

Article

Crisis and Consumption: ‘Saving’ the Poor and the Seductions of Capitalism

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Abstract: This article examines the crisis of capitalist seduction through the lens of online shopping platforms that raise funds for international assistance organizations and development celebrity advertising. Consumer-based giving has altered the commodity fetish into cliché, subsequently masking the capitalist produced crisis of endemic poverty and global inequality. Celebrity supported consumer-based giving and product advertising are used to illustrate the seductions of capitalism. This article argues that international assistance organizations are embedded in the substance and lifeblood of capitalisms’ dependence on inequality and poverty to generate profits/wealth. Consumer driven assistance remains a pervasive crisis hidden by seductive shopping platforms camouflaged as compassion.

Keywords: capitalism; gender; body; seduction; international assistance; economic development

1. Introduction

Listening to *Democracy Now*, on National Public Radio (NPR) during their annual fund raising drive, renowned journalist, Amy Goodman was hard at work trying to convince listeners to call in with their financial support for NPR programs. The program prior to the fundraising pitch was an interview with Jeremy Scahill and Glenn Greewald, who wrote and contributed to the book *The Assassination Complex: Inside the Government’s Secret Drone Warfare Program*. I was struck by the intersecting crises in the discussion of United States (US) militarism and target killing through the use of drones, and the less obvious crisis (and not identified as such by Goodman) of fundraising attached to consumer-capitalist inequalities and commodity fetishism. At one moment Goodman was interviewing the journalists about US drone technology and then a few minutes later she was fundraising, offering to share “dinner and a show” in New York City to anyone willing (and able) to donate \$1500 to NPR. While dinner and a show in New York may not seem problematic or a situation of crisis, in this article I disrupt the normative niceties of consumer-based fundraising in the US in order to render visible the banality of gendered and racial othering along with the everyday cyclical crisis of profound and growing economic inequalities. Through a critical examination of virtual-gift giving and consumer-directed marketing by international assistance organizations to generate funds, this article highlights consumer-based giving as a form of capitalist seduction. By linking consumerism and commodities (both material and abstract) with international assistance and development, shopping becomes situated as a method of altruism and individual choice. Predominantly black and brown female bodies are used to represent the needy other deemed worthy of assistance, thus gendering and racializing a general imagination of global poverty.

The functionality of seduction is investigated by examining the ways in which international non-governmental humanitarian and economic development assistance organizations represent bodies through different forms of “ethical consumption” within online consumer-based-giving platforms.

This analysis will juxtapose the representational framing of the development subject (both bodies and places) with that of the development celebrity. The development celebrity's body is a commodity in and of itself, a brand, and a representational space upon which consumptive expectations and moral claims are simultaneously made. By juxtaposing the representative framing of "individuals in need" with celebrities who advocate "in the name of" those individuals, multiple seductions are revealed: (1) the view that non-governmental assistance is the answer to global poverty and inequality rather than being a crucial part of economic inequalities; (2) shopping-as-giving becomes framed as an ethical and moral activity; and (3) economies of desire are mapped onto the celebrity body to simultaneously sell and normalize consumerism and humanitarian or development assistance. These seductions divert attention from the structural violence of racial, gender, and economic inequalities by suggesting individuation and personal choice through consumer-based giving as an agent of change, rather than an integral layer within the structures of consumer capitalism.

The discussion section of this article provides a context for considering consumer-based giving and development branding through online platforms and celebrity branding as an ongoing crisis that reinforces inequality and contemporary capitalism, while seducing shoppers through compassionate consumption (Kuehn 2009). The (In)visibility section considers seduction as a central aspect of consumer-based giving and "ethical" or "compassionate" consumption that has transferred the commodity fetish into cliché, subsequently masking consumer-capitalist as a solution rather than endemic to the crisis of economic inequalities globally. For the purposes of this article, I focus specifically on consumer capitalism and the neoliberalization of international assistance, aid, and development. I identify these forms of capitalism as crises based on various forms of structural violence that underscore enduring inequalities further widening the divide between the wealthy and the poor, allowing the privilege to thrive and the unfortunate to die.

2. Discussion

I focus on seduction in order to reflexively examine how the system of international aid and development borrows from consumer capitalism to encourage charitable giving. Seduction is further required to support the mythologies of prosperity and progress associated with late consumer capitalism keeping many bound to travel on the road to economic promise, which remains pot marked by obstacles that prevent the actualization of this optimistic economic potential (Berlant 2011). Economic prosperity is identified as a potential outgrowth of neoliberal capitalism, however, massive consumption and increased wealth require poverty. Neoliberal capitalism meticulously follows political conflict, "natural" disasters, and endemic poverty to attend to humans "in crisis" while simultaneously ensuring future profit making for the privileged few on the backs of the impoverished many (Klein 2008; Loewenstein 2015). Neoliberal economics and globalization generate various forms of labor exploitation and uneven forms of global integration (Harvey 2005; Sparke 2012).

Global and localized inequalities include the displacement of individuals from low-income neighborhoods and slums for more aesthetically pleasing and market-rate housing (Ghertner 2015). Localized insecurities brought forth through international development and geopolitics have displaced people from their access to land and resources (Casolo and Doshi 2013; Yeh 2013; Mollett 2014). This has been further marked by an increase in global mobility due to economic need, existing inequalities being reproduced within assistance organizations, and the accumulation and extraction of resources by corporations both with and without land dispossessions (Blunt 2007; Sangtin and Nagar 2006; Paudel 2016). Neoliberal capitalism is also intricately intertwined with governance and the various forms of violence associated with state sovereignty, security, and insecurity (Fluri 2014). In contrast, researchers such as Anaya Roy and James Ferguson offer plausible alternatives generated from the global south rather than the global north (Roy 2010; Ferguson 2015). In many respects, critical scholars in geography and related social science disciplines consider contemporary aid and development under the umbrella of neoliberal capitalism writ large to be in and of itself *a crisis* (Hyndman 2011). Many

aspects of this crisis remain hidden or sidelined by the seductive veneer of hope, promise, and good intentions that bolster the façade of multi-national assistance and development organizations.

Despite academic concerns and various threats and resistances to capitalism—along with the counter or alternative forms of living outside of or ancillary to the capitalist system (Gibson-Graham 2006)—capitalism persists as a dominant global economic structure. Scholars illustrate the ways in which many organizations, in the pursuit of capital, abuse and use bodies, spaces, and environments toward economic gain or growth, without taking into consideration other forms of social, political, and economic exchange or ways of being (Lawson 2007; Povinelli 2011). The ills of consumer capitalism have been well researched, however, the softer, nebulous, and abstract devices such as desire and seduction require further scrutiny. Cindi Katz identifies economies of desire as part of the spatial and situational transformations that occur as part of economic restructuring through international development (Katz 2004). Desire has been used as a regular feature of advertising and consumptive seduction, often manipulating racial, gender, and class stereotypes to solicit consumers to purchase products (Hennion et al. 1989, 1993; Belk et al. 2003; Hooks 2006; Oza 2006; Parameswaran and Cardoza 2009). Specific attention to economies of desire and the seductions attached to them offer a method for investigating the a/effective mechanisms of seduction embedded within donation structures and situated through online shopping platforms.

Linking consumer capitalism with international assistance and development has been a hallmark of fundraising campaigns for over two decades. For example, the RED program was a project that incorporated well-known companies (Gap, Apple, Armani) to brand products with the RED label in order to encourage individuals to purchase these products by promising to send a percentage of the profits to fight HIV-AIDS in Africa. The celebrity Bono and internationally recognized development experts, Jeffery Sacks and Paul Farmer, also endorsed the RED program (Richey and Ponte 2011). A critical examination of the RED campaign demonstrates the ways in which this program strengthened positive attitudes toward consumption, reinforced individual brand identity and the objectification of bodies and locations identified as lacking or in need of resources (Richey and Ponte 2011). This program worked to distance corporations from being associated with the structural conditions that perpetuate the continued crisis of global economic inequalities, cyclical and protracted poverty and disassociated the means of production from existing forms of low wage labor exploitation. The idea of shopping as an act of assistance seeks to place the consumer on a moral high ground afforded to her/him by way of his/her economic advantage, purchasing power, choice, and the autonomous actions afforded by these privileges. This further feeds into savior myths that position individuals (largely in the global north) as economic heroes assisting the less fortunate (largely in the global south).

One example of hero narratives embedded into international assistance can be found in the post 9/11 USA-led mission to save Afghan women. The Taliban regime caused an indisputable social, economic, and political crisis in Afghanistan, particularly for women. Thus, the US-led invasion and occupation of Afghanistan included the mantra of saving Afghan women through the a/effective use of political discourse, humanitarian aid, and development assistance. Saving Afghan women from the Taliban in many respects manifested into a new crisis through the transition of these saving women narratives into political and economic currency. The currency of Afghan women's representational liberation was exchanged among international aid/development organizations (Fluri and Lehr 2016). For example, some organizations hired Afghan women in an effort to appear more attractive to large donors such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). In other cases, organizations sold goods made by Afghan women, by representing women's labor as liberation. In the most egregious cases, internationals used stories or experiences of Afghan women for their own personal economic profiteering or professional gain (Fluri and Lehr 2016). Guy Debord's conceptualization of social spectacle theoretically situates how media and discursive geopolitics create consumer-based illusions (Debord 1994). Due to the consistent and continued decline of use value, Debord argues that workers are incorporated as laborers who must submit to the parameters set by capitalist structures or die. For consumers, Debord states: "The real

consumer has become a consumer of illusions . . . the spectacle thus becomes a generalized expression of this illusion" (Debord 1994, p. 32). In the case of Afghan women, the "consumer's illusion" became the imagined ability of consumers to "assist" in Afghan women's liberation by purchasing goods made by some of these women. This illusionary form of consumption was solidified through the discursive representation of Afghan women's labor as a conduit for social and political liberation. This depiction of liberation became a marketing tool for the sale of Afghan-women-made goods. Therefore, the Afghan-woman-made-commodity, represented as a material expression of her liberation, becomes a representative spectacle and is thus the "generalized expression of this illusion" (Fluri and Lehr 2016, p. 119; Debord 1994, p. 32). Malkki identifies this as a form of imagination or imaginary of the needy other by those who seek or "need" to help others in faraway places. She identifies how the imagination erases the division between subject and object, melding the signified and the signifier as one (Malkki 2015). Thus, imagination and illusion of consumer-based assistance or liberation in the case of Afghanistan manifested a form of gender currency. Women's labor-as-liberation was exchanged—often for professional gain or personal profit—by organizations and individuals providing rather than receiving assistance (Fluri and Lehr 2016). Gender, race, and location (global south) provide a representational frame of economic deprivation and deserving vulnerable subjects in need of interventional assistance from outside their communities (Fluri and Lehr 2016; Butler 2010).

I use the examples above to reinforce how myths of saving, whether for social, political, or economic liberation, are tied to a particular framing through the gender and race of the *needy other*. The idea of "ethical consumption" frames the prevailing understanding of assistance, responsibility, or obligation as an individual choice and "reproduce(s) a set of oppositions between active consumers and passive recipients" (Barnett et al. 2005, p. 42). What has been labeled the "paradoxes of community activism" lays bare the structural violence associated with class, race, and gender inequalities while privileging non-state actors, market commodification, and the individual choices of consumers as the solution to poverty and inequality, while simultaneously reinforcing economic disparities (Fuqua 2011).

The use of advertising techniques by international assistance and development organizations relies on visual and textual representations (Strüver 2007). Those working to alleviate suffering and global economic disparities contribute—through various representational frames—to the reproduction of objectified and often negative images of people and places targeted for assistance or development (Strüver 2007). These images help to situate a global imagination (Malkki) of what need "looks like" and how individuals can use their disposable income to help (Malkki 2015). The visual representation of celebrities who are branded as global humanitarians or supporters of development are in many respects the antithesis of the "other" in need of assistance. The celebrity body as a commodity is a space upon which economies of desire are articulated. The celebrity body as a humanitarian-development brand draws on his/her influence, authority, or status and ability to command mediated forms of attention from mass audiences. The humanitarian-development-celebrity engages his/her commodification to influence individual decision-making and reinforce consumer-based forms of giving.

The celebrity body provides us with one example of marketing seduction. The celebrity body is regularly enrolled as a representative space for seducing *us* into purchasing materials. The corporeal power afforded to the celebrity body—as a representative space of aesthetics, power, authority, and desire—correspondingly increasingly situates him/herself as a moral spokesperson. Goodman and Barnes define this as "star/poverty space":

These spaces in turn make and 'make up' the development celebrity at the same time that they give them their elevated and authoritative voice that draws us in and allows them to pronounce on (under)development and humanitarian crises. These images and words of development celebrities provide the basis around which charity campaigns and events are now created, popularised and marketed in order to facilitate the transnational relations of care between audiences, consumers and contributors and those 'in need'. Celebrities are now the cultural intermediaries, along with NGOs and charities, who encourage us to care about Others, Other environments and Other places (Goodman and Barnes 2011, p. 79).

This research examines and questions the authenticity of the development celebrity and how this produces certain forms of authority that generates interest from various multi-national aid and development Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) who actively cultivate celebrities to represent their respective causes (Goodman and Barnes 2011). What they define as the “compassion-celebrity-consumption complex” creates a particular type of branding for the celebrity as an authoritative person and self-identified spokesperson for representing the problems *we* are expected to care about and attend to in distant places.

Branding represents one part of the matrices of intersections between the celebrity body and that of the “needy other”. Branding, like other forms of advertising, represents an active and continual method for producing imagination and illusions necessary for capitalist seduction. While branding is important, it is not the only ingredient necessary to link the economies of need with those of desire. Thus, the celebrity provides an apt symbol for various forms of seduction to shape consumer capitalism and assistance. The celebrity body operates as both a vision of what many individuals do not have but are expected to desire. Thus, the celebrity’s a/effective brand on the one hand situates him/her beyond the reach of the average consumer, while suggesting a connection to the unreachable celebrity through the consumption of the products represented by his/her body or image. The celebrity operates as a guide for the consumer, and increasingly the *development celebrity* acts as a moral guide within the already accepted imagination of need giving along with the seduction of consumptive desire.

The celebrity works as a catalyst of capitalist seduction. This seduction is necessary to keep *us* within a regular pattern of desire to purchase or consume disparate products and ideas. The intersection between capitalist seduction and the development subject occurs through the coupling of the development celebrity with other forms of branding. It is not simply the branding, but the double representations by the *development celebrity* to advertise both high-end consumer goods, and the spaces and faces of those in situations of deprivation or need. Nigel Thrift suggests that “style wants us to love it and we want to be charmed by it” (Thrift 2008, p. 14). In this case, style becomes embedded into the act of giving by way of being charmed by the practice through the celebrity’s status and mark of approval on a specific mode of assistance (such as the RED campaign described earlier). The development celebrity offers a particularly seductive aspect of consumptive capitalism by enlisting their corporeal brand to highlight poverty and consumption nearly simultaneously. The celebrity makes assistance fashionable and even trendy, while not questioning or suggesting that consumptive behaviors and patterns are integral to and integrated within the *crisis of poverty* and the structures and situations that create, perpetuate, and sustain these conditions.

The development subject operates as a classed, raced, and gendered body that seduces *us* into performances of ethical or compassionate consumption (i.e., aid/development) and represents this through an economic assistance shopping platform to raise funds for international organizations. The visual commodification of suffering and continued marketization of aid and development can be seen through the shopping platforms of several international assistance organizations’ websites. The following examination focuses specifically on consumer-shopping models, which ask donors/consumers to purchase an item for a distant other in their own name or that of a loved one. Based on data collected and analyzed with one of my students, Semarley Jarrett, the following discussion examines the representation and commodification of the distant other in need of assistance or development. Places and people shown through these websites draw upon conventional tropes of vulnerability and crisis. These tropes include focusing largely on women and children with an overwhelming majority of black and brown bodies. The advertisements used to represent the needy other rarely (if ever) show crowded factories and compromised cities. Rather they largely illustrate rural non-mechanized poverty—marked by scarcity, lack of potable water, and abject poverty. Representations of individuals and places targeted for economic assistance have become embedded in the seduction of consumer-based fundraising. Through corporeal and spatial representations,

a form of poverty porn¹ draws on the consumer's desire to assist (or save) within a familiar consumer capitalist framework.

2.1. Website Structures

For this examination, Semarley Jarrett and I reviewed the shopping platform on the websites of the following organizations: Mercy Corps, Oxfam America Unwrapped, Save the Children, Heifer International, and CARE International. With the exception of CARE international, the shopping-based donation sections of these websites were functionally similar to Amazon (an online shopping corporation). The donation/gift pages each begin with a large picture at the top of the website frame, followed by promotional items, smaller pictures with price tags, and suggestions for other items to purchase. The primary difference between these pages and that of Amazon are the items being sold. Items for sale on these websites were often labeled as "life changing" and textually identified by type of item next to the picture of a woman or child (usually non-white). The labels attached to the images state the purpose and price of the purchase such as "comfort a child \$20", "educate a young girl \$40", "purchase a cow \$150", "help launch a business \$1500", followed by longer copy that explains the local conditions and how the consumer's donation will help. Men are rarely pictured, and when they are shown, they are accompanied by women or children, shown as young or elderly, or shown in the distance rather than in close-up photographs as more commonly used for representations of women and children. After extensive searching throughout each website we only found one picture that included adult white men, who were physically disabled in wheelchairs. The absence of white able-bodied males highlights, through their invisibility, the racial and gender hierarchies of economic power, influence, and authority (Rothenberg 2008).

The shopping websites include both tangible items such as Heifer International's cow, chicken, goat, or duck purchasing formats, and abstract items such as "comforting a child". Familiar Internet shopping icons are also displayed such as the shopping cart or basket, and order total. The shopping cart/basket provides visual familiarity with other online shopping experiences, ensuring a familiar online environment for the consumer. Similarly, the consumer is provided choice when purchasing his/her items of economic aid or development, as the websites allow the consumer to browse by interest, type, and price of the *gift* being purchased for the "distant other" pictured in the photograph that accompanies each item description. The use of color, images, and text frames poverty as an ordinary condition of certain places (outside the prosperous US/west) and simplifies solutions through point and click shopping platforms. Once a consumer chooses a gift/item for purchase, if he/she scrolls down, a disclaimer is displayed in small print, or explained on the frequently asked questions page (the following example is from Heifer International):

Every gift to Heifer International represents a gift to our total mission of purchasing and transporting food and income-producing animals, as well as providing intensive training in animal husbandry; environmentally sound, sustainable farming; community development and global education. Again, gifts designated for a particular project or animal are used as requested until that need is fully met. Any remaining money is put to use where it is needed most.

While many people want to know where their gift animals were sent, the tracking of individual animals for donors requires more staff and increased operating expenses. In order to keep operating expenses low while we help the greatest number of needy

¹ Poverty porn has become a common colloquialism to identify the objectification of poverty as part of movie or television based entertainment, see "Welfare commonsense, poverty porn and doxosophy" (Jensen 2014).

people and respect the dignity of our project participants, records on each donor's specific animal and to which family it was given remain confidential.²

Web-based shopping pages use colorful tag lines, smart copy, images of smiling mostly black-and-brown-women-and-children receiving assistance, suggesting to the consumer that he/she is purchasing a specific item for the person pictured. However, as the disclaimers identify (in small type the consumer would need to scroll down to see) donations are indeed not tracked and purchases/donated funds go to the organization's overall programs and projects. Therefore, the visual representation of assistance is the consumer's illusion and the spectacle of this assistance through internet-based shopping platforms is "the generalized expression of this illusion" (Debord 1994, p. 32). The spectacle is further buttressed by celebrity support, such as Heifer International's celebrity video or CARE International's "celebrity supporters", or Oxfam's use of celebrity video appeals.³

2.2. How It Works

The "How it Works" section of each website provides text and images to describe how the consumer's shopping and donating experience will be completed after his/her sale is totaled. The gift giving feature on these websites is two-fold: (1) the virtual gift-donation provided to the person symbolically pictured in the point-and-click sale/fundraising platform, and (2) the gift of this donation in the name of a friend or family member. The second version of gift giving is often identified as giving a gift to someone who "has everything". Therefore, suggesting that the person receiving knowledge of a donation being given in his/her name is clearly a person in a relatively comfortable economic situation and not "in need" of tangible material goods. The donation suggests a lack of equality or reciprocity between the recipient and giver, while giving the donation in the name of another (as a gift to him/her) suggests an equitable and reciprocal exchange. The consumer's choices and desires for giving are privileged through the shopping platform over the needs or realities of the individuals on the receiving end of this financial assistance.

The dual gift experience further reinforces the unequal relationship between the consumer and the distant other. The consumer's ability to purchase a gift for a distant other occurs partly because of the existing structural inequalities that prioritize the excess incomes of consumers over the desires, needs, and voices of the distant other as the intended recipient of assistance. The consumer is seduced into believing the illusion that his/her purchase will be delivered to a specific person, and that this purchase will make a difference to that person (and his/her family). However, the messiness, complexities, and complications of daily life for the intended recipients are rendered invisible underneath the gloss, colors, and copy of advertising a tidy package ready for sale. Familiar Web-based shopping platforms allow for an easy "shopping/giving" experience. As mentioned earlier, celebrity endorsements and advertisements are another successful method for encouraging consumer-based giving. The following section examines celebrities who are known for supporting humanitarian assistance and their representation of consumer products in order to highlight celebrity seductions embedded within consumer-based methods of assistance.

2.3. Core Values and Louis Vuitton

Online shopping is one method for both venerating and objectifying the celebrity body. Economic prosperity and excess consumption are mapped onto celebrity bodies. Their bodies are used to attract, entice, and seduce consumers into purchasing products associated with or sponsored by a celebrity. A celebrity's fame and popularity are directly linked to his/her ability to influence consumer

² Frequently asked question page for Heifer International, about Heifer International: <https://www.heifer.org/support/faq/heifer-international/index.html>, and about online donations: <https://www.heifer.org/support/faq/online-donations/index.html>.

³ For example, see Heifer International's celebrity giving video (Heifer International 2017).

behavior (and gain contracts from corporations to represent their products). Celebrity bodies are spaces of consumer advertising and offer a contrast and complement to international assistance through internet-shopping platforms. I use the following example of the *Louis Vuitton Core Values Campaign* to highlight the contrasts and connections between development celebrities, consumption, and assistance. Several celebrities, including notable *development celebrities* Angelina Jolie and Bono, have participated in the *Louis Vuitton Core Values Campaign*. This advertising campaign includes a series of highly stylized photographs of celebrities, made by renowned photographer Annie Leibovitz, pictured with (overpriced) Louis Vuitton bags. The description of the series is as follows:

Travel is a fundamental and defining value of Louis Vuitton's more than 150-year heritage. The Core Values campaign was launched in 2007 as a long-term restatement of Louis Vuitton's legacy as the pioneer of the Art of Travel. Travel is much more than the physical act of going from one place to another or the discovery of a new destination. Travel is an emotional experience, a process of self-discovery. We all have the potential to accomplish our own personal journeys. Louis Vuitton has a long tradition of associations with exceptional people. Naturally, the Core Values campaign features personalities of truly global stature ranging in professions and backgrounds. Above and beyond their celebrity status, they are individuals who are widely recognized to have lived full and interesting lives—people who have accomplished personal journeys of their own.⁴

I focus on two photographs: one of Angelina Jolie and the other of Bono and Ali Hewson. I chose these photographs because of the subtle and overt links made between the advertisement for Louis Vuitton handbags, and each celebrity's association with "star/poverty space". Angelina Jolie is pictured bare foot, wearing capris and a simple top with a Louis Vuitton bag hanging from her left shoulder. She sits on a small, wooden, raft-like boat in a swamp. The tag line reads, "A single journey can change the course of a life" Cambodia, May 2011. The accompanying ten-minute video commercial (*Angelina Jolie's Journey to Cambodia*⁵) is a monologue of Jolie sitting on a bamboo platform in a plush green "natural" setting, discussing Cambodia's landmine crisis and the simple pleasures of the Cambodian people. The "Portraits of Cambodia" section of this video illustrates still and video images of "everyday" Cambodians; however, neither names nor the voices of these people are included in the video. The remainder of the video focuses on Jolie's love of travel, how she decided to adopt her son from Cambodia, her representations/imagination of Cambodian culture, and the struggles and experiences of the people. Jolie serves as the interlocutor for Cambodian lives and livelihoods, struggles, needs, and desires. The staging for this film occurs in a setting devoid of an extensive built environment, and with several scenes of Jolie walking "in nature", and ends with the photo shoot for the Louis Vuitton advertisement.

Bono and Ali Hewson are pictured standing in an open savannah with rolling hills in the background. They are the only people in the frame: he holds a guitar and they both have Vuitton bags draped over their shoulders, a small prop plane behind them suggests that they arrived at this place on that airplane. The copy reads, "Every journey began in Africa. Ali and Bono wear Edun; Ali carries the Louis Vuitton/Edun collection bag. Profits from the bags as well as Ali and Bono's fee benefit Conservation Cotton Initiative in Uganda." This exemplifies both the celebrity as commodity and Bono's development celebrity status reinforcing compassionate/ethical consumption.

The celebrity body operates as a symbolic representation of aid/development morality subtly and overtly connected to their respective star/poverty space within the photographic frame and accompanying text/copy. These images also portray a seductive scene associated with travel, high-end consumption, and celebrity privilege. The celebrity body offers several symbols/representations:

⁴ Louis Vuitton Core Values Campaign ([Facebook n.d.](#)).

⁵ Louis Vuitton Core Values Commercial and Interview with Angelina Jolie: "Angelina Jolie's Journey to Cambodia (Louis Vuitton Full Commercial) ([Vickojolie 2011](#)).

(1) morality, (2) high-end consumption, and (3) the time and money necessary for leisure and adventure travel. The juxtaposition of nature with the manufactured products and celebrity bodies reinforce the economic privilege manifested by leisurely mobility. Additionally, these images help to sell high-end designer bags that cost well into the thousands of dollars. These are but two of countless examples of celebrity seduction, and the complementary position of economic excess associated with star/poverty space, celebrity corporeality, and his/her ability to influence and reinforce the myth of compassionate consumerism.

Lemke argues that contemporary neoliberal capitalism requires the state and various autonomous institutions (i.e., multinational NGOs) to lean toward “self-regulation and domination” (Lemke 2002, p. 60). Lemke argues, “These effects entail not just the simple reproduction of existing social asymmetries or their ideological obfuscation, but are the product of a recoding of social mechanisms of exploitation and domination on the basis of a new topography of the social” (Lemke 2002, p. 60). Drawing on Lemke, I argue that celebrity engagement with the “needy other” renders invisible or erases the celebrity’s capitalist position that benefits from and perpetuates capitalism and the inequalities it is dependent upon. The advertisements portray a succulent and seductive representational framing of natural settings in the “developing world”. Through their participation in international assistance and development campaigns and representational advertising by way of the *Louis Vuitton Core Values Campaign*, a subtle suggestion is rendered bare—that the poor pictured in the Internet shopping platforms and the landscapes as backdrops of the Louis Vuitton advertisements are *natural*. The poor are represented as *naturally* in situations of poverty associated with their locations (i.e., in the global south) rather than on uneven forms of assistance and development and the pervasive inequalities necessary for profit growth within a global capitalist framework. Through these “natural” or “ordinary” representations of places and bodies, poverty and inequality become normalized as simply “existing there,” and celebrities are identified as the solution rather than endemic to cyclical poverty.

3. (In)visibility

Bodies and places targeted for development (as discussed above) are seductively put to work to sell the concept of international assistance and generate funds for international aid and development NGOs. The desperation of poverty and disaster have become fodder to feed consumer capitalism, which requires low wage, unregulated, and long-hour labor packaged as a path to something better, i.e., the good life (Berlant 2011; Ong 2007). Desires are embedded into the cyclical process of development because when projects fail another one is poised to take its place without reflecting on what went wrong (De Vries 2007). Pieter De Vries argues “development as a desiring machine operates through the generation, spurring and triggering of desires, and by subsequently doing away with them. It is a double movement of the generation and banalisation of hope that constitutes the dialectics of desire” (De Vries 2007, p. 32).

The dialectics of desire, presented in this article, link the shopping-to save assistance model with the corporeality of celebrity status and stardom. Wealth and influence combined with objectified poverty and need become neatly nestled through fundraising where both the celebrity and development other are placed within an oppositional, complementary, and dialectical frame. This frame operates as a border concealing the production of poverty through consumptive geographies encouraged by celebrity sponsorship. This form of seduction attempts to create meaning through images and representational forms. Attention is paid to the image, which washes away meaning leaving only its illusion. As argued by Baudrillard’s treatises on seduction, “the most beautiful construction of meaning and interpretation ever created thus collapses under the weight of its own signs, which were once terms heavy with meaning, but have once again become devices in an unrestrained seduction, terms in an untrammelled exchange that is both complicit with and empty of meaning . . . ” (Baudrillard 1979, p. 58). The celebrity body seduces *us* toward an array of consumer activities, from fashionable accessories to gifts for the poor, each exemplifying the “unrestrained seduction” that is complicit in meaning making while simultaneously emptying that meaning through trivialized fashionable and trendy packaging.

In late consumer capitalism, the markets and consumers remain privileged over laborers (Fluri and Lehr 2016). In the shopping-to-save examples discussed in this article, consumers' desires are imbricated with the machinations of international economic assistance and development as part of rather than separate from consumer capitalism. The consumer is both a subject and target of economic exchange and gift giving, with individual choice being a central component and reminder of status, power, and influence packaged and sold with the simple click of a mouse. Baudrillard uses the metaphor of an opaque mirror to remind his readers that seductive power in contemporary capitalism resides with the consumer. "The eye, instead of generating a space that spreads out, is but the internal vanishing point for the convergence of objects. A different universe occupies the foreground, a universe without horizon or horizontality, like an opaque mirror placed before the eye, with nothing behind it. This is properly speaking the realm of appearances, where there is nothing to see, where things see you" (Baudrillard 1979, pp. 63–64). Therefore, the hyper-visibility of need and celebrities who "have it all" are continually positioned dialectically as complementary representational spaces of capitalist seduction, a life one is expected to desire (celebrity) and a life one is expected to avoid and pity (development other). Shopping-to-give provides a platform for feeling closer to the celebrity (particularly the development celebrity brand) and superior in one's ability to give rather than receive assistance. The dual desires Baudrillard discusses in relation to spaces are illustrative of the paradoxes wrapped in the celebrity-commodity-aid-development package. The celebrity as a desired subject can influence and is expected to awaken the desire to assist, while continually reinforcing his/her own social, class, or racial privilege. There is a growing amount of scholarship that examines humanitarian and development celebrities (Brockington 2014; Richey 2016). In an effort to contribute to this literature, I argue that the integral link between consumption and development celebrity status remains a crisis of (in)visibility. This crisis normalizes the economic divisions between celebrity wealth and global poverty and integrates them as problem and solution, rather than co-constituted: wealth requiring poverty, poverty feeding wealth.

4. Conclusions

I argue that the links between shopping, consumer culture, and the objectification of others *in need* are a slow and continual crisis that work collectively to support and maintain the banality of neoliberal capitalism and seduce consumers in ways that require their active participation by purchasing goods and buying-into the global humanitarian aid and development business as a "cure" for endemic poverty. The "good intentions" associated with the business of aid and development remain at the center of capitalist seduction. Seduction is the marrow between the dialectical bones of economic desire and hero mythologies that seek to save the distant other. Seduction rests between these paradoxical pairings, and shopping-based assistance platforms bring together these competing desires. Desires reinforce the purchasing power and choice of the economically privileged subject, with he/she virtually choosing how to give, despite website disclaimers that identify the personalized gift as symbolic rather than a tangible one-to-one exchange. Seduction offers a momentary promise, "the feel-good purchase", and a self-congratulatory experience of caring at a distance or as a form of compassionate, conscientious, or ethical consumption.

I argue that shopping to save or help others reinforces economic and social hierarchies and spatial distances rather than bridging or developing an interactive connection between individuals and groups across disparate locations and socioeconomic strata. In order to address the seductions of consumer-based assistance as a crisis we need to alter our view of development and similar forms of economic assistance. These organizations provide assistance while operating as an integral branch of structural economic inequalities. International assistance and development organizations are central to the substance of capitalist growth and the continued generation of wealth for countries, corporations, and individuals providing economic aid, assistance, or development. The excesses of wealth are co-constituted in assisting places and people who have been wasted or abandoned by capitalist structures that rely on continuous and cyclical poverty in order to sustain wealth. Assistance requires

enrollment in market and neoliberal forms of capitalist production and consumption. Celebrity supported consumer-based assistance schemes remain an endemic crisis rendered (in)visible by seductive shopping camouflaged as compassion.

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