both she and Fye had served as field researchers. Royce served as a researcher for a community assessment project sponsored by the International Red Cross; Fye as fieldworker for a research project sponsored by the Sajuka School to investigate child- and drug abuse in the Gambia and its relationships to children

not going to school, the results of which were submitted to Save the Children Representatives in the Gambia. Royce used her time on stage to refer to this research project and the ways in which the information the children provided is shaping the design and delivery of a new community hospital.

Against the backdrop of the Western slave trade with deep roots in the Gambia—home to the ancestral heritage that Alex Haley retraces in his epic book *Roots*—this move merges “experiential understandings” with information about at least some of the “historical [and economic] forces” that perpetuate poverty in the Gambia (Scatamburlo-D’Annibale and McLaren 147). By circulating such information, Royce identified publicly some of the mechanisms that perpetuate the conditions of poverty in which so many young girls go to school. There was nothing sanctimonious about her delivery. In her remaining seconds on stage before turning the microphone over to the newly crowned Miss Gambia USA, she asked us all: “Anyone have the recipe for chicken yassa?”—the chicken-and-rice dish served to everyone who gathered that evening for the pageant.

Interspersed throughout the pageant, such speeches described in material terms ways that real people are building full adult lives that include professional and personal commitments and projects in the Gambia—even as they maintain close ties and projects here in the U.S. So doing, participants modeled how people in relative institutional privilege can speak wisely and persuasively for social change (Flower, *Community* 135). Moreover, these speeches challenge the static binary of more conventional aid-based self-other norms by charting reciprocal movement between the cities in the U.S. where pageant participants and members of the audience now live for much if not all of a given year and “back home in Gambia.” So it’s not that—as in *Blind Side*—the Sandra Bullock character rescues a poor misunderstood young Black man from an urban waste land by drawing him into her nuclear family values and practices, nor that capital-O Others are the ones held responsible for staying behind to make said improvements. Instead, this reciprocal movement manifests itself in ways imaginable only in the peculiar climate of transnationalism (Dingo, “Securing” 178).

## Disrupting the Hegemonic Core

The rigid self-other norms that prevail in international aid discourse are met in traditional Gambian culture by equally fixed gender roles and expectations—roles and expectations that are, rather ironically, both fixed under long-established custom and under siege by neoliberal economic-development rhetoric (Dingo, “Linking” 492). Of the pageant’s most important rhetorical work disrupting this intersection of aid and custom, two acts are particularly significant: a hip-hop dance and the contestants’ skit.

*The hip-hop dance.* Four Gambian-American young men known collectively as the Ndaga Boys performed a dance in which Jarju, playing a village leader, or *alkali*, in the Gambia, comes across the young men dancing in the street. In the performance, the *alkali* vehemently objects to the men’s American-style of hip hop for being too sexually suggestive and threatens to shut down the performance altogether. The young men reply—in dance, of course—that traditional dance can be just as

suggestive and proceed to illustrate just how suggestive these traditional dances moves can be. To the dancers' highly stylized kicks and thrusts, the audience erupts in laughter, and for a while the music can't be heard over the din of applause. In the end, the young men's skill at performing traditional dance steps succeeds in winning over the *alkali*.

*The contestants' skit.* Four young women performed a play—also set in a village in the Gambia. The dramatization begins with the first daughter calling her mother into a discussion about the daughter attending secondary school. At first, the mother resists—demonstratively—insisting that what's needed is not her daughter attending more schooling but the daughter showing up at market each day to sell the family's farm produce. The mother and daughter's disagreement escalates. But the daughter invokes her rights to education under UNICEF, and she insists that her mother's plan for her could leave her destitute should she, after marriage, be widowed or her husband fall ill. In the end the daughter's argument is so persuasive that the mother then takes her daughter's argument and uses it to engage the a second mother-character in a dialogue about *her* daughter's education.

The performative rhetoric here works less according to the propositional logic associated with deliberation and more according to the logic of disruption that, for instance, Gwendolyn Pough associates with hip hop and “wrecking.” For Pough wrecking is that instance of hip hop that connotes “fighting, recreation, skill, or boasting” (65). In *Check it While I Wreck it*, she observes that wrecking has been frequently used to call attention to the work African American rhetors have traditionally had to accomplish before public deliberation even becomes possible.<sup>7</sup> Were the pageant orchestrated primarily to promote access to education, it might be said to have worked according to the democratic-lite model that Dhaliwal associates with cultural appropriation, drawing previously excluded people into its hegemonic core. But these performances did more than accommodate difference by arguing to extend education to previously excluded girls; rather, these performances disrupted simultaneously the status quo of both international aid and traditional custom. They did so through the careful interplay of what in the study of radical street theater goes under the name of “authenticating” and “rhetorical” conventions.

The orchestrated tension between “authenticating” and “rhetorical conventions” is theorized by Baz Kershaw in *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theater as Cultural Intervention*. Drawing on the work of Elizabeth Burns, Kershaw explains that *rhetorical conventions* “secure an agreement to conjure up a fictitious world [...]; the means by which the audience is persuaded to accept characters and situations whose validity is ephemeral and bounded to the theater”; *authenticating conventions* “imply a connection to the world of human action of which the theater is only a part. [...] Their function is, therefore, to authenticate the play” (25).

Within these two pageant performances, the authenticating conventions were affiliated with Gambian culture: traditional dress in both performances; traditional dance for the Ndaga Boys, a script in Wolof language for the contestants' skit. In both performances, the rhetorical conventions were those that conjured up worlds where young people could engage elders in sustained and focused conversations about cultural norms and institutional practices that have limited women's options. In both cases dramatic tension had to be achieved within the tenor of the pageant.

Kershaw's point is not simply that political street theater often makes use of authenticating and rhetorical conventions or that street theater regularly puts these conventions in circulation together, but rather that the interventional technique *per se* is a rhetorical move—a logic, if you will—that deliberately strives to limit the interpretations available to the audience by orchestrating the interplay of the two sets of conventions to the point of “rupture” (Kershaw 33-35). The point of disruption is to perform a new way in the world—an invention—that otherwise would not have seemed possible. This is the premise on which Kershaw assigns efficacy to radical street theater: “For the ‘possible worlds’ encountered in the performance are carried back by the audience into the ‘real’ socio-political world in ways which may influence subsequent action” (37).

For the Ndaga Boys, disruption allowed invoking a world where young men can speak back to biases they find hypocritical and unfounded (cf. Cintron 92); a world where men actively support the education of girls and young women without either taking over or feeling emasculated. If—as the transnational feminists' Gender and Development movement suggests—men have important yet under-elaborated roles to play in enfranchisement of women in developing countries, the Ngada Boys' hearty participation in the pageant enacts a kind of sharing of responsibility for the current and future well being of sisters, daughters, cousins, and female friends.

For the pageant's contestants, the skit's disruption allowed them to invoke a world where women of different generations engage together in the shared use of reason (cf. Habermas 24); a world where daughters are so persuasive that their mothers use the arguments they hear their daughters making to appeal to and persuade other mothers (cf. Fraser 123; Young 52). Some readers may wonder whether the skit, by virtue of being staged on a kitchen floor back in Gambia, didn't re-inscribe women to the most limited of traditional roles. But this reading would enormously reduce both the possibility that “the home” can serve as a site of political resistance (hooks 32) and the rhetorical power the skit recognizes in the authenticating conventions of the lively Wolof of ordinary Gambian women (cf. Young 71).

## Conclusion

This study asked: *How do rhetors call together a public to address issues of shared concern when the prevailing norms for public deliberation thwart rhetorical engagement by undercutting the agency and expertise of those most affected by the practices under question?* We've contended that the pageant reconfigured the norms for stranger-relationality in aid-to-Africa discourse itself. We've tried to show how the rhetors evoked and enacted pageantry, prayer, theatrics, traditional tribal dance, hip-hop, and call-and-response, and moved among Wolof, Arabic, and English to expose and to interrogate both Islamic and Western cultural gender expectations and to embody some of the hidden and under-acknowledged ways that these expectations limit options for girls and women. The intensely hybrid discourse that resulted is distinctly multivocal and performative, one that reconfigured norms of stranger-relationality as it transformed women's daily experiences into grist for inquiry and action.

As we've tried to understand what these rhetors were up against, we've sought also to underscore the significance of these students' cultural work. Of course, such work does not and cannot flip the script on aid to Africa once and for all. Rather, such rhetorical performance works with tenacious persistence that does—at the same time—have a ripple effect on real bodies. For as M. M. Bakhtin reminds us: “The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, can not fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue” (276).

The most immediate ripple effect of the pageant was the assembly and care of what John Dewey might call the collective, public We. Dewey writes: “But ‘we’ and ‘our’ exist only when the consequences of combined action are perceived and become an object of desire and effort” (151). Consider that this event lasted for five and a half hours—long into the evening, and most of us had long drives ahead of us still that night. After the performance, when people perhaps more typically would have eagerly packed up and gone home, another public configuration emerged. Members of what had been “the audience” for the pageant reconfigured themselves to seek out people whose comments over dinner or whose questions during the Q-and-A portion of the pageant had piqued one another's interests. This public discourse was distinctly multivocal, just as the pageant itself had been. To someone arriving late to the event, the mix of Wolof, French, and various World Englishes under the acoustical constraints of a high school multipurpose room may have seemed cacophonous. However, a local public is under no obligation to subscribe to the terms of even the best normative theories. We believe the din instantiated on empirical grounds the “untidy communicative practices” that shape local vernacular public life (Hauser 275) under transnationalism—that is, a publicity that Gee, Hull and Lankshear called for in *The New Work Order*:

This new Discourse would disavow the consumer determinism of the new capitalism. It would argue for the reinvigoration of the local as against the “faux” local of the new capitalism. It would see critique as necessary to real learning and thus as part and parcel of critical thinking and the empowerment of workers. Most importantly, it would envision a new “global citizenship” in terms of which we all begin to care about the members of the cooperative in Nicaragua and about the poor in our own communities—as being linked to each other and ourselves—if only to avoid degradation of all our spaces and lives. (166)

In the moments immediately following the pageant, a young man grabbed a microphone and created a stage area for himself on the gymnasium floor. He performed a raucous, impromptu hip-hop tribute to his home country located just north of the Gambia: Senegal. Between stanzas of his song, several people stopped to talk to him about his boyhood there. Another circle formed around Royce, asking her to elaborate on the findings she had earlier mentioned from her research in the Gambia; an elderly woman slipped her a half sheet of paper where she had jotted the recipe for chicken yassa. Fye and Ceesay were joined by ever-growing circles of aunts,

mothers, cousins, African American college friends, and African nationals, teachers and friends to hear about what was next for them as they mapped their young adult lives between the Gambia or other west African countries, and New England. This discussion had a distinctive theme: transnational womanhood; and, more specifically, how we could be together in charting and supporting those new paths and projects. For each such path or project entails new risks and puts existing relationships under new kinds of pressure—as well as opens up new possibilities. These conversations were lively and engaging, and came to a close only when the night janitor jingled his keys and flicked the lights to signal that the multipurpose room was now his to reclaim.

The pageant also reconfigured real bodies by offering further form and function to the young Gambian-American men's interest in the well-being of their sisters, nieces, cousins, and neighbors. The Ngada Boys' participation, for instance, included not only dancing at the pageant but also producing the video of the event, burning it to DVDs that they have then circulated, and maintaining the organization's Web presence. These latter projects have helped to scaffold the commitment and imagination of an increasing number of young people. For Fye, this reconfiguration has been one of the most significant effects of the pageant—one proving to have some of the greatest staying power.

Further discursive ripples inspired the administration at Jarvis's college to offer scholarships to twelve girls at the Sajuka School each year for the foreseeable future and to extend those scholarships to their college after the recipients' high school graduations.<sup>8</sup> Within this framework, Jarvis and Fye have since launched a program to take a dozen to fifteen college students to the Gambia in January or May of each subsequent year to work for the Sajuka School and to produce jointly directed documentaries featuring lives of Sajuka School students.<sup>9</sup> (For the method and curriculum shaping these documentary projects, see Long, Jarvis, and Deerheart Raymond.) Significantly, as a result of the pageant and the work it did to challenge norms of stranger relationality, the educational training for students preparing to go to the Gambia to work with Fye and Jarvis has been reconceptualized. Along with reading more familiar texts on humanitarian aid such as *Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission To Fight Terrorism And Build Nations . . . One School At A Time* and *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide* and others available through UNESCO and Red Cross, students read together this essay, as well as many of the sources cited in this piece—texts like those by Dingo and by Richey and Ponte—to help college students and faculty members name, evaluate, and negotiate their own motivations, stances, and identities as members of a globally situated, locally positioned, public We.

## Endnotes

1. We'd like to thank Linda Flower, Jennifer Clifton, Shannon Carter, and Deborah Mutnick for responding to previous versions of this essay. We are grateful to Tim Dawson for helping us see and articulate the play of authenticating and rhetorical conventions at work in the Ngada Boys' hip-hop performance and the contestants' skit.

2. Martin Luther King Jr., bell hooks, and Cornel West belong to what Keith Gilyard terms a “prophetic tradition” in deep democracy—a tradition both insisting that structural injustices perpetuate attitudes and practices that dehumanize all involved, and also demanding engaged efforts to hold the structures accountable to the people who experience daily violations (Gilyard 59).

3. Bono’s less celebrated name is Paul David Hewson.

4. Gee, Hull, and Lankshear explicitly treat the relationship between global privatization and the exploitation of the poor. See pages 35, 67, 150.

5. In the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Islam was superimposed on a dynamic matriarchal culture. In 1816, the Gambia became a British colony—thus, English is still its official language—and has had a turbulent political history, gaining independence from Britain in 1965.

6. Pseudonyms are used throughout this analysis.

7. Because in the U.S. Black people have historically been invisible “in the eyes of the governing body and society at large,” Pough notes, “spectacle becomes key; [... s]pectacle and cultural representation are the first steps in bringing a disruption, the first steps in bringing wreck” (21). Harkening back to the Black Panther Party, Pough calls attention to the ways that they and other Black groups used spectacle to “renegotiate the public sphere in order to claim power for themselves” (22).

8. The 2009 Miss-Gambia USA pageant helped launch several scholarship programs and fund a library at the Sajuka Elementary School in the Barra region, the only non-madrassa school in its region that enrolls girls as well as boys. The pageant was also instrumental in Fye’s and Jarvis’s efforts to create the Sajuka Community Development Project, an exchange program and partnership between Fye’s undergraduate college, Bay Path College, and the Sajuka Elementary School in Barra.

9. Fye has since graduated from college. For her current job, she travels regularly between Nigeria and New England. She’s been able to organize her work for the months of January and May so she can join Jarvis and the college students in Barra, the Gambia, for weeks at a time.

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