Most of us who are Americans know little about Africa. We might have studied Africa for a few weeks in school or glanced occasionally at newspaper headlines about genocide, AIDS, malaria, or civil war, but rarely have we actually thought seriously about Africa. If we do want to learn about Africa, it is difficult to find ample and accurate information in our popular media such as television and newspapers. Africa and its people are simply a marginal part of American consciousness.

Africa is, however, very much a part of the American subconscious. Ironically, although we know little about Africa, we carry strong mental images of the continent. Once you begin to notice, you find that Africa appears in the American public space quite frequently. Although it may not figure often in the news, it shows up in advertising, movies, amusement parks, cartoons, and many other corners of our society. And although most Americans do not possess many facts about Africa, we do know certain general truths about the continent. We know, for example, that Africans live in tribes. And we know that Africa is a place of famine, disease, poverty, coups, and large wild animals.

General images are useful and perhaps necessary for our collective consciousness. We can't know everything about the world, so we have to lump some things into big categories that are convenient if lacking detail. Life is too short for most of us to become experts on more than a couple of subjects. Thus,
these images help us to organize Africa's place in our collective mind. A war in Congo? Ah, yes, that's more of the "African trouble" category. Elephants being used in a commercial? Yes, wouldn't it be fun to have an elephant wash your car. There are lots of large animals living in the wilds of Africa, aren't there?

If our general categories are reasonably accurate, they help us navigate our complex world. If, however, they are inaccurate, these categories can be both dangerous and exploitative. If, for example, we are wrong about Africa's supposed insignificance, we will be blindsided by political, environmental, or even medical events that affect how we survive. Or, if we think of Africa only as a place of trouble, a large zoo, or a storehouse of strategic minerals rather than as a place where real people live real lives, we will likely be willing to exploit the continent for our own purposes. France's former president François Mitterrand demonstrated this possibility graphically when, speaking to his staff in the early 1990s about Rwanda, he noted that "in some countries, genocide is not really important." Although in the short term the exploitation of Africa might help France or us, in the long term the planet's society and environment will pay dearly for our failure to care.

Speaking "African"

Anyone who wants to study Africa in depth needs to learn African languages, because language is the major key to understanding how people mentally organize the world around them. Likewise, anyone who wants to understand Americans must examine the words Americans know and use. You can begin to discover American ideas about Africa by trying some free association with the word Africa. Ask yourself what words come to mind when you hear Africa. Be aware that this is not the time to "clean up your act" and impress yourself with your political correctness. Rather, search for the words your society has given you to describe Africa, some of which will seem positive, some negative, and some neutral.

My students have helped me create lists of words that come to mind during such an exercise. Within a few minutes, a class frequently generates thirty or forty words that Americans associate with Africa. Native, hut, warrior, shield, tribe, savage, cannibals, jungle, Pygmy, pagan, voodoo, and witch doctor are commonly associated with "traditional" Africa. "Tourism words" include safari, wild animals, elephant, lion, and pyramid. There are also "news words," including coup, poverty, ignorance, drought, famine, tragedy, and tribalism. And then there is a group of "change words" (indicating Western-induced change), such as development, foreign aid, peacekeeping, and missionary. Occasionally, a really honest person will come up with "racist words" he or she has heard, like spear chucker or jungle bunny.

Although some American words might be positive—kinship, wisdom, or homeland—the overwhelming impression gained from studying American language about Africa is that Africa is a primitive place, full of trouble and wild animals, and in need of our help. A survey by a major American museum on popular perceptions of Africa found a number of widely held misconceptions, including the following: Africa is just one large country; Africa is all jungle; Africans share a single culture, language, and religion; Africans live in "grass huts"; Africans mainly hunt animals for their subsistence; and Africa has no significant history.

If you think you have escaped these concepts, you are either extraordinarily lucky or you fool yourself easily. The messages that perpetuate such impressions pervade American culture. They are ideas that have deep roots in American history as well as strong branches that entwine our daily lives. At one time in our history, most of white America did not even consider Africans to be equal as humans! By comparison, today's understanding is positively enlightened. Yet historical misperception, ignorance, stereotype, and myth still cast shadows upon our thinking. Once you begin to look for them, you see inaccurate portrayals of Africa that reproduce the blatant old images in subtler, modernized versions. In fact, a worthwhile exercise is to ask yourself where the words listed above have come from. Home? School? Church? Friends? Television? Newspapers? Magazines? Movies? Books? Amusement parks? It is difficult to get complete and balanced views of Africa in everyday American life. This topic will be discussed further in Chapter 2, "How We Learn."

This book investigates the histories of our inaccurate and stereotypical words and ideas and suggests alternatives. For example, Africans are sometimes referred to in everyday America as "natives." You may or may not think that native is a negative word, but its use is a legacy of the colonial period in Africa, when words were weapons employed by outsiders to keep Africans in their places. In the first part of the twentieth century, most Americans believed that Africans could be (indeed, should be) subjugated because they were primitives, natives. The problem is not the term itself, however. The first dictionary definition of native is someone who belongs originally to a place. Thus, "He is a native of Boston" is a neutral and acceptable use of the word. We also use native in a positive political way in the term Native American, which implies that an "American Indian"
has rights and connections that go beyond those belonging to the rest of us who are more recent immigrants. But the term African native evokes a negative connotation, whether intended or not, that is a holdover from its colonial meanings of primitive, savage, or unenlightened. Why can we think of Africans as natives, but never the Chinese? The answer is that we have long thought of Africans as primitive and Chinese as civilized. Today, even when we intend no insult to Africans, we have these leftover phrases and connotations that get in the way of conceiving of Africans as real people like ourselves.

You can get around the "African native" and "native African" problem in a number of ways. For example, if you are referring to an African living in a rural area, you can say "a rural African." If you mean someone who is an inhabitant of Africa, just say "an African." If you mean someone who belongs to the Kikuyu ethnic group, use the words "a Kikuyu." These phrases are more precise and therefore less likely to create images that evoke stereotypes. And, to avoid even a hint of insult, you might steer clear of phrases like "He is a native of Cape Town," which in most other contexts would be neutral but in the African context might elicit musings on whether you are referring to the stereotype.

The Use and Misuse of Stereotypes

In an ideal world, we would abandon our stereotypes about Africa and learn to deal with Africans as they really are. Human cognition does not allow this, however. Everybody stereotypes. And we do it about practically everything. The reason for this is, first of all, that we are biologically wired to try to make sense of reality, even when it makes no particular sense. Whether through science, history, literature, religion, or whatever, humans strive to understand and categorize what is in front of them. In fact, not trying to understand apparent reality is so extraordinary that Buddhism, as one example, has made a philosophy out of it. Buddhism's attempt to experience the "is-ness" of reality directly, without thought, promises liberation from ordinary human consciousness and suffering, but such salvation is sought only by a few. Most of us will continue our attempts to make sense of the reality in front of us.

We also stereotype because it is virtually impossible to know everything that is going on in reality, and therefore we are bound to base our judgments on partial information. Like the proverbial blind men and the elephant, we each take our separate, limited experiences and extrapolate to make sense of the whole. Moreover, we often use ideas provided by our culture instead of investigating things for ourselves. If our culture has a pre-made picture of reality for us, we are likely to accept it. One way to think about this is to invert the notion "seeing is believing," making it "believing is seeing." Once we "know" something through our culture, we tend to fit new information into the old categories rather than change the system of categorization.

To say that we inevitably use stereotypes is really to say that we use mental models to think about reality. But the word stereotype also implies that our models are so limiting that they deform reality in ways that are offensive, dangerous, or ridiculous. Thus we need to strive to make our mental models as accurate as possible. We should, for example, study African art, history, literature, philosophy, politics, culture, and the like so we can differentiate between Africans. We should also ask ourselves whether we cling to inaccurate models of Africa because they shore up our self-image or allow us to do things otherwise unthinkable.

Following are brief discussions that explore different reasons for the persistence of our misconceptions about Africa. Later in the book I offer extended discussions of many of these topics.

Leftover Racism and Exploitation

During much of American history, a large majority of Americans considered racism and exploitation of Africa acceptable. Although the United States never ruled colonies in Africa, Americans did enslave Africans and maintain both a slavery system and segregation. Moreover, we profited from our businesses in Africa, sent missionaries to change African culture, and did not protest the colonization undertaken by Europeans. This exploitation of Africa, whether direct or indirect, required thinking about Africans as inferiors. In other words, our culture has had a lot of practice, hundreds of years of it, in constructing Africa as inferior. The legacy is obvious in the words and ideas we call to mind when we hear the word Africa.

Our legacy of negativity poses a question: Can we attribute a major portion of our modern stereotypes about Africa to our just not having gotten around to changing the myths we inherited from our racist and imperialist past? Perhaps we no longer need most of these myths, but they persist because only a few decades have passed since the end of the colonial period and a similarly brief period since the passage of the US Civil Rights Act of 1964.
Chapter 1: Changing Our Mind About Africa

A few decades in cultural history is really only a moment in time because cultures have momentum and are slow to change direction. Perhaps our myths about Africa are dying, but slowly.

Support for this view comes from the fact that African independence and the civil rights movement have made it unacceptable for news reporters and commentators to use the most blatantly negative of the words we once associated with race and with Africa. Likewise, schoolbooks are vastly improved in their treatment of Africa. One could argue that with greater sensitivity to the issue and more time, Americans will change. To put this idea another way, shouldn’t we give Americans the benefit of the doubt and assume that most people do not consciously intend to exploit or misrepresent Africa? I believe that we should.

Current Racism

I am assuming that most readers are not intentionally racist, because people who are probably wouldn’t read this kind of book. But we have to take account of the connection between our stereotypes about Africa and current racism in America. Racism is still alive in America, but the most derogatory images of Africa can no longer appear in public spaces. We must conclude, therefore, that they persist because we learn them in the more private aspects of our lives, from family and friends, and often through jokes or offhand comments. Unfortunately, such private racism is difficult to eradicate, because continuing efforts like this book can do little for those who would not seriously consider them. Others of us, perhaps most of us, are a different kind of racist, for although we truly want to believe that all humans are equal, we entertain undercurrents of racist doubt in our minds that make us susceptible to more subtle myths about Africa. It is this real but unintentional racism that concerns us here, because a deeper consideration of the issues can help us see Africans more clearly.

It would be incorrect, however, to say that all or even most of the public stereotypes about Africa come from unintentional racism. First, each of us has negative stereotypes about others that are not racist. Second, not all of our stereotypes about Africa are negative. Inaccuracy and insensitivity are not necessarily racist, even when they have racist roots and produce racist results. This is a fine distinction to make, especially if you are a victim of racism, but it seems a useful distinction if we are to help decent, willing people to see Africa in new ways.

The Use and Misuse of Stereotypes

Current Exploitation

We also perpetuate negative myths about Africa because they help us maintain dominance over Africans. From our perspective in the United States, it is difficult for us to see how globally influential our country actually is. In simple terms, we are a superpower. To wield this kind of might and still think of ourselves as good people, we need powerful myths. Whereas in the past the myth of the racial inferiority of Africans was the major justification for Western control of Africans, now cultural inferiority is a more likely reason. Our news media, for example, are much more likely to inform us about African failures than about African successes. And the successes we do hear about tend to demonstrate that our own perspectives on reality are correct. It doesn’t take much imagination to figure out that modern Americans who deal with Africa—bureaucrats, aid workers, businesspeople, missionaries, and others—might have an interest in describing Africa in ways that justify the importance of their own work.

Entertainment

If Africa were portrayed as being “just like us,” it would be quite uninteresting. (“Man bites dog” sells more newspapers than “Dog bites man.”) The word exotic describes the point; exotic portrays African culture as excitingly different. Usually this is at the expense of African culture, an extraordinarily large portion of which is removed from its everyday context in a way that allows us to believe that the wider culture itself is wholly extraordinary. Movies and novels thrive on this sort of thing. America too is often portrayed overseas as exotic, and we are thus frequently mis-taken. In his book American Ways, for example, Gary Allen describes an international student who was misled by myths about exotic America. Coming to the United States having watched American movies, the student expected to find a lot of women ready for sexual activity with him. Actually, he found them, but it took him nearly two years to figure out that such easy women were also marginal and often disturbed and that more desirable women were not so readily available.1

I provide African examples in later chapters, but give a first illustration here. One National Geographic issue includes a short article on the gold of the Asante, the traditional ruler of the Asante people in Ghana.2 Ten beautiful photographs show the gold clothing and ornaments of the Asante, his court, and his relatives. But the authors make almost no effort to tell us how all of this
fits into the life of the Asante or of the modern country of Ghana. Presumably, *National Geographic* does not intend to portray Africans in stereotypical ways. Without (con)text, however, the reader might think almost anything.

This is exoticism. Exoticism portrays only a portion of a culture and allows the imagination to use stereotypes to fill in the missing pieces. Most frequently, when we supply the missing pieces, we extrapolate that other people are more different from us than they are similar. We can too easily sustain our myths about Africans and believe that words such as mysterious and the Dark Continent actually apply to Africa.

**Self-Definition**

Sometimes we use other people, including Africans, as a mirror. We want to know about them so we can know about ourselves. This very human activity accounts at least partially for our interest in people-watching in parks and the appeal of television sitcoms, movies, literature, history, and many other cultural phenomena. Yet this is a tricky business. For example, we know that people who spend a lot of time watching soap operas begin to conceive of the world as a soap opera and themselves as characters. And those who watch the local evening news feel that life is much more violent and chaotic than it really is.

In the case of Africa, we might say that many of us want Africans to be a bit savage so we can feel more satisfied with our own lot in life. The Lorax who announcer on the Cartoon Network puts it well: “Without nuts like these, the rest of us look crazy.” Perhaps you have never thought of Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, and Elmer Fudd as therapists, but doesn’t Africa often serve the same function? If we focus on ourselves without comparison to others, don’t we look pretty messed up? But if we can see that others are poorer, less educated, or more chaotic, then it is easier to believe that we are fine despite our problems. To put it differently, we can’t be rich without the poor, developed without the underdeveloped, saved without the sinner, normal without the abnormal, civilized without the uncivilized, and so forth. Sometimes students tell me that they believe the reason they are required to study other cultures in college is to demonstrate how good we have it in America.

Our culture is especially susceptible to this kind of thinking because of the way we conceive of time. Our idea of time as a continuum from the past to the future—rather than, for example, as a circle returning to a golden age of the past—is embodied in our concept of progress. For us, progress generally means going forward, moving on, getting over it, improving ourselves, growing up, and a whole collection of other ideas implying that the past is negative and the future is positive. Of course, if we believe this to be true, we will expect reality to substantiate the belief. Indeed, one way we perceive African reality reveals this way of thinking. We see African community life as basic, but impossible to return to in our own communities. And tribalism is something we have gotten beyond. It wouldn’t help to find much of use to us in Africa, because that would contradict our understanding of progress.

The same is true for the way we understand nature or daily life. Although we might believe abstractly in the balance of nature, or might desire that our lives resemble a peaceful kingdom where friendly lions and lambs coexist, we have been more likely to see our lives in dog-eat-dog terms that conform to the “law of the jungle.” Africa as the prototypical jungle is useful as a myth to substantiate our view of daily life as a jungle that we escape when we go home at night.

Positive myths about Africa also serve Western self-definition. Those who are dissatisfied with modern American life might construct Africa to present viable alternatives. Some might search African customs for a more natural way to live. Some might look to Africa for a less racist culture. Some, specifically African Americans, might be looking for their idealized personal and cultural roots.

**Stereotypes over Time**

As Europeans spread across the world from the 1400s onward, they had to make sense of the new peoples and places they encountered. Over time, and for reasons explained later in this book, Africans and Africa became representatives of extreme "otherness." They were not the only representatives of difference, of course: there were also Aborigines, Native Americans, and so forth. But Africa certainly became a primary symbol that Europeans and white Americans used to express difference. Even black Americans found Africa’s difference useful at times.

This is not all bad, because there is indeed a great deal of difference between African and Western cultures. Moreover, we know that humans tend to think symbolically, so it is natural that Africa should stand for something, rather than nothing, in our minds. The real problem has been that using Africa as a symbol of difference has meant that the continent has been treated as an object. As an object, Africa is described and manipulated, but Africans, as objects, cannot speak for themselves or make comments on who we are.
Fortunately, with each passing decade, Americans have been treating Africans with less prejudice. Perhaps we are in the midst of a real withdrawal, however slow, from the myths of primitive Africa. Indeed, we cannot afford such myths. Africa, because of its sheer size, population, resources, and modernization, will play an increasingly important role in the world, whether for good or ill, and will have to be taken seriously. Our long-term interest in our shrinking world is to understand Africa with as little bias as possible.

The point is not that an accurate and whole picture of Africa has to be totally positive. Indeed, such a claim would be a continuation of our stereotyping. What we should strive for is a view of Africa as a continent full of real people, both like us and not like us. On the surface this seems easy: “It’s a small world after all” “Why can’t we just get along?” “All we need is love!” “Just leave them alone.” But these stereotypical, facile solutions don’t automatically work in the real world. As you will see in the pages that follow, seeing others as fully human without desiring to change them into ourselves is exceedingly difficult. It may be, however, the only thing that will make our home—the planet—a safe place to live.

A Word About Words

Before we go any further, a warning is in order. As I wrote this text, I realized that some of the words I use regularly are problematic. For example, the word Africa is used incorrectly throughout the book, because I mean “Africa south of the Sahara.” This is a problem that might be helped by replacing all occurrences of Africa with sub-Saharan Africa. However, that would make reading difficult, and the change would not solve the problem entirely. For example, not all sub-Saharan Africans are the subjects of the stereotypes discussed in this book, assuming we consider the millions of European Africans in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Kenya, and elsewhere to be Africans. Following the example of other scholars, I have opted to use the convenient expression Africa instead of a more accurate term. I assume that readers understand what is meant and will fill in missing qualifiers where needed.

Likewise, terms such as Westerners and Americans, and the pronouns we and our, are frequently distortions of the truth. There is, you will agree, no such thing as an average American, just as there is no such thing as an average African. As I wrote this book, I found myself generalizing and perhaps overgeneralizing about Americans for the sake of calling attention to “our” stereotyping of Africans. We need to remember, however, that in every era there have been Americans who did not accept the general view and who spoke out on behalf of Africans.

One of the biggest difficulties with generalizing about American views of Africa concerns the inclusion of African American views. The problem is complex because American culture is complex. Until at least the 1960s, for example, it was quite common for African Americans to think of Africans as having primitive cultures. This should not be too surprising, considering the dominance of European culture and the fact that most information about Africa was filtered through European American eyes. Thus when I say that “we Americans” believed Africa to be primitive, it can be taken as somewhat accurate for black as well as white Americans.

On the other hand, African Americans since well before the American Revolution have resisted white efforts to define black reality, and therefore they cannot be said to have invented the idea of African primitiveness, even if they believed in portions of it. They were victims in much the same way that Africans have been victims. Moreover, African Americans have largely rejected white American interpretations of race, and many have attempted to teach America about African achievements. Until the mid-twentieth century such teachers were largely ignored, but their efforts make it more difficult to generalize about “Africans.”

In this book, I have usually focused on white American myths about Africa—because they have been the most dominant, the most negative, and the most in need of change. Although I include a brief summary of African American perspectives in Chapter 5, I do not do the subject justice. Unfortunately, as far as I know, no studies since the mid-1970s have attempted to investigate the whole spectrum of contemporary African American attitudes toward Africa. Without such studies, preferably ones undertaken by African Americans, I would not want to write much more than I have already.

What seems most strikingly similar about white and black American perspectives on Africa is that all of us have generally “used Africa to think with.” Whether Africa has been constructed in a negative or positive manner, we have used the continent to reflect upon who we are in relation to each other and in relation to Africa. Much of this thinking, negative and positive, has stereotyped Africa in ways explained in this book.
In the 1970s, scholars of Africa realized that American high school textbooks were filled with stereotypes about Africa. With the coming of independence for African countries in the 1960s and with the American civil rights movement, the most glaring myths had disappeared. But less obvious myths persisted. In a 1978 study, *Africa in Social Studies Textbooks*, Astair Zelikov and Marylee Wiley detailed the extent to which our public schools were perpetuating myths and inaccuracies about Africa. They noted that most textbooks were written by “armchair” authors who rely on weak sources for their own information.” Thus, no matter what the textbook authors were discussing, they tended to make Africans look like the Africa they imagined rather than the one that existed. Fortunately, several decades later our textbooks are much better. On the other hand, schools have only a modest influence on how we think about Africa. Despite improved texts, by the time students get to college, most still have outdated ideas about the continent. Even college graduates may not have corrected their misconceptions of Africa. In a 1996 study of preservice social studies teachers, 82 percent thought there were tigers in Africa, 94 percent believed wild animals were common everywhere on the continent, 74 percent understood most Africans to be illiterate, and 93 percent were convinced that more kinds of diseases exist in Africa than in Asia and South America. Respondents commonly used stereotypical “African words” such as *tribe* (90 percent), *primitive* (69 percent), *cannibals* (60 percent), and *savages* (60 percent). Modern Africa was largely misunderstood.
A 2007 survey asked American college students studying in several African countries to describe their attitudes toward Africa before and during their time there. When asked what they had expected to find in Africa, they provided words much like the ones described in Chapter 1, especially **peor, dangerous, hot, underdeveloped, violent, tribal, and spiritual.** When they described how they felt after spending time in Africa, they emphasized words such as beautiful, diverse, friendly, culture misunderstood, developing, changing, and vibrant. Words such as dangerous and underdeveloped did not disappear entirely, but overall the students' perceptions were significantly more positive.4

Both teachers and students are bombarded with mistaken images of Africa in our everyday culture, so it is not surprising that they often mistake Africa for what it is not. Correcting these errors is not a losing battle, but it is an uphill one. If readers of textbooks and teachers of classes are wearing tinted glasses, even the most accurate texts will appear to be the same color as the glasses. What is the tint of these glasses? "Americana," the hue of our cultural heritage. Thus, to know how Americans learn about Africa, we must look at the more general culture in which our glasses get manufactured.

### Television Culture

One way to study how we learn about Africa is to examine **popular culture**, the ordinary information we get from television, magazines, movies, novels, and other common sources. This approach leads us first to television because it is our most pervasive everyday source of ideas about practically everything. In sheer numbers of programs, Africa is actually better represented on television than many other areas of the world. Regrettably, however, the shows do not provide a very accurate view of Africa, in part because of the large number of nature programs. This is actually an improvement over television a decade ago when the nature shows were joined by cartoons that featured Africa, such as *George of the Jungle, Johnny Quest,* and frequent reruns of *Mickey Mouse* and *Popeye* episodes made in the 1940s and 1950s. Most of the cartoon images of Africa were stereotyped presentations of ferocious large animals, lost treasure protected by evil genies and geniuses, and hungry cannibals. Fortunately, after about 2000 these cartoons mostly disappeared and were replaced by action cartoons that rarely use Africa as a setting.

Today's nature shows still tend to portray Africa as a place filled with wild animals, park rangers, and naturalists who battle against poachers and encroaching agriculture. By featuring carnivores, the programs also use Africa to emphasize "survival of the fittest" motifs. Yet most Africans never see wild animals because they live in towns or in parts of the continent where the human population is dense. Furthermore, the relationships in nature are vastly more complex than those symbolized by the few large animals that nature programs favor.

As stations on cable and satellite television have multiplied, so have programs on African *people*. The number of programs is not great, but from time to time the Learning Channel, the Discovery Channel, the History Channel, Black Entertainment Television, the Africa Channel, and other stations show Africa-related ethnographies and documentaries. For example, I recently watched an excellent show on ABC about the Abayudaya Jews of rural Uganda and a PBS News Special on how termites affect a village in northern Cameroon.5 What is still lacking, however, is a serious understanding of how people currently live in Africa. Today, 40 percent of Africans live in cities, and most rural Africans are deeply connected to cities in one way or another. Why, then, do shows about African culture rarely show a city scene, middle-class Africans, a paved road, or a farmer producing a crop that will be sold in a town or eventually reach us? One reason is that urban documentaries are more difficult to film than those about life in rural areas. Most African elites live in cities and don't like reporters and filmmakers prying into their affairs.

Perhaps a more significant reason for television's preference for rural over urban Africa is our ongoing romance with the exotic. We consider nature and the life of people with less contact with modern cultures more interesting and more enlightening than studies of everyday modern African life. Thus, despite greater television access to Africa as a result of the cable revolution, the televised image of Africa remains drastically incomplete. This is not to say that no good documentaries have been made on African urban life. For example, British directors Kim Longinotto and Florence Ayisi have made *Sisters in Law,* the powerful story of Beatrice Ntuba and Vera Ngassa, a judge and a state prosecutor, in the town of Kumba, Cameroon. This film, aired on PBS's *Independent Lens,* presents a positive, complex picture of the lives of contemporary urban women.6 But such films are rare.

If we can't find a whole picture of Africa on most television shows, we should be able to turn to television news to find out about contemporary Africa. Yet here the picture is even bleaker. What usually prompts the infrequent appearances of Africa in the news or in news documentaries is a war, coup, drought, famine, flood, epidemic, or accident. Such events certainly occur,
but they are not the essence of Africa or of any other part of the world. To be fair, despite the problems, our reporters are providing more context for such news events than ever before. Cable News Network (CNN), for example, occasionally runs stories produced by African reporters. And television coverage of the transition to majority rule in South Africa included a great deal about the history and life of South Africans. Since that time, however, South Africa has almost disappeared from the news except for occasional reports of trouble.

Of course, charges that news reportage is biased are common for all areas of the world including American cities. Defenders of television news say that reporters have too little time to provide background and that Americans don’t want to watch it anyway. Increasingly, news programs border on entertainment. We want our emotions aroused, but not so much that we actually might feel compelled to think deeply or take some kind of action. Moreover, news from Africa is expensive. If all this is true, the point here should be that we learn what we want to learn and that we like our picture of Africans the way it is now.

The Print Media

Newspapers provide about the same coverage of Africa as television news does and for the same reasons. Unless you subscribe to a world-class paper such as the New York Times, the Christian Science Monitor, or the Washington Post, you are likely to find no more than a couple of column inches of space devoted to Africa per week. And the stories tend to be of two kinds, “trouble in Africa” and “curiosities from Africa.” The “trouble in Africa” reporting usually follows a pattern. At any given time, only a handful of American reporters cover Africa south of the Sahara, a region containing a population more than twice as large as that of the United States. These reporters either are based in one of the big cities, such as Johannesburg (South Africa), Nairobi (Kenya), or perhaps Abidjan (Côte d’Ivoire), or are visiting these cities. They report on local events, and, if trouble arises in a neighboring country, they fly in, get the story, and fly out, or they collect what information they can from where they are. News about Congo, Nigeria, or Zimbabwe might be broadcast from Abidjan. It sounds authentic because it comes from Africa, but it might as well be from the United States, which has equally good or better communications with most African cities. When there is a big story, reporters flock to it, stay for a while, then leave. And because reporters rarely speak local languages or have well-developed local contacts, the result is shallow reporting. In many cases, we hear nothing from a country for months or years, and then it appears in the news once or even every day for a couple of weeks before disappearing until trouble occurs again.

Charlayne Hunter-Gault—a longtime observer of Africa, reporter for the New York Times, correspondent for PBS, and now Special Africa Correspondent for National Public Radio—makes the point well in her book New News Out of Africa. She writes that the perception throughout Africa is that foreign media are only interested in stories that fit the old journalistic maxim “If it bleeds, it leads.” Much of the shallow coverage of death, disaster, disease, and despair for which foreign media treatments of Africa are criticized derives from what is called “parachute journalism”—dropping in for a brief look at a situation, then flying back out without taking the time to delve deeply into the background or put a story in context.

If we try to put a positive spin on reporting about “trouble in Africa,” we might concede that our reporting is about the best we can hope for, considering the difficult conditions under which reporters must work. We are badly served, however, because our news is superficial, sensationalist, and infrequent.

In some cases, it is also clearly biased. In a study of media coverage of the civil war in Angola, for example, Elaine Windrich found that reporters tended to accept uncritically the US government position concerning our ally Jonas Savimbi. In the context of the Cold War, this was considered acceptable, but the American public was clearly duped. Savimbi was actually a tyrant and a liar, and we eventually had to drop him in favor of his enemies. Everyone, especially Angolans, would have been better served had reporting been more thorough and fair.

Ironically, bias in media coverage can also be found in the desire of some reporters to treat Africa well. Ugandan journalist Charles Onyango-Obbo observes that in the 1990s younger liberal Western journalists began reporting on what they termed a “new breed” of African rulers who they supposed would bring democracy, honesty, and development to African governments and economies. In producing such reports, the journalists glossed over the undemocratic and dishonest features of the new regimes, thus allowing the new rulers to believe that the West would look the other way if they acted badly. "Africa, the continent,” Onyango-Obbo concludes,
is a collection of nations that are pretty much like others elsewhere in the world, struggling with successes and with failures, and there should be no special type of journalism reserved for its coverage. The patronizing reporting one witnesses today is as bad as the condescending work of the past. What the African continent needs is good journalism, one that tells the stories as they are reported and observed. What has happened to coverage of Africa in the Western media today offers the latest proof that there is no alternative to this proven approach.9

Items also appear regularly in newspapers that can be characterized as “curiosities from Africa.” Weeks go by in my local paper without any substantial news from Africa, and then the paper (not a bad paper, actually) includes a front-page story about “newest version of Nigeria-based rip-off targets dog lovers,” a scam luring people to send money to buy or rescue purebred puppies that don’t exist.10 Is this news about Africa? Yes. Is it interesting? Kind of. Does it give us perspective on what is happening in Africa? Not much. Is it useful? Somewhat. Is it the most important news from Africa? Not at all. Once again, however, we should remind ourselves that there has been progress. In this case, the story about puppies was not about curiosities of African village life, but about Africans living in cities with everyday access to modern tools such as the Internet.

After television and newspapers, we can examine popular magazines. We should do better here if only because our magazines offer more space to devote to pondering what is going on in the world. Indeed, journals such as the New Yorker, the Atlantic Monthly, Current History, Discover, Vanity Fair, and the World and I have published thoughtful, unbiased articles about Africa in the last few years. Once again, progress. Yet the number of “trouble in Africa” articles outweighs the number of articles that help us to see Africans as real people attempting to solve their problems in rational ways, even if the solutions might be different from the ones we would choose.

Most Americans read less sophisticated fare as a daily diet. In more popular magazines, most articles about Africa are of the “African safari” genre. A few wild animals, a few natives, a camp, a curio market, a little art, a gourmet meal, and you’re home. For example, SmartMoney advertises that “South Africa has it all: gorgeous scenery, fascinating cultures, rhino-filled game reserves—and, best of all, a weak [currency].”11 In Outside, a blurb for an article quotes a safari brochure as promising “unfiltered Africa, an extremely rare, hard-core, expeditionary safari in the oldest style.” It also notes that when the author of the article arrived in Zimbabwe, he experienced “fabled wildlife, and mutiny on the veld.”12 Yet other themes include “celebrity goes to Africa,” “curious customs,” and “African agony.” These views of Africa not only evoke stereotypes we already hold but reinforce them as well.

National Geographic

One very popular magazine, National Geographic—with an astounding global circulation of nearly eight million—is America’s picture window on the world. What are we likely to see through this window? The editorial policy of the magazine since its early days has been to avoid controversy and print “only what is of a kindly nature . . . about any country or people.”13 That policy, still followed a century later, directs the organization toward wild animals and ethnography and away from the social, political, and economic conditions in which Africans live. Countries such as Congo (Kinshasa) and Malawi were featured in the 1970s and 1980s, but in the 1990s most African countries became unsuitable for National Geographic. As conditions worsened in Africa, it was increasingly difficult to be kind to modern Africa, at least from the American perspective, and the frequency of National Geographic articles dealing with individual African countries declined correspondingly. There are 1990s articles set in Congo and Malawi, but they treat Congo River travel and Lake Malawi water life, much safer topics than the countries themselves.14

A 1996 article about Eritrea demonstrates the point: Eritrea could be featured because, as a brand-new country, it was considered full of hope.15 Likewise, the magazine’s 1993 treatment of the life of blacks in South Africa came long after the world had chosen sides on the issue, which made the subject safe and, to my eye, exploited the situation by printing gripping photographs.16 This is an example of what has been termed “development pornography.” We are asked only to look at others’ misery, not do anything about it or even understand it.

In the 1990s and after, National Geographic continued to run articles on Africa, but they tended to feature animals. The exceptions tend to be “trouble in Africa” articles that, for example, warn against environmental deterioration, describe problems with oil extraction, and decry violence. Although often useful, these articles, even taken as a whole, offer a distorted picture of Africa. A 1997 article on Central Africa provides a brief but generally accurate analysis
of the history of the civil wars in Rwanda and Burundi. Yet most readers would be unable to decipher the implications of the article's points because the author provides little background on post-independence international influence and competition in Africa. A 2003 article on national parks in Gabon rightly praises Gabon's conservation efforts but is entitled "Saving Africa's Eden," thus stereotyping Africa's environment as both idyllic and prehistoric. (Also see Chapter 4.) "Curse of the Black Gold," a 2007 piece, deals with the problems of the oil industry in the Niger Delta and appears to take the side of Africans by pointing to the failure of aid programs and the neglect of international companies such as Shell. However, the article ends on a pessimistic note, giving no suggestions for action and claiming that there are "no answers in sight." This statement effectively tells the reader not to look for answers and not to act, reaffirming the stereotype of Africa as a hopeless place.

In a 2004 article on modern Johannesburg, "City of Hope and Fear," the author focuses on fear and violence in this South African city. The article stands out because only a year later the magazine's sister publication, National Geographic Traveler, included an article on Johannesburg, "Brash and Brilliant," that celebrates "Jo'burg" as a tourist destination. Although portions of South Africa do have high rates of violent crime, as do portions of the United States, journalist Charlayne Hunter-Gault, quoted earlier, chastises the media for focusing on the violence of Johannesburg:

Many people say that they want to visit Africa for the adventure, for some of the world's greatest natural wonders, and because it is the last best place to see animals not in a zoo. Many tell me they are making plans to go there, especially to South Africa, whose struggle against apartheid engaged so many of them. Then, in the next breath, they express concern about the reports of crime they've heard. One caller shared with me the report his son came back with that "everyone" in South Africa carries a gun, which was news to me, a Johannesburg resident of almost ten years.

National Geographic, our window on the world, is rarely a place to get a balanced picture of Africa. This magazine calls itself scientific, yet avoids controversy, thriving on beautiful photography and safe topics. It would have to take such an approach to be so widely accepted in the United States and indeed in the world. Is this publication then useless? No, beauty and safety have their places, and, like our other media, National Geographic is improving. Forty years ago National Geographic would not have published on topics such as environmental degradation and oil extraction, as it does today. But even if the magazine doesn't actively exploit, it does reinforce our stereotypes and confuse us by asserting that beauty, safety, and bland analysis are somehow equal to science and geography.

Movies

Movies, too, teach us our African stereotypes. Whether oldies such as The African Queen, Mogambo, and Tarzan the Ape Man, or newer pictures such as The Constant Gardener and The Last King of Scotland, there are dozens of such 'African' feature films, and each tells a story that seems to be about Africa but in which Africa only provides an exotic background. One funny movie, The Gods Must Be Crazy, a South African shoestring production that has become popular as a video and DVD release, is an exception because of its many scenes featuring African actors. However, it is full of South African white stereotypes of hunter-gatherers, Bantu villagers, Cuban revolutionaries, African dictators, and white damsel in distress—pure entertainment. There is nothing wrong with entertainment, of course, except that this is where we pick up our ideas about Africa. One of my students informed me that in high school he was tested on the content of The Gods Must Be Crazy, which his teacher had considered an authoritative source on African life. Africa has appeared more recently in such feature films as Blood Diamond, Tears of the Sun, and Lord of War. However, as their titles suggest, these movies perpetuate myths of Africa as remote, exotic, and full of violence and disease. All three films echo Leonardo DiCaprio's line in Blood Diamond: "God left this place a long time ago."

Tears of the Sun, an action film, is an example of how difficult it is to portray Africa as savage while portraying Africans as civilized. The premise of the film is that the Navy SEAL commando played by Bruce Willis delves into war-torn Nigeria to extract an American doctor from the cross fire—the war being flippantly explained in terms of "tribal hatred," as if that phrase is enough to encompass the whole array of causes for war and to silence any hopes of remediation. However, despite its stereotypical basis, the film treats its African characters with relative dignity. African refugees in Tears of the Sun arm and defend themselves, and two of them have personalities that are as well developed as those of the white characters. Thus the film's image of Africans as rational,
functional human beings conflicts with its overall message that African wars are caused by ancient, "tribal" rivalries and cannot be ended by rational means.

Lord of War tells the story of an international arms dealer and features Africa only in its second half. The movie represents Africa as a heart of darkness, the geographic equivalent of the Nicholas Cage character's descent into human depravity in the arms trade. Dialogue from the movie reinforces this idea: the main (white) character refers to the outskirts of Monrovia as "the edge of hell." Individual characters are also shallow: African men are all members of a corrupt and licentious governing elite, and the women are hypersexual and mute. The film gives the sense that Africa is a place even a hardened international arms dealer finds unsettling. Gratuitous images of violence, such as a dead man lying unattended in the street beside a hotel, reinforce this image.

Lord of War also evokes African remoteness. In one scene the central character is forced to make an emergency landing and unload his cargo of AK-47s before an Interpol agent catches him. He does so by offering the contents of his plane to a crowd of poor villagers, who strip the plane not only of its contents but of its structure as well, dismantling it for scrap materials.

Blood Diamond, the most offensive of the three films, damages the image both of the continent and of the individual African. Solomon, the film's only significant African character, is hollow, unintelligent, and aggressively instinctual. During a scene in which he and the character played by Leonardo DiCaprio are hiding from passing trucks of militants, Solomon thinks he spots his missing son and cries out, alerting the enemy to their presence. He does not seem to realize his mistake even the following day, after a sharp rebuke from DiCaprio. Later, in another chaotic fighting scene (instigated once again by an act of stupidity), in which everyone is using firearms, Solomon picks up a shovel to bash in the head of the man who kidnapped his son.

In Blood Diamond, the whites are always the ones scheming, plotting, dealing, and above all, thinking. The film's Africans never so much as protest at the injustices of their society, let alone fight back. Solomon, apparently motivated by little more than animal instinct to protect his son, is unable to think through his actions. Dialogue also makes ample use of the abbreviation TIA (for "This is Africa") to dismiss anything violent or distressing that occurs, implying that in Africa, misery is the only way of life.

While it is no longer acceptable to create a film set in Africa that does not feature Africans or that makes overtly racist statements without encasing them in the dialogue of unsavory characters, Hollywood stereotyping of Africa has become veiled rather than growing less prevalent. Fortunately, several contemporary films from international producers offer more enlightened perspectives. The Constant Gardener, The Last King of Scotland, and Hotel Rwanda are particularly good, though each has its problems. These problems are small, however, compared to those of films produced entirely by Americans.

Amusement Parks

Busch Gardens Africa in Tampa, Florida, is another prime example of how we learn about Africa and also how this learning process is changing. In the 1970s the park was called Busch Gardens: The Dark Continent. At that time, a poster advertising the park depicted a white family in an African environment, the husband in a safari suit and pith helmet holding a chimpanzee and pointing to some off-poster sight, and the wife looking on passively. His children also follow his gaze, from the back of an elephant. An Arab or Swahili guide in flowing robes looks on, while three barely visible black African men dressed in loincloths carry the family's luggage.

Twenty years later, this racist and sexist poster is no longer used. As a result of protests, Busch Gardens has tried to change its "Dark Continent" image. Now the park focuses instead on neutral images: the large animal park, replicas of African houses, African-made tourist art, and rides that have mildly African themes. Nostalgia for nineteenth-century stereotypes persists, however, and thus there are endless inconsistencies. The idea of Ubanga Banga Bumper Cars in the section called The Congo would be hilarious except for the underlying message this stereotypical "African" name sends about Africa. It is strange to think of the Dolphin Theater and Feathause restaurant being in Timbuktu, a town on the southern edge of the Sahara Desert. The park's Stanleyville area is named after the violent white conqueror of the Congo River, Henry Morton Stanley, and the colonial town that bore his name. Modern Congolese found the name odious enough to change it to Kisangani. And the real Kisangani doesn't have warthogs, orangutans, or a barbecue smokehouse.

The conflicts with reality go on and on, but to anyone who knows little about Africa, these inconsistencies aren't readily apparent.

Busch Gardens claims to offer a chance to "immerse yourself in the culture of the African continent as you experience its majestic wildlife." How is observing wildlife equal to participation in anyone's culture? Moreover, how does Busch Gardens' silly version of African culture represent the complexity of
African realities! Instead, Busch Gardens Africa teaches Americans damaging stereotypes about Africa. Perhaps in another twenty years we will look back at this version of Busch Gardens as a misguided and misinformed (if not racist) approach to both Africa and entertainment.

Another amusement park, Disney World in Orlando, has become a global pilgrimage destination. When I visited, I was reminded of Africa at several turns (literally) as I took the Jungle River Cruise in boats named after real rivers and places in the Congo rain forest (not jumble): Bomokandi Bertha, Wamba Wanda, and so on. It was all fun and a bit hokey, of course, and the site's designers included elephants and a pygmy war camp. But pygmies don't have war camps—they are more like conservationists than soldiers—and Africa is certainly more than elephants, jungles, and riverboats.

The boat trip guides have a rollicking time telling jokes during the trip. For example:

On the left, a friendly group of native traders. Ukka Mucka Lucka . . . Ubonga Swahili Ungawa . . . Wagga Kuma Nui Ka . . . It's a good thing I speak their language. [Turns to guest] They want to trade their coconuts for your [wife/child/husband] . . . I think we should hold out for at least four.

This is my good friend Sam, who runs the Cannibal Cafe. The last time I talked to Sam was at his cafe. I told him that I didn't like his brother very much. He told me, "Next time, have the salad."24

These couldn't be funny if our culture hadn't put Dark Continent images in our heads before the trip.

(In 1998 Disney) expanded its treatment of Africa with Animal Kingdom, an animal theme park located near Disney World. The African Savannah section of the park is set up to give visitors the sense that they are in a genuinely natural environment. There are, for example, no fences between the visitors and the animals. The illusion of real wilderness is made possible by hidden moats around the predators that give the impression that carnivores and herbivores are living in the same space. They are not, of course, because it would be too costly to allow lions to eat gazelles. Besides, viewing real predatory activity would upset most tourists.

But to merely experience nature is not considered entertaining enough. As one brochure puts it, "The imagination of Disney is going to take you on a journey into the mysteries, marvels and thrills of the ever-unfolding story of animals." Indeed, Disney advertises that the park tells the story of all animals, "real, imaginary and extinct."25

Participants in the Kilimanjaro Safari, which visits a recreated African savanna, buy tickets from a window in a building that looks like a decayed colonial-era outpost. Conquest nostalgia is sold here. And visitors are escorted in buses outfitted to give the feeling of a real safari. Further, as visitors pass certain points, underground sensors trig the events in the fashion of similar tours at Disney World and Disneyland. This is wild nature on demand. And there is a story line: you are hot on the trail of a group of poachers.

In Disney's topsy-turvy world, fictional animals compete with real ones, entertainment competes with understanding, and corporate profits compete with what is termed scientific research. Captivity promotes wildness, we're told, while African complexity is further reduced to stereotypes. And the hunt for poachers models Disney's other enterprises, which from their founding in the 1950s have epitomized the Western dream of the conquest and management of nature through science and technology.

San Diego Zoo's Wild Animal Park offers the same conquest nostalgia as the parks described above. In a children's storytelling arena, a live "Dr. Livingston" entertains visitors in the evening. The park's "Journey into Africa" tour claims to represent an authentic Africa. The website reads: "As you approach your tour vehicle, you start getting a sense of this place called Africa. Lift-up flaps, maps, and cultural artifacts establish a sense of place."26 What is this sense of place? It can hardly be a sense of the whole, complex continent of Africa. Rather, it is a canned production designed to echo the safari mythology of our own culture.

The zoo clearly feels it needs to transform seeing African animals into an African adventure, and what better way to do that than to evoke African stereotypes that the visitor can connect with? "Journey into Africa" includes: "the heart of Africa" (a colonial phrase), which turns out to be its amazing diversity of species. "You enter the "Nairobi Village" through a portal that simulates the ceremonial chamber of a Ugandan king," and you visit the "Mombasa Lagoon," modeled on a "Congo fishing village." The allusions to an Africa filled with villagers, tribes, nonmodern political organizations, and animals go on and on.27

A more positive example is Lowry Park Zoo in Tampa, Florida. A smaller park, Lowry does not attempt to compete with the entertainment and advertising strategies of nearby Busch Gardens and Animal Kingdom. It features
an "Iwuri Forest" region, designed to mimic the tropical rain forest habitat in the northern Congo River Basin. Concerned only with animals, the zoo makes no pretensions of showing African culture to its visitors, nor does it make overtly stereotypical statements about Africa.

**Celebrities**

Is it possible that celebrity attention to Africa's problems could actually reinforce our stereotypes about the continent? This generation's celebrity attention to Africa began in earnest in 1985, when stars Bob Geldof, Bobby Shriver, and others organized the first LiveAid concert, an international event mounted with the intention of raising funds to fight AIDS and poverty in Africa. Since then, additional concerts and a steady stream of celebrity visitors (among them Bono, Mia Farrow, Angelina Jolie, Brad Pitt, Madonna, Guy Ritchie, Jessica Lange, Oprah Winfrey, and Simon Cowell) have helped call attention to many African issues. Some of these celebrities have been criticized in the media for seeking publicity at Africa's expense. And Jolie and Pitt were accused of "celebrity colonialism" for effectively using the government of Namibia to provide privacy and security so they could have a special birthing experience in what she called "the cradle of human kind." Narcissism is certainly alive and well.

Nigerian novelist Uzodinma Iweala says that while Africans appreciate help, the continent does not need to be saved. Celebrities and others use Africa not only to call attention to themselves but also as a prop in their fantasy worlds:

My mood is dampened every time I attend a benefit whose host runs through a litany of African disasters before presenting a (usually) wealthy, white person, who often proceeds to list the things he or she has done for the poor, starving Africans. Every time a well-meaning college student speaks of villagers dancing because they were so grateful for her help, I cringe. Every time a Hollywood director shoots a film about Africa that features a Western protagonist, I shake my head—because Africans, real people though we may be, are used as props in the West's fantasy of itself. And not only do such depictions tend to ignore the West's prominent role in creating many of the unfortunate situations on the continent, they also ignore the incredible work Africans have done and continue to do to fix those problems.

Many have doubted the sincerity of celebrity efforts to help Africa, but it might be more useful to examine the effect of these efforts rather than their motives. In Chapter 6 I discuss the overall effectiveness of American efforts to help Africa. Our purpose here is to ask whether celebrities teach us stereotypes about Africa. Michael Holman, former editor of the Financial Times, a British newspaper, suggests that "celebrity aid" reinforces stereotypes by promoting gift giving rather than deep analysis of African problems. If we continue to see African problems as susceptible to redress only through aid, we will continue to see Africans as helpless and inferior. What message, for example, is sent when celebrities make high-profile adoptions from Africa? That Africa has no future? Holman suggests that celebrities could do the most good for Africa if they would abandon stereotypical help-for-poor-Africans strategies and focus on starting debates about questions that matter. Things might really be different, says Holman, if Madonna, who adopted a child from Malawi, would, say:

respond to the fact that the diaspora of Africa's educated is swollen by 60,000 a year. This has led to the bizarre, outrageous situation that more doctors who were trained in Malawi are practicing in England's second city of Birmingham than in Malawi itself. If one of Malawi's main exports is health professionals, that is not in itself a bad thing—what is unacceptable is that there is no organised replenishment.

Holman doubts that the celebrities' "armies of advisers and publicists and sponsors" would permit such statements. What do you think? I believe that intelligent entertainment celebrities (that's not necessarily an oxymoron) could help spark much-needed debates and still remain celebrities. For now, celebrities tend to reinforce Dark Continent stereotypes and thus keep us from addressing real issues concerning how the world—the one inhabited by both Africans and Americans—is structured.

**Other Sources**

The other places where we learn our ideas about Africa are too numerous to discuss here. How about children's books, place mats in restaurants, Africa-themed resorts, billboards, and computer games? I've seen Africa
used in exotic, inaccurate, and sometimes offensive ways in each of these examples. My impression is that children’s authors are ahead of many others in our culture in trying to portray Africa accurately. Nonetheless, there are matters to pay attention to. Yulisa Amadu Maddy, a Sierra Leonean theater artist and director and novelist, has taken an interest in American children’s literature related to Africa. He notes that although children’s books today intend to capture the positive spirit of Africa, they still contain mistakes that confuse readers and insult Africans. In The Market Lady and the Mango Tree, for example, a greedy market lady claims a mango tree that grows in the marketplace as her personal property and refuses to give mangoes to children unless they pay. She buys a Mercedes Benz with her profits and then begins selling her mangoes to a jelly factory at such a high price that the villagers cannot afford them. In the end, the market lady’s guilty conscience makes her sell the car and give the mangoes to children free of charge. It is a good story, meant to reinforce community values and favor children, except that it portrays the market lady as a stereotypical rich, power-hungry African elite and the village as responding in helpless, un-African ways. There are no doubt greedy people in Africa, but this short book—despite its positive intentions and excellent illustrations—gives a distorted picture of reality. Says Maddy, “No one in his or her right mind, no matter how greedy, would claim a mango tree in the marketplace as private property.”

Maddy also notes that in Ann Grifalconi’s Flyaway Girl, east and west are confused: a mask and a food item from West Africa are associated with the Maasai of East Africa. In Paul Geraughty’s The Hunter, African ivory poachers are blamed for killing elephants when, in fact, Western demand for ivory should also be blamed. Frequently, adds Maddy, stories based on African folktales rely on biased colonial sources that modify the folktales to make Western moral points, not African ones.

Another study of children’s literature asks whether books about South Africa give children a realistic picture. Linda Labbo and Sheryll Field took a selection of American books to South Africa to ask teachers there what they thought. In general, the teachers were impressed and wished that their own students had access to the materials, but they also found that books about children and African animals or about village life could easily give a mistaken impression of life in South Africa. Most South Africans live in cities, and very few have money to visit game parks or private game farms, practically the only places to find wild animals. The South African teachers also suggested that when American students read about village life, they should read several books so as to begin to understand the variety of South African cultures.

Churches and missionaries also play a role in reinforcing the idea of Africans as primitives. Missionaries returning from Africa often communicate to churches in the West that non-Christian Africans need fundamental change because they are culturally, if not biologically, primitive. Ironically, missionaries themselves are often more respectful of African cultures than parishioners in the United States. Those parishioners who give money for African causes frequently want to feel that they are converting or helping poor, unenlightened savages in the old-fashioned missionary mode. The refrain of a 1998 Christian song entitled “Please Don’t Send Me to Africa” encapsulates such an attitude toward the continent:

> Please don’t send me to Africa
> I don’t think I’ve got what it takes
> I’m just a man, I’m not a Tarzan
> Don’t like lions, gorillas, or snakes
> I’ll serve you here in suburbia
> In my comfortable, middle-class life
> But please don’t send me out into the bush
> Where the natives are restless at night

This sentiment, “Please don’t send me to Africa,” appears also in sermons and other church literature to represent a significant sacrifice. But while intended to satirize the faintness of Christian hearts, it does a severe disservice to Africa. Africa is mistaken as a wild, distant place where animals and restless natives abound and discomfort is standard.

And museums? It’s remarkable that we continue the nineteenth-century practice of putting animals and “native” peoples in the same museum, the “natural history” museum. In the American Museum of Natural History in New York, the Field Museum in Chicago, the National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C., and many others, the implication is that premodern African cultures belonged to the history of nature rather than the history of civilization. Moreover, such treatment implies that animals and Africans can be considered separately from ourselves in our understanding of the world. Aware of these problems, natural history museum curators do what they can to overcome them.
Art museums pose a somewhat different problem. Art curators must help us understand that what we consider art is not a universal category appreciated in the same way by all humans. When we see a display of African art—in which masks and statues are usually overrepresented—we see something entirely different than what most Africans themselves do. I might add that curators in both art and natural history museums are frequently ahead of their advertising departments in teaching us about Africa. Curators are often trained as specialists in African studies. Publicists, by contrast, are trained to attract an audience, so they often play on exotic and stereotypical aspects that reflect public interest in Africa. They are correct in assuming that the public is interested in the exotic. But because museums are also committed to accuracy, exhibits since the 1990s and their advertising have displayed much less stereotyping.

Corporate advertising also uses Africa to sell products. Exxon Mobil, Dow, Snapple, Coca-Cola, Honda, Microsoft, and IBM, for example, have recently produced ads depicting their products in association with Africa. Some of these ads are shown in Chapter 10. Advertisers easily pick up on our stereotypes and use them to convince us to buy. Moreover, they educate us about what our culture already “knows” about Africa.

Once you are aware of the ways we commonly treat Africa, you will soon (and perhaps frequently) see Africa treated stereotypically in everyday life. I hope you will also begin to think about why our stereotypes persist. Few such treatments are conscious attempts to make Africa look bad. Far from it. Despite American racism, or perhaps because of it, we are probably more sensitive to this question than most other people in the world. At least in the public sphere, we make explicit efforts to avoid derogatory allusions to Africa or Africans. Therefore, such unintended stereotypical references are all the more indicative of how we see the world. Clearly, they indicate that our belief in an Africa full of animals, “the bush,” and desperate people is so embraced by Americans that we do not even see it as derogatory. The problem, of course, is that such views become self-perpetuating. Even if we want to avoid portraying Africa in stereotypical terms, we are bound to do so because we have few other models of Africa to which we can compare these images.