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Vanishing into the *Terra Incognita*: A Reading of Paul Theroux's *Dark Star Safari*

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Abstract

The Anglo-American travel writer Paul Theroux's 2003 travelogue *Dark Star Safari: Overland from Cairo to Cape Town*, as the title itself suggests, is a record of the writer's journeys from Cairo to Cape Town over land covering several countries in Eastern and Southern Africa. Theroux had been to Africa 38 years ago when he worked as a volunteer in the Peace Corps in Malawi and taught in Uganda for 4 years. The return to Africa, Theroux explains, is motivated as much by the desire to re-discover the Africa he left behind as the desire to become unobtainable and invisible for a while, Africa being "one of the last great places on earth a person can vanish into" (4). In this paper, I argue that while Theroux's take on Africa reveals certain unpleasant truths about contemporary Western society, in his attempts to relate Africa's problems to the so-called ineptitude of its people and his refusal to engage with the colonial guilt, he merely reproduces the old stereotypes about the continent.

Keywords

Travel Writing; Africa; Postcolonialism.

The Anglo-American travel writer Paul Theroux's 2003 travelogue *Dark Star Safari: Overland from Cairo to Cape Town*, as the title itself suggests, is a record of the writer's journeys from Cairo to Cape Town over land covering African countries as Egypt, the Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Malawi, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and South Africa. Theroux had been to Africa 38 years ago when he worked in the Peace Corps in Malawi and as a teacher in Uganda for 4 years. The return to Africa, Theroux explains, is motivated as much by the desire to re-discover the Africa he left behind as the desire to become unobtainable and invisible for a while, Africa being "one of the last great places on earth a person can vanish into" (4). There is also the wanderlust in him, the desire to explore and discover, like Huck Finn "lighting out for the territory" (4). In this paper, I argue that while Theroux's take on Africa reveals certain unpleasant truths about contemporary Western society, in his attempts to relate Africa's problems to the so-called ineptitude of its people and his refusal to engage with the colonial guilt, he merely reproduces the old stereotypes about the continent.

Theroux begins the travelogue by talking about how Africa is represented in the media ("All news out of Africa is bad"), and how this was what prompted him to go there "not for the horror, the hot spots, the massacre-and-earth quake stories" but "I wanted the pleasure of being in Africa again" "feeling that there was more to Africa than misery and terror" (1).

Africa, as Theroux first knew it, is presented as a rural idyll, tribal clashes, drunken brawls and political violence notwithstanding: "Africa was sunlit and lovely, a soft green emptiness of low flat-topped trees and dense bush, bird-squawks, giggling kids, red roads…some people so dark they were purple" (2).

Thus the Africa he remembers is pristine and untouched by civilization with picturesque landscapes where the human beings and animals merge in the background. 38 years ago, Theroux had found "beauty, symmetry, order, the sublime" in Africa (Pratt 213). However, from the beginning of the travelogue, there are enough hints that it is not this Africa which he is going to find.

The condolences he was offered even before he started his trip and the dire pronouncements of the party guests (most of them whites) at a dinner party in Egypt when he said he was going down south to "Africa proper" reveal the stereotypical perceptions about the "big hopeless heart of the continent" (Theroux 17).

It is not as though Theroux is not capable of subverting stereotypes about Africa. For instance, he dispels the stereotype of the African cannibal that literary works like *The Heart of Darkness* put into circulation. Referring to the cannibalism that was "harped on rather than hinted at" in the book, Theroux writes:

> The heavy hints of anthropophagy are a bit of stage-managing on Conrad's part. Though mutilation and amputation and massacre by Belgians had been customary, cannibalism was never institutionalized by Africans in the Congo (as it had been, say, in Fiji). The suggestion of flesh-eating was just another racist dig, like that of the Toronto mayor refusing to go to Kenya, because I don't want to end up in a cooking pot'. (Theroux 261)

But the subversion of stereotypes happens rarely. More often than not, Theroux brings up stereotypes about Africa attributed to other Westerners and then go on to vouch for their veracity. For instance, he quotes a party guest in Egypt who argued that colonization had merely slowed down a process that was inevitable and that the Africa of the present resembled the Africa centuries ago. While acknowledging this as a stereotype, Theroux argues that it was in

some ways true, that while it hadn't reverted to savagery, "Africa had slipped into a stereotype of itself: starving people in a blighted land governed by tyrants, rumors of unspeakable atrocities, despair and darkness" (17). In fact, like them, Theroux too does not want to acknowledge the role of colonialism and neocolonialism in creating the Africa of the present.

Theroux brings up the images used to describe Africa, that of "blind whiteness" and "crepuscular darkness" and says they amount to the same thing, of "terra incognita". But these images he attributes to others are what he keeps repeating through the text (18). In fact, he mentions that for the Westerner in Africa, it constituted "a blankness so blank and so distant" that one could ascribe all the calamities in the world onto it including theft, anarchy, cannibalism, disease, division etc. (17). It is this image of Africa that Theroux carries along with him on his trip like a blue print. As Theroux puts it, "So the image I carried with me on my road trip was of a burned-out wilderness, empty of significant life, of promise, a land of despair, full of predators, that I was tumbling down the side of a dark star" (18).

The "dark star" analogy is used repeatedly throughout the travelogue. At one point Theroux says, "I began to fantasize that the Africa I travelled through was often like a parallel universe, the dark star image in my mind, in which everyone existed as a sort of shadow-counterpart of someone in the brighter world." (286) Thus, for Theroux, the Africans he meets are often shadows of their "brighter" Western counterparts. They are fatalistic, prone to despair and lack the will or the energy to change their fates. They are incapable of maintaining things in good shape and feel at home only following a rudimentary lifestyle.

Mary Louise Pratt in her *Imperial Eyes* points out how the white travellers like Theroux and Moravia find "scarcity of meaning" in the landscape of their former colonies in the postcolonial era as opposed to the "density of meaning" their ancestors used to find there, when the land was full of promise

for colonization. "No longer cornucopias of resources inviting the artful, perfecting intervention of the west, newly assertive, de-exoticizing places and peoples become in the eyes of the seeing-man repugnant conglomerations of incongruities, asymmetries, perversions, absence and emptiness" (Pratt 215).

Theroux also seems to believe that it is in fact pointless to try to change the destinies of these people from the outside. As such, a Western presence in Africa which Theroux berates time and again is that of the aid agency or the relief worker who he feels is doing more bad than good to the African cause. He, in fact, either traces the deplorable condition of Africa to the presence of aid agencies whose "aid" comes with strings attached or else he declares that despite working in Africa for decades, they have not been able to change anything for the better; rather things have worsened because of them. He also argues that they live a very privileged life moving in the latest Land Rovers and have better accommodations than the Africans. He writes:

> Where are the Africans in all this? In my view aid is a failure if in forty years of charity the only people still dishing up the food and doling out the money are foreigners. No Africans are involved – there is not even a concept of African volunteerism or labor-intensive projects. If all you have done is spend money and have not inspired anyone, you can teach the sharpest lesson by turning your back and going home. (Theroux 286)

This view of foreign aid in Africa ignores the thousands of Africans working as volunteers in aid projects. Yet one could say Theroux does raise some pertinent questions about the role of relief agencies in Africa and the absence of Africans at the organizational level of the aid projects. Theroux is also critical of how aid workers sell the latest disaster or famine in Africa, terming it "hunger porn" (193). He declares that the massive entry of aid agencies in Africa have led to the African governments using the disasters in Africa to bring in more aid, most of which goes into their pockets and hence does not help the victims. The

availability of foreign aid, in turn, has led the Africans to "demand money and gifts with a rude, weird sense of entitlement" (Theroux 1).

However, his criticism of the aid workers is also motivated by other factors. In fact, he carries a grudge against them for having denied him lift time and again in their newest land cruisers and land rovers. While there are certain elements of truth to Theroux's take on foreign aid, it is to be noted that his chief gripe seems to be about how the Africans are acting as though they are entitled to the charity bestowed on them by foreigners like him. He feels that the aid projects do not teach the Africans self-dependence. There is an element of truth to what Theroux says, but he has little to say about "the crippling effects of colonialism and neo-colonialism on African society. The expropriation of natural resources, the brutalization of plantation labor, the degradation of Africans by white supremacist regimes: these historical facts do not provoke the same sort of attention as do the failure of contemporary Western charity" (Stecopoulos 227-228). In fact, the colonial guilt is assuaged by claiming that these are people incapable of helping themselves. As Pratt notes with respect to travel writers like Theroux and Moravia, "the impulse of these postcolonial writers is to condemn what they see, trivialize it, and dissociate themselves utterly from it" (213). In fact, they are not even ready to acknowledge that "what they are lamenting is the depredations of western-induced dependency" (Pratt 213).

Theroux even quotes even some of the Africans who are of the opinion him that "aid is one of the main reasons for underdevelopment of Africa" and that it only maintains the status quo (328). Though the general impression Theroux tries to convey is that the people of Africa were as skeptical about the aid agencies, there is an instance where he gives another picture: "I saw no positive results of charitable efforts. But whenever I articulated my skepticism about the economy, the unemployment, or even the potholes or the petty thievery, people in Maputo said, as Africans elsewhere did, 'It was much worse

before'. In many places, I knew, it was much better before" (Theroux 442). In fact, it is striking that Theroux who had worked briefly in Malawi 38 years ago can speak with so much certainty that he *knows* things better than the natives who have been there for years.

The basic premise of the travelogue is that things are much worse than before and every place Theroux visits, every person he talks to and every statistic he quotes, is geared towards giving this impression. Theroux does have a genuine bone to pick with the aid workers, but it is this tone of sheer pessimism that becomes Theroux's defining tone through much of his travels. One could say that his gripe at the aid workers also stems from a belief that they are doing something that is ultimately useless since the Africans cannot be "saved".

Theroux also has a tendency to go overboard in his condemnation of foreign aid as unequivocally bad for Africa, sometimes even tracing apparently unrelated things such as the rise of prostitution in African cities exclusively to aid projects. Also by declaring that the benefits of foreign aid are imagined rather than real, he seems to totally ignore the useful work done by at least a handful of agencies. Secondly, Theroux cannot propose a better solution to the problems faced by Africa. As he says, "maybe there are no answers" (Theroux 286). While he keeps saying that Africans have to be involved in helping themselves in this context and that aid workers can hardly do the job for them, his take on Africans elsewhere seems to imply that they do not care about helping themselves. According to him, most of the African population are either happy loiterers who do not like working or are the unemployed who keep demanding jobs which the governments cannot provide them. Yet those who are employed hardly do any work. It is such gross generalizations that often take the edge out of some of Theroux's insightful findings about Africa.

Ironically, despite Theroux's utter disregard for humanitarian endeavours in Africa, his birthday plans in Africa were "to spend a week or so

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teaching, helping out, doing something useful…I would also visit my old school, may be bring some text books, and I would volunteer to spend a week teaching, to show my gratitude to Malawi after so many years: the long-lost son returning to give something back on his birthday" (316). The American embassy in Malawi does not prove helpful despite prior notice. Theroux notes with wry irony in one of his kinder moments that perhaps his offer was not taken seriously as he had also become just another "agent of virtue" in an environment where foreigners routinely offered help. Though his old colleague promises Theroux help in arranging the lecture in the school where he had taught, he drops the plan after seeing the poor condition of the school [there were no books in the library anymore] and convinced that there is nothing he can do for Africa. He writes:

> I saw the pointlessness, almost triviality, of my staying and attempting to do some teaching. That effort would have been something purely to please myself. I did not feel despair at having been prevented from doing it, but rather a solemn sense that since only Africans could define their problems, only Africans could fix them. (Theroux 336)
>
> That was my Malawian epiphany. Only Africans were capable of making a difference in Africa. All the others, donors and volunteers and bankers, however idealistic, were simply agents of subversion. (Theroux 343)

Though Theroux presents this as his epiphanic moment, one gets the feeling Theroux is merely stating what he had been hinting at and at times reiterating right from the first page of the travelogue: The Africans, the "most lied-to people on earth – manipulated by their governments, burned by foreign experts, befooled by charities and cheated at every turn" in reply "*dragged their feet or tried to emigrate, they begged, they pleaded, they demanded money and gifts with a rude, weird sense of entitlement*" (Theroux 1) [Italics mine].

One feels Theroux's epiphany is also an attempt to evade his own troubled conscience that he ought to be doing "something useful" for Africa. It is only by convincing himself that there is nothing he can do to improve the situation that Theroux can leave the "dark star" for good which seemed far removed from "planet earth".

Apart from the aid worker, it is the Western tourist who becomes his "other" through much of the travelogue against whom he defines his identity as the "traveller-adventurer". The tourist who does not leave the comfort of his luxury bus while on safari and sticks to the most expensive hotels and does not mix with the locals is constantly ridiculed by Theroux. The not-so-rich backpacker tourists are also criticized for their unwillingness to move away from their itineraries fearing dangers on the way.

Theroux's self-representation is as an adventurer who does not shy away from the toils of a journey in cheap conveyances such as a cattle truck or the lack of amenities in a rural hut and who can watch the real life of Africans close at hand. Theroux prefaces his journey with images of Kurtz who "sick as he is, attempts to escape from Marlow's river boat, crawling on all fours like an animal, trying to flee into the jungle" (representing Theroux's own desire to escape from the "creepier aspects of globalization) and Huck Finn, "lighting out for the territory" (representing Theroux's spirit of adventure) (Theroux 3).

At times, the adventurer-traveller identity also blurs with another identity that Theroux claims was his in his earlier life in Africa – "an ambitious exile in the bush" which is in keeping with his fascination for writers like Rimbaud and Greene who had written about Africa[1] (Theroux 10). This is

[1] Later, Theroux himself pooh-poohs this image of the exile he constructs for himself, imagining a life in a small town again, doing something worthy for the locals. "People would say of me, in a praising way, as they always said of such people: 'He devoted his life to Africa!' But that was not it at all, for it was just a version of Rimabaud in Harar: the exile, a selfish beast with modest fantasies of power, secretly enjoying a life of beer drinking and scribbling and occasional mythomania in a nice climate where there were no interruptions, such as unwelcome letters, or faxes or cell phones. It was an eccentric ideal, life lived off the map". (262)

contrasted with the "narrow existence of the tourist or big-game hunter, or the rarefied and misleading experience of the diplomat" (122). The decision to travel through land using the cheapest conveyances available [the exception being the last leg of the journey] and more often than not, living in tents or cheap motels is prompted by a desire to see Africa the way a traveller would, in the tradition of Livingstone, Burton, Speke, Flaubert, Rimbaud etc. and not as a tourist would in his "safari-as-charade" which included "charter flights, obsequious Africans, gourmet food", and branded bush jackets, helmets (426). Distinguishing his own "safari-as-struggle" from this "'Yes, *bwana*' Africa of escapists and honeymooners and so-called consumer travellers in designer *khaki*" who "had lots of money and no interest in Africans", he writes,

> This was a far cry from my safari-as-struggle, including public transport, fungal infections, petty extortion, mocking lepers, dreary bedrooms, bad food, exploding bowels, fleeing animals, rotting schoolrooms, meaningless delays and blunt threats: 'There are bad people there' and 'Give me money!' Consumer travellers raved about flying into Malawi to spend a few days in a lakeside resort; but in Malawi I had been appalled – as a Bible-pious Malawian might put it – at the years the locusts had eaten (Joel 2: 25). (Theroux 426)

Thus the Africa Theroux sees is constantly compared to the picturesque post-card Africa of travel brochures and travel magazines. It has to be said that the places Theroux travels to are the kind of places which would not be part of any tourist itinerary and he does show a genuine interest in talking to the Africans and learning their stories. But inevitably, the stories he writes about are all which highlight the hopelessness of the Black African's existence and their desire to leave Africa for good or else they are about the survivors of the atrocities of dictators or about aid workers who are finding their aid projects a fruitless and thankless task. Also one wonders whether despite Theroux's

claims to interacting with the locals close at hand, his interaction, mainly with Black Africans, remains mostly limited to his drivers or the people he meets on public transport or his old acquaintances.

Along with the aid workers and the tourists, Theroux is also critical of the missionaries in Africa whom he terms "agents of virtue" who have come there for their proselytizing missions believing the Africans are a sinned lot and need saving. He even enters into debate with some of them about their beliefs about the original sin and pooh-poohs their conviction that they are in fact helping the Africans by trying to change their ways of living.

While Theroux's criticism of the missionaries is valid to some extent, it is derived from his view that the Africans should be left to live their lives in the same way that they had lived before the advent of colonialism. Theroux notices a return to subsistence farming in rural Africa, where farmers have moved away from growing cash crops because the governments have failed them and it is only here that Theroux sees any hope. The African towns and cities are, with the exception of Cape Town and Johannesburg, dismal and dirty for Theroux and present only cynicism and despair:

So the future Theroux sees for Africa is only a reversion to earlier methods of living. Though Sudan is only the beginning of Africa [Sudan as such is considered only the beginning of Africa proper, since it has a large Arab presence], for Theroux, his experience in Sudan also stands for much of his impression of how rural Africa should be. In a tiny village in Sudan, an irate Arab man screams at him, which is translated to him by his driver, "Tell Bush we want a pump" (79). Theroux thinks to himself:

> No, I don't think so: a pump would mean gasoline, spare parts, regular maintenance. Ultimately the contraption would fail them. They were better off hauling water the ancient way, with donkeys, goatskin pails, and goatskin water containers which when filled looked like fat goat corpses". (Theroux 79)

Theroux's sarcasm stems partially from his obvious animosity towards the Arabs, who often engage him in discussions of America's foreign policy towards Arab countries or Israel. They obviously unsettle him though he tries to present them as people who all want to migrate to America in search of better fortunes. But his view of the Sudanese is also tempered with the same conviction that they are better off doing subsistence farming since Africans do not know much about maintenance and therefore their cities and towns are all run-down.

While "the cityscapes are constructed around ugliness, grotesquery, and decay", the rural landscapes are inevitably linked to the prehistoric (Pratt 213). This is especially true in Egypt and Sudan, countries which Theroux had not visited 38 years ago. The people there are relegated to a prehistoric time, a representative strategy that Johannes Fabian considers as one of the foundational principles of [Western] anthropology whose "seemingly self-evident objects were the Others of a Western self" (Bunzl xvii). This temporal discourse of anthropology which he terms the "denial of coevalness" is "a persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse". In other words, these Others of the Western self who live in the present are discursively relegated to a past time, i.e, they are termed remnants of a "primitive" way of life in order to justify the claims of Western hegemony and imperialism.

Theroux's admiration for the rural lifestyle and subsistence farming by Black Africans and Arabs however does not extend to Zimbabwe where he enjoys the hospitality of a rich white farmer and his family who have parts of their land being occupied by poor Black Zimbabwean squatters, who have the encouragement and sanction of the Mugabe government. Theroux presents a pitiable picture of the white farmers who have their lands being taken away from them by the government almost overnight as a shortcut method to address the problems of the black Zimbabweans. But he refuses to entertain

any sympathy for the poor squatters who do subsistence farming on the land they have illegally occupied. Theroux's indignation is only reserved for the white farmers and the losses they are incurring as the "petulant" and stubborn squatters grow their maize on lands which can be cultivated in much better ways. Theroux is content to interview only one squatter among the many squatters on the farm and he is all scorn for the man's childish indignation and his complaint that his crops are still not ready for harvesting because the government did not provide the seeds on time.

The sight of beggars pestering him for money is an image that Theroux keeps repeating through the travelogue. Theroux does not believe in giving alms to pestering beggars, as he mostly feels offended by the rude way they beg, their sense of "entitlement" that Theroux owes it to them being the privileged white tourist. There is an interesting episode in a luxury train which Theroux takes on the last leg of his journey. Theroux notes with wry sarcasm how the well-heeled couple on the train threw apples from their baskets to children panhandling by the tracks.

> A skinny girl of about ten or eleven pleaded with me for food, murmuring in the shy prayerful way of a child softly begging. She was so thin and curveless her blue dress hung straight down from her shoulders to her knees like a faded flag of defeat. I could not bring myself to fling food at her. She ducked out of sight, and after we started up she re-appeared, fierce-faced, and flung a small stone through the window, just missing my head. A few more small stones clattered into my sumptuous compartment, plopping on the cushions and smacking the wall – not serious, but meaningful; a symbolic stoning. (Theroux 492)

This episode perhaps best illustrates Theroux's take on Africa and how it is different from that of the other Westerners he condemns like the aid agencies and the tourists. His argument about the aid not helping the Africans may be

right, but he also comes across as equally culpable by refusing to save the sinking ship. After all, though he may ride the same rickety pickup truck as the Africans or wear hand-down clothes as the Africans he travels with, finally, he can leave the "dark star" behind and return to the comforts and familiar demands of his "brighter life" elsewhere.

Finally, no travelogue is an objective account of people and places visited. The subjectivity of the author is firmly imprinted on whatever he/she sees. Theroux who plans his African trip on the cusp of his 60th birthday is also trying to escape the realization that he has aged and is not as young as he used to be. His attempt through his African trip is to prove that he is as agile and adventurous as he used to be in his earlier years. Africa being a land where life expectancy is short, Theroux feels at home because almost all the Africans he meets considers him far younger than he is. His irritation at being called an "old man" by some of the youngsters also points to his desire to forget his approaching birthday and the anxieties of aging. Though Theroux tries to escape thoughts about decay and degeneration with respect to his own person, he can only see signs of dereliction and degeneration everywhere he goes in Africa. He refuses to even give it a thought that the "bright" Africa of his youth was also a construction of the hope and optimism of his younger days. As such, the travelogue also becomes autobiographical in ways Theroux had not intended.

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