Fear of a black planet: anarchy anxieties and postcolonial travel to Africa

KEVIN C DUNN

ABSTRACT Western travel to Africa has historically involved the construction and consumption of African otherness. In the postcolonial era this is most clearly evident in Western tourism to the continent, where Africa is frequently marketed as an exoticised destination to see and consume both ‘nature’ and ‘native’. The Western tourist gaze often requires fixing Africans, both in a spatial site (‘village’) and a temporal site (‘tradition’). Africans on the move (both spatially and temporally) are often seen as threatening to the Western-established images of Africa, which are grounded in a long-standing fear of ‘unorded’ and ‘chaotic’ African space. After 11 September and the USA’s ‘war on terror’ retributive response, the political implications of these fears are evinced in the writings of Robert Kaplan and his popular ‘coming anarchy’ thesis. The article concludes with a critique of Kaplan’s work and a discussion of its implications for Africa and African international relations.

In the wake of the 11 September terrorist attacks, many Americans were reluctant to travel abroad. Travelling in general, especially outside of one’s own borders, suddenly seemed increasingly dangerous. In the months and years that have followed, Westerners’ fear of terrorism has seriously affected the international tourism industries. After the USA launched its retaliatory ‘war on terror’, several analysts commented that Africa represented a ‘soft underbelly’ that terrorists might exploit to further attacks on the West and Westerners. After all, Al Qaeda was allegedly behind the 1994 US embassy bombings in Tanzania and Kenya. Fear was further increased after a Mombasa tourist hotel was attacked in November 2002 and an Israeli airliner narrowly escaped a terrorist’s surface-to-air missile. Reflecting growing concerns that it was unsafe to travel to Africa, on 15 May 2003 British Airways announced a travel ban to Kenya for security and safety reasons. Although the ban on daily flights from London to Nairobi was eventually lifted in late June (at the time of writing, the ban on flights to Mombasa still exists), the Kenya Tourist Board reported that the country’s tourism sector had lost more than $30 million because of the ban. While the travel ban to Kenya was in effect, British Airways announced that it would be the first European airline to land in Baghdad, Iraq, despite the

Kevin C Dunn is in the Department of Political Science, Hobart and William Smith College, Geneva, NY 14456–3997, USA. Email: dunn@hws.edu.

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existence of what the American commanders admitted was a ‘guerrilla war’. While this anecdote is certainly ironic and amusing, it is also highly instructive, for the British Airways travel ban reinforced a long-standing image in the Western mind that travel to Africa is a highly risky affair.

Not surprisingly, in the wake of the 11 September terrorist attacks, one of the US commentators who stepped onto the media’s centre stage was Robert Kaplan, who had published an article entitled ‘The coming anarchy’ in the February 1994 issue of *Atlantic Monthly*. For Kaplan and many others, the terrorist attacks validated his claims that anarchy was coming. In his 1994 article Robert Kaplan sounded the warning bells for his apocalyptic vision of world insecurity caused by Third World environmental degradation, societal collapse and failure to modernise. The anecdotal evidence in his writing came largely from his travels through the postcolonial world. The symbolic linchpin in his argument was the collapse of ‘civilisation’ in Africa. Kaplan’s vision of this ‘anarchy’ was powerfully written and engaging. Even before the 11 September attacks, Kaplan’s arguments were so enticing that the Clinton White House faxed a copy to every US embassy around the world. The conclusions of Kaplan’s travel writings—like those of his earlier *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey Through History*, a 1993 travelogue through the former Yugoslavia—inform US foreign policy and framed many of the discussions that followed.

What makes Kaplan’s work so powerful is his ability to interweave his travelogue with political analysis and policy prescriptions. Clearly there is nothing new in this literary strategy, especially with regard to Western foreign policies toward the Third World. European colonial policies were greatly informed by the travelogues of explorers—from Columbus and the Conquistadors in the Americas to Henry Morton Stanley and Christian missionaries in Africa. What makes Kaplan’s re-employment of this act of political travel writing so interesting is how easily it has been embraced by the public consciousness while being just that: a re-employment of a colonising practice. That is not to suggest that Kaplan is calling for the re-conquest of the Third World. Far from it. Rather, Kaplan is engaging in a colonising act of power by controlling representations of ‘the Other’ and producing a specific, politically saturated picture of the world. In doing so, he mines numerous tropes from earlier colonial-era discourses, and re-invents others to produce his vision of insecurity. It is for these reasons that Kaplan’s work provides a strong example of the interconnected terrain of travel, travel writing, international relations and foreign policy.

This article is not specifically concerned with providing a critique of Kaplan’s ‘Coming anarchy’ thesis. To be sure, Kaplan’s work will be directly addressed in the final section of this article. However, I use this work as a stepping-off point to examine larger issues of travel and international relations in postcolonial Africa. One of the overarching themes here is that Western travel to postcolonial Africa frequently exists within scripts drawn from colonial-era representations of Africa and Africans. In the postcolonial era these scripts and representations have become increasingly less tenable for multiple reasons, and their stability is increasingly contested and under pressure. Thus, the postcolonial travel project is engaged in an act of reifying these discursive constructs. These travel
discourses are produced and circulated through travelogues and other travel writings; representations within the travel industry, particularly within marketing campaigns; and dominant images within popular culture, such as in books, films and television.

One of the key elements in the Western postcolonial travel project to Africa concerns the ‘emplotment’ of Africa and Africans within specific Western-scripted narratives. In this essay, the term ‘narrative’ does not refer exclusively to travel writings, but reflects that discursive and ideological systems that structure the travel experience. Emplotting Africans within these narratives requires the ‘freezing’ of African space—in terms of its meaning and boundaries—and an attempt to control African movement. This emplotment is both spatial and temporal. This article begins with a theoretical examination of these narratives and their colonial roots. It will then explore how these narratives require the freezing of African space and control over African movement. I argue that this need to freeze and control stems from colonial-era anxieties about an unchecked and ‘chaotic’ Africa. In the final section, I use Kaplan’s ‘Coming anarchy’ article to illustrate the links between postcolonial travel to Africa, the narratives that inform it and the foreign policies they engender.

In 1990, four years before Kaplan’s ‘The coming anarchy’ was published, the American rap group Public Enemy released a record entitled Fear of a Black Planet. The album and its title song addressed the anxieties many white Americans have about black Americans crossing socially imposed boundaries, whether they be sexual, political, demographic, financial or intellectual. It was an incendiary critique of the social status quo and the white fears that help maintain inequalities. I have appropriated the group’s title for this article because it is an appropriate response to what I regard as the underlying anxieties behind the need to control African movement and freeze the meaning and boundaries of African spaces. The Western-defined project of (white) modernity creates normative landscapes where only one way of narrating or experiencing that space is allowed. African resistance to the established meanings and boundaries of this project undermines the project itself. That is to say, Africans’ refusal to accept this narrative is a challenge to the exclusive Western authorship of modernity, as well as to its assumed primacy. For many Westerners, such contestation conjures up fears of a black (ie non-white controlled) planet.

The travel experience

One of the most (in)famous Western travellers to Africa was Henry Morton Stanley, who travelled throughout Central and Southern Africa at the end of the 19th century. Because of his historical status, and links to Robert Kaplan’s own travel writings, Stanley provides a useful starting point for my own discussions. Perhaps more than any other single figure, Stanley’s became the authoritative Western voice on Africa at the end of the 19th century. Stanley’s status as expert was entirely a result of his travels in the continent. He gained international fame during the first of his four expeditions to Africa in 1871 when he found the ‘lost’ Scottish missionary-explorer David Livingstone for the New York Herald. His second expedition took him to Lakes Victoria and Tanganyika and down the
Congo River. Lasting from 1874 to 1877, this trip resulted in Stanley’s ‘discovery’ of Lake Edward, Stanley Falls and Stanley Pool. Under the guise of various international associations, Belgian King Leopold II hired Stanley to acquire land in Central Africa for his own personal colony; land that would become the Congo Free State. Through his travels Stanley was responsible for physically demarcating the geographical limits of Leopold II’s possession during an 1879–84 expedition (colonising by traversing), assimilating that space into the larger colonial structures, and scripting the colonial subjects’ identity and history to necessitate their conquest.4

During this time Stanley emerged as the principal author and authority of African identity during the age of conquest. Stanley produced numerous newspaper reports, travelogues, exploration narratives and works of fiction that publicised his accomplishments and views. His writings, particularly the newspaper reports for the New York Herald and his travelogues—How I Found Livingstone (1872), Through the Dark Continent (1878, 2 vols) and The Congo and the Founding of Its Free State (1885, 2 vols)—were incredibly popular both during and after his lifetime. Stanley’s representations of the Africans became an accepted ‘truth’ in the West. Stanley was able to achieve this authoritative position for several reasons. At one level the Africans he wrote about did not have a written tradition from which to offer alternative interpretations. Moreover, these Africans did not have access to the European or US printed media or speaker circuits that Stanley utilised to articulate and circulate his own representations. As a result they were unable to speak for themselves directly to Western audiences. Furthermore, Stanley required all his white companions to sign contracts promising they would not write or publicly speak about their travels until well after he had published his journals. Thus, Stanley reduced any direct challenge to his position as the expert and guaranteed his narrative’s place as the standard interpretation. Yet the real source of his expertise came from his claims of ‘authenticity’ through experience. Through his authoritative ‘traveller’s perspective’ Stanley helped construct an image of Africa and Africans that would not only engender Leopold II’s violent conquest of Africans in the region, but would also frame the way future generations thought and spoke of that space and its inhabitants.

I will explore the politics of Stanley’s narrative later, but for now I am interested in examining the source of its truth claims: the concept of ‘experience’. Stanley’s writings, like all travel writings, employ a certain level of ‘truth claims’ because they are purportedly based on the experience of the author. They reflect a vision of ‘reality’ because that reality was experienced firsthand. Thus, the truth claims of the author lie predominantly in the fact that they are relating experiences that are ontologically ‘true’. Yet the travel writer does not see with fresh, objective eyes. Rather, he or she interprets his/her experiences through the narratives of understandings. In her insightful work on historical experience, Joan Scott argues that experience reproduces rather than contests given ideological systems and the narratives that construct them. As Scott writes: ‘Experience is at once always already an interpretation and is in need of interpretation. What counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straight-forward; it is always contested, always therefore political.’4 In the case of the traveller’s experience,
the traveller’s understanding is shaped by the dominant discourses, narratives and representations in circulation within their historically-specific social context.

In Stanley’s narratives he was drawing upon discursive trends and rhetoric already in circulation. One of Stanley’s important functions was the way he took various elements of these existing Africanist discourses and united them into a singular and authoritative declaration of African identity. This was certainly the case with the other Western travellers to other parts of the soon-to-be colonised world. Edward Said has written forcefully on how Western contact with non-Western cultures was framed by pre-existing notions of ‘the Other’ and the exotic Orient. Likewise, Tzvetan Todorov has documented how Spanish and Portuguese explorers to the ‘new world’ of the Americas had already made their discovery ‘knowable’ through a projection of internal beliefs, characterisations and anxieties circulating within their historically-specific social milieu. The point here is that the traveller is not a blank slate who has objective experiences, but rather someone who reproduces and reinforces the dominant narratives of an ideological system.

However, cultural theorists such as Stuart Hall have pointed out that human agents are not sponges that assimilate these narratives and discourses uncritically. Rather, they arrive at understandings through the negotiation of a range of discursive networks. For travellers to Africa, an understanding of the land and its inhabitants pre-exists before contact, given the construction of Africa and African identities in societal discourses, narratives and representations. Different travellers may react and/or alter these discourses in myriad different ways, but the societally constructed narratives remain the foundational ground upon which they react and negotiate their own understandings. We must now ask ourselves, with reference to postcolonial travel to Africa, what are the elements of these narratives and their underlying ideological systems.

Postcolonial travel and the marketing of Africa

Just as colonial African travel narratives were built upon pre-existing constructions of African identities, postcolonial African travel narratives build upon the colonial discourses and tropes—appropriating, re-employing, subverting and inverting them depending upon the context and the author. Given the opening of discursive space within the postcolonial era—when myriad agents have access to new technologies that enable their representations and interpretations greater circulation than under the colonial regime—it is difficult, and perhaps dangerous, to generalise too greatly about postcolonial travel narratives. However, among the dominant discourses, it is clear that Africa is often presented as an exotised destination in which to see and consume both ‘nature’ and the ‘native’. This disposition, informed by and built upon colonial travel narratives and tropes, entails the practice of commodifying Africa and marketing it for Western consumption.

I suggest that there are at least three discursive images at play within this narrative. The first portrays Africa as a ‘primitive paradise’—a land unspoiled by modernisation. Closely associated with this image is the second image of Africa as a zoo. Finally, there is the presentation of Africa as undeveloped, traditional,
and pure. This is the supposedly ‘authentic’ Africa. These are the images that dominate the marketing strategies of the tourism industry. Throughout the travel brochures tourism websites, and travel ‘documentaries’ one is struck over and over by images of African wildlife and Africans in their ‘traditional’ setting. This is the Africa of safaris and ecotourism; of the Serengeti and the Masai. Rarely are there images of urbanised and industrialised African spaces. One would be hard pressed to find photographs of Dar es Salaam or Lagos in travel paraphernalia. Moreover, the few ‘modern’ Africans represented within this marketing project are typically servers and personal attendants. Within the marketing campaigns that sell Africa to the potential tourist, Africans are almost always portrayed as ‘natives’ in ‘traditional’ garb, often personified by the Masai. Contrast these images with the marketing strategies of First World destinations. For example, urban images of New York City, London and Paris are featured as prominently, if not more so, than settings such as the Grand Canyon, Stonehenge or the vineyards of St Emilion. The difference is between supposed ‘modern’ spaces and ‘pre-modern’ spaces. This dichotomisation is not a coincidence, but an integral part of how Africa is constructed within the dominant Western travel narrative.

What is occurring is the continuation of certain colonial-era tropes, specifically the portrayal of Africa as a primitive paradise. Michael Adanson, an 18th-century traveller to Africa, wrote: ‘Whichever way soever I turned my eyes, I behold a perfect image of pure nature: an agreeable solitude bounded on every side by a charming landscape.’8 Perhaps this literary trope is best captured by Stanley’s remark that ‘All is nature, large ample, untouched and apparently unvisited by man.’9 Of course, the ‘man’ Stanley refers to is the white man. His colonising gaze removes the African inhabitants to portray a primordial terrain teeming with wildlife. Embedded in Stanley’s narrative was a call for Western conquest to ‘vastly improve what Nature had so carelessly left in disorder’.10 In contrast, much of the current employment of this trope carries a different message. Today, these images are employed within the contexts of safaris and ecotourism to encourage the consumption of an ‘unspoiled’ African landscape.

It should be emphasised, however, that the production and circulation of these images is not the exclusive domain of Western whites. African elites are complicit in the reproduction of these ideological narratives. Indeed, we must situate these practices within a larger international political economy framework. The foreign capital accompanying Western travellers to Africa is an important part of many countries’ (and local communities’) economy. Yet there is a tremendous irony to this influx of capital, given the lengthy exploitation of the Third World by the First. In many ways it is a case of the capital returning to the scene of the crime: whether the scene be former slave trading forts or the Kenyan Highlands. As Caren Kaplan sharply observes, ‘Tourism, then, arises out of the economic disasters of other countries that make them “affordable” or subject to “development,” trading upon long-established traditions of cultural and economic hegemony, and, in turn, participating in new versions of hegemonic relations’.

Yet the narratives of the new hegemony bear a striking similarity to the narratives of the old. Specifically, postcolonial travel to Africa continues to be
linked to the freezing of African spaces and control of African movement. Within the colonial project the meanings and boundaries of African space were hotly contested. A large part of the colonial project involved ‘fixing’ the meaning of African space within the dominant, capitalist project. In the Congo, for example, all land that was viewed by Leopold II’s colonial agents as ‘under-utilised’ became the possession of the colonial state. Similar appropriations of land occurred throughout colonial Africa. Colonial agents sought to control Africans’ movement via pass laws and migration controls. The need to control African movement and the meanings and boundaries of African space were fundamental to the realisation of the colonial project and the imposition of specific systems of knowledge. The colonial states quite rightly viewed any resistance and contestation as a threat to their domination because it challenged the colonial ideological system. Although colonialism has given way to the era of postcolonialism, or perhaps neocolonialism, postcolonial travel narratives continue to employ colonial-era tropes and images. More importantly, they continue to engage in the project of freezing African space—its meanings and boundaries—and controlling African movement.

**Controlling and consuming Africa**

Much of the Western tourism project requires that Africans exist within a temporal holding pattern. Within this narrative Africans are portrayed in their ‘natural’ village habitat. This image is grounded in an understanding of development as a linear process, where Westerners are portrayed as having ‘progressed’ further than Africans. For Robert Kaplan, for example, this linear progression means that the First World lives in a space where ‘the environment has been mastered and ethnic animosities have been quelled by bourgeois prosperity’. The rest of the world, however, is still ‘stuck in history’. A trip to Africa, then, is a trip back in developmental time; a trip back into history.

This belief in linear ‘progress’ provided the background knowledge-base for the ‘civilising’ dimension of the colonial project. It was only through the intervention of the civilised West that the African would advance along this diachronic line of progress—‘evolving’ from savagery to civilisation. These colonial ideas also informed the emergence of the dominant postcolonial discourse on development, commonly known as modernisation theory. Perhaps the most representative work of this theory remains WW Rostow’s *The Stages of Economic Growth*, published in 1960. Rostow’s argument was that there are five evolutionary ‘stages’ of economic growth a society or state goes through. In his words, this growth involved ‘maturity’ from ‘traditional’ (read ‘backward’ or ‘immature’) society to one of ‘high mass-consumption’ (read ‘developed’). This approach fixed Africa and Africans in a specific reading of space and time within an evolutionary narrative dictated by Western/modernist values of the individual and the market. This new development discourse was, at its heart, a re-framing of the civilising discourses of colonialism. Africa, defined as a ‘traditional’ space, was set in opposition to Western ‘modernity’.

Within the terms of economic development, this has meant that ‘traditional’ elements—whether economic, social or political—must be rooted out in the
name of progress. Within the postcolonial travel project, however, this has also worked to situate Africa as a destination for visiting the ‘past’. Drawing from the work of Renato Rosaldo, Caren Kaplan has observed that Western postcolonial travel is overly characterised by an ‘Imperialist nostalgia’. As she writes, ‘Imperialism has left edifices and markers of itself the world over, and tourism seeks these markers out, whether they consist of actual monuments to field marshalls or the altered economies of former colonies’. In the case of postcolonial travel to Africa, what is sought by the Western traveller are purer, simpler lifestyles. This is an intrinsic condition of modernity, where the modern subject must travel to another location to ‘discover’ the displaced past. But this entails a construction of the ‘pre-modern’ by which the ‘modern’ is defined. The assumption that modernity has erased a pre-modern past operates in conjunction with the assumption that progress is in opposition to tradition. The result is the construction of non-modern societies as pre-modern—the historical past to modernity’s present. This nostalgia for a mythical past means that Africa is imagined—and frozen—as a space of ‘tradition’ where modernity can visit the pre-modern. In the words of Dean MacCannell, Western narratives ‘museumize the pre-modern’ within this African space.

To accomplish this manoeuvre African movement must be frozen. Temporal and spatial movement by Africans across the boundaries constructed by the postcolonial travel discourses threatens to disrupt those discourses. In terms of temporal movement images of a modern, ‘developed’ Africa are cast as threatening to an endangered, ‘natural’ Africa. In fact, the Western tourist project often works to erase the threat. As noted above, few if any images of a modernised Africa—urbanised and industrialised—are to be found in the marketing of Africa as a tourist destination. Western travellers on East African safaris are often whisked away from the airport on private buses and taken directly to maintained environments (game reserves) where they can consume African ‘nature’ without exposure to certain elements (such as urban life in Dar Es Salaam) that might disrupt or undermine the narrative.

Yet an even greater threat to the ideological systems underpinning these postcolonial travel experiences comes from the spatial movement of Africans. Viewing an area of land as ‘untamed by man’ involves a linear and progressive perspective upon time which emphasises a separation between humans and nature, the latter being constantly under threat from the former. The unchecked movement of Africans threatens to disrupt the narrative. Therefore, the postcolonial travel project requires controlling the movement of Africans, and often the emptying of Africa of its human inhabitants. The creation of national parks and nature or game reserves reflect this Western opposition between humans and the environment. National parks and game reserves are centrally controlled landscapes where local human use is often forbidden. Such projects are consistent with the colonially informed representation of Africa as a primordial ‘natural’ space. As Anderson and Grove have observed: ‘Much of the emotional as distinct from the economic investment which Europe made in Africa has manifested itself in a wish to protect the natural environment as a special kind of “Eden” for the purposes of the European psyche, rather than as a complex and changing environment in which people have actually had to live.’ Moreover,
these areas are a central, if not the primary, component of most African states’ tourist projects. Westerners provide valuable hard currency for their ‘safaris’ into these parks and reserves, where they are able to see African wildlife. Yet the creation of these parks and reserves has displaced thousands of rural people, most of whom now live on the margins of the protected areas from which they were evicted. In many cases their previous normal daily activities are now criminalised. I will provide two examples to illustrate this; the Tarangire National Park in Tanzania and the Matopos National Park of Zimbabwe.

The Tarangire National Park is located in the Simanjiro district of Northern Tanzania. The area first became a game reserve in 1957, and the Masai pastoralists were allowed to remain in the Tarangire Game Reserve for 13 years, their ecosystem largely unaffected. However, in 1970 the area was converted into a national park and rangers placed wooden markers in the ground and announced that people living to the west of them would be evicted. Yet the creation of these ‘closed’ spaces is problematic because the parks and reserves are not self-contained ecosystems. The park is centred around watering sites traditionally used during dry seasons by the rural pastoralists as well as by the region’s wildlife. In the wet season the animals disperse, usually beyond the park’s borders. Since the creation of the park, the Masai pastoralists have been kept out of the park and its much-needed permanent water sources. As Jim Igoe has noted, ‘the main effect of the park was (and still is) the interruption of local resource management systems’. The conservation and development ideologies behind the park’s creation and maintenance are based on the assumption of the inferiority of African resource management and production systems. In addition to the disruption of their ecosystem and way of life, the Masai herdsmen have reported suffering extortion and being physically and sexually abused by the park rangers. The local community does not perceive the park to be a public resource, but a commodity controlled by an elite for the benefit of foreign tourists. As Igoe notes, ‘They [locals] say that they should not have to pay for protected areas so that rich white people could come from Europe and America to look at animals. They are aware that the tourist industry has benefited a wealthy elite while bringing few or no benefits to the people who have been most directly affected by large-scale appropriations of natural resources by the Tanzanian state.’

The Matopos Hills are located in Matabeleland in southern Zimbabwe. They have been inhabited for at least 40 000 years. However, a specified area within the hills has been uninhabited following the creation of the national park in 1962. With the park’s creation came the eviction of its inhabitants. Similar to the Tarangire National Park, the Matopos National Park is not managed in partnership with locals. As Terence Ranger notes, ‘the modernist doctrines of international conservation are embraced by the Zimbabwean state, which in the interests of the “whole community” does not allow locals to collect plants, or hunt, or visit holy places within the park’. But that does not mean that privileged tourists do not have access to this space. As Ranger continues, ‘The imperatives of international tourism have ensured that the park still presents much the same symbolic face as it did under settler rule. People still visit [Cecil] Rhodes Grave and other colonial monuments; still camp out and barbecue; still photograph
indiscriminately; and are still ignorant of the African history and cosmology of the hills."\textsuperscript{22} Thus, in the name of tourism, the Matopos National Park has been emptied of its black inhabitants so that predominantly white tourists may consume it in its frozen colonial image.

In order to preserve the ‘traditional’ and ‘pure’ Africa, the Western tourism project increasingly requires that African space be depopulated of Africans and controlled within specific narratives. Uncontrolled movement by Africans is often seen as a threat because it disrupts the meanings and images assigned to these spaces by the dominant Western narratives. Another clear example of this is the creation of UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Africa. ‘Heritage’ is a concept that is loaded with a notion of time; a notion of the past. As Joost Fontein notes, ‘simply labeling something “heritage” is in itself an intensely political act, justifying the action and rights of some over that of others...The idea of “heritage” is one which results from a very particular way of considering a past, based on a concept of time as linear and progressive, and one in which certain disciplines (especially history and archeology) are seen to have a particular authority.’\textsuperscript{23} World Heritage sites, such as the ruins of Great Zimbabwe and Okapi Wildlife Reserve in the Ituri forest of eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, are major destinations for tourists in Africa. As such, the meaning and narratives attaching to the sites are often frozen within the international conservative discourse of heritage. Local knowledges, perspectives and activities are frequently marginalised and, in some cases, criminalised by an appeal to ‘outstanding universal value’ and preservation for ‘humanity’.

As a final example, consider the case of the Elmina Castle in Ghana. Because of its role in the Atlantic slave trade, the Elmina Castle and other similar castles and trading forts in Western Africa have become of intense interest to members of the African diaspora, especially African Americans. Yet ‘the reawakening of the slave trade has distorted the other stories associated with these structures’.\textsuperscript{24} The meanings attributed to these spaces are defined within the Western travel project solely in terms of their relevance to the Western ‘experience’, ie the Atlantic slave trade, ignoring the fact that their histories extend beyond, both before and after, the period of the slave trade. Thus, a tension results between African American tourists, locals, museum professionals and local chiefs, all of whom have different perspectives and narratives attached to these sites. EM Bruner argues that the Western tourists view Elmina Castle ‘as sacred ground not to be desecrated’ and thus oppose attempts at restoration, while the locals desire restoration in order to encourage greater tourism and its accompanying influx of foreign capital.\textsuperscript{25}

These examples reflect the tourism-inspired project of mummifying the landscape in order to create normative landscapes where only one way of narrating or experiencing the space is privileged. Of course, the very act of freezing is itself a way of re-appropriating the land. Moreover, the ideological systems underpinning these actions work to strengthen the constructed dichotomy of ‘pre-modern’ Africa and the ‘modern’ West. However, I suspect that there is something much larger informing these processes: a long-standing Western fear of ‘unordered’ and ‘chaotic’ African space. One thread running through colonial discourses was the need to control and tame Africa: its
landscape, its nature and its inhabitants. This need was grounded in the belief that a failure to do so would threaten the dual projects of imperialism and modernity. In the immediate aftermath of colonialism, visions of ‘chaotic’ Africa were interpreted as cold war security threats. For example, *Time* magazine claimed that the ‘chaos’ in the newly independent Congo provided fertile soil in which ‘red weeds’ would grow. It should be emphasised that these are not benign tropes and images. Such representations engendered the brutal colonisation of Africa during the 19th and early 20th century. During the Cold War this same imagery prompted Western intervention in African domestic affairs. In the case of the Congo, it resulted in the assassination of its democratically elected leader and the imposition of a brutal, pro-Western dictator for over 30 years. Although the Cold War is over the Western fear of an unordered Africa continues today, and the political implications of this disposition are tremendously important for international relations. This fear—and the policies it engenders—are clearly evident in the writings of Robert Kaplan.

**Robert Kaplan’s anarchy fantasies**

Robert Kaplan’s works are typically political travelogues concerned with rendering representations of distant spaces to his audience, whether those spaces are the Balkans, West Africa or western North America. His article ‘The coming anarchy’ and the full-length book it spawned, *The Ends of the Earth: A Journey at the Dawn of the 21st Century,* seek to construct an image of the Third World for consumption by his fellow First World readers. The message of these writings is a grim one: Western modernity has failed to take hold in the backward Third World and, a prey to environmental degradation and societal collapse, the Third World poses a serious security threat to the First World’s way of life. Kaplan’s writings have greatly informed policy making in the US State Department during the past decade: ‘The coming anarchy’ was faxed to every US embassy around the world and Kaplan become one of the foremost experts’ on the post-11 September world (dis)order. For these reasons Kaplan represents an excellent example of the powerful conjunction between travel, travel writing and international relations.

In his *Atlantic Monthly* article Kaplan opens and closes with a discussion of Sierra Leone, which he visited in late 1993, when rebel troops had control over most of the country and the government was confined to the areas surrounding the capital. He uses Sierra Leone as a stepping-off point for his generalisations about the larger processes he says are occurring throughout the postcolonial world. He states that in Sierra Leone a ‘premodern formlessness’ exists similar to pre-1648 Europe. In one passage he attempts to recast the region in precolonial terms: ‘West Africa is reverting to the Africa of the Victorian Atlas. It consists now of a series of coastal trading posts, such as Freetown and Conakry, and an interior that, owing to violence, volatility, and disease, is becoming, as Graham Greene once observed, “blank” and “unexplored”.’ What has caused this tragedy in Kaplan’s narrative? Kaplan dismisses any political rationale for the events, stating that ‘there is less and less “politics” today in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sri Lanka, the Balkans and the Caucasus, among
other places’. In Kaplan’s narrative, the ‘coming anarchy’ is caused by three factors: ‘demographic, environmental, and societal stress’. Simply put, Kaplan argues that the Third World poses a threat to the rest of the world because of unchecked human growth and movement, environmental abuse and the failure of modernity to take root in the postcolonial world.

I should first point out that Kaplan’s analysis of the situation in Sierra Leone, the linchpin of his argument, is wrong. In Fighting for the Rainforest: War, Youth and Resources in Sierra Leone, anthropologist Paul Richards explains in painstaking detail why Kaplan’s analysis is mistaken and dangerous. According to Kaplan, the war in Sierra Leone was a product of social breakdown and increased tribalism caused by population pressure and environmental collapse. Yet, as Richards notes, there was no run-away environmental crisis in Sierra Leone, nor was the war an ethnic conflict. The war, while dramatically violent, had a clear political context, and the belligerents had rational political aims. Instead of thoughtful political analysis, Kaplan reverts to colonial tropes of Africans as ‘primitive savages’. As Simon Dalby has noted, in Kaplan’s argument ‘resurgent cultural fears of “the Other” and assumptions about the persistence of cultural patterns of animosity and social cleavage are substituted for analysis of resources and rural political ecology’.

For my purposes here, however, I am less concerned with illustrating how Kaplan’s analysis is incorrect than I am with illustrating that his political travelogue is really, at its heart, about African movement and the desire to control that movement. In this way, Kaplan’s writing illustrates a strong link between the postcolonial travel project discussed already and the policy prescriptions such thinking engenders within international relations. Throughout the text Kaplan interweaves tales of his travels with discussions of political thinkers such as Samuel Huntington, Thomas Homer-Dixon and Thomas Malthus. Taken together, his vision of the world-going-to-hell-in-a-handcart emerges. Yet it is the travelogue elements of Kaplan’s text that establish its authenticity. His interpretations of his travels are central to the structuring and tone of his arguments.

Kaplan’s article is peppered with phrases that ground his ‘truth claims’ within the act of travelling, such as ‘two months of recent travel...revealed to me’ and ‘a recent visit...made clear to me’. Yet, unlike Stanley, who claimed to be the ‘first’ explorer in many of the places he visited, Kaplan is unable to claim any original ‘discovery’ or conquest. However, Kaplan does engage in the established trope of ‘surviving’ the Third World. As such, Kaplan re-employs the familiar trope of Africa as the ‘white man’s grave’. In addition to the threats from wildlife and disease, Kaplan braves the streets of West Africa, which he claims are ‘some of the unsafest places in the world’. He survives African airports and their lax security, African restaurants and the fear of being gunned down while eating, African bus stations populated by the ‘loose molecules’ of unemployed youth, and the ‘ordeal’ of the return flight to New York where he faced ‘the toughest security procedures I have ever encountered when returning from overseas’. Thus, Kaplan’s presentations and analyses are established as ‘truth claims’ because he has travelled to the edge of this ‘anarchy’ and has returned to report back to the upper-middle class readers of Atlantic Monthly.
That is to say, he has been there, done that, and come back to present the ‘reality’ of what he has seen.

Within Kaplan’s political travelogue he is primarily concerned with what he considers to be the three causes of anarchy: demographic, environmental and societal stress. Let me turn to a deeper discussion of these causes of Kaplan’s anarchy anxieties. At their core, each of these anxieties is linked to unchecked African movement, both spatially and temporally.

When Kaplan writes about demographic stress, he is concerned both with the process of Third World urbanisation and with the flow of Third World refugees to the West. Quite clearly, Kaplan posits that urbanisation is a source of the ‘anarchy’ when he writes that ‘loose family structures...communalism and animism...provide a weak shield against the corrosive social effects of life in the city’.36 When he travels through six West African countries, Kaplan refers to migrants as ‘loose molecules in a very unstable social fluid, a fluid that was clearly on the verge of igniting’.37 For Kaplan, Africans moving out of their supposed traditional/natural rural environment are dangerous because African city-dwellers have failed to create a ‘modern’ city life. This fear of urbanisation is rooted in his portrayal of postcolonial societal collapse discussed below. Yet it is also linked to Kaplan’s larger anxiety over Africans crossing boundaries, whether they be rural/urban boundaries or state-defined borders. In Kaplan’s narrative, ‘displaced’ Africans moving across boundaries represent a real security threat, particularly to the West. The uncontrolled movement of Africans means the unchecked spread of disease, tribalism and cultural backwardness. Perhaps this is most clearly articulated when he writes: ‘Whatever the laws, refugees find a way to crash official borders, bringing their passions with them, meaning that Europe and the United States will be weakened by cultural disputes’.38 Such a position gained increased relevance in the wake of the 11 September attacks. For Kaplan, the policy implications are clear: increased isolation and the freezing of Africans’ spatial movement. As Dalby points out in his critique of Kaplan, ‘security is understood in the geopolitical term of containment and exclusion’.39

Containment—the restriction of movement—is also the solution to Kaplan’s anxiety over environmental stress. Again, Kaplan takes a dual approach to this fear. On the one hand, the message in Kaplan’s narrative is that (global) environmental resources are being over-used by seemingly short-sighted locals. Rather than explore the historical patterns of development that may be partly responsible for the social processes of the degradation he attacks, Kaplan blames local practices and thus employs the tireless colonial assumption that African resource management and production systems are inferior to those of Western ‘experts’ As Dalby notes, however, a ‘focus on the larger political economy...would lead the analysis in a very different direction, but it is a direction that is not taken by the focus on West Africa as a quasi-autonomous geopolitical entity driven by internal developments’.40 Because Kaplan’s analysis is limited to colonial-era tropes and ideologies, the solution posited is for the protection of these resource-rich spaces by freezing Africans out of them; creating national parks and nature or game reserves.

Kaplan is also concerned about African nature itself. As he claims, ‘the threat
[from Africa] is more elemental: *nature unchecked*. Kaplan’s Africa is one where nature runs rampant. In his follow-up book he proclaims that Africa is sliding back to the ‘dawn’ of time because ‘Africa’s geography was conducive to humanity’s emergence, [but] it may not have been conducive to its further development’. Kaplan observes a world where trees grow inside abandoned buildings and vegetation covers everything. Animals, reptiles and insects are omnipresent and uncontrollable. Lizards slide under his door and tsetse flies threaten his life. Where he sees elements of Western civilisation (such as buildings, roads and railways), African vegetation has triumphed by covering them. To Kaplan, this means that the continent’s prehistoric nature cannot be conquered and that Africa is sliding backwards.

In his portrayal of ‘nature unchecked’, Kaplan is mining a long-standing trope and his writing is alarmingly similar to the rhetorical manoeuvres colonial explorers used to construct an image of Africa as the land that time forgot or, in the case of some postcolonial era writers, a land that is de-evolving. Such writings employ the image of Western symbols of advancement decaying and becoming covered with vegetation. This move was employed by Henry Morton Stanley in his description of Leopoldville in the Congo Free State. After being absent for several months, Stanley returns to find the buildings, roads and railways covered with grass and vegetation. In Stanley’s narrative, he argues that the two physical spheres—Africa and Europe—are intrinsically incompatible, so Stanley redoubles his efforts to control the physical environment through increased European presence and activity. For civilisation to evolve, nature must be tamed. Yet Kaplan’s narrative employs this trope in a style more in keeping with that found in VS Naipaul’s novella, *In a Free State*. In this work, based on Naipaul’s travels through postcolonial Central Africa, the setting is a thinly veiled depiction of post-independence Uganda. The white protagonists make the mistake of venturing into the abandoned expatriate community, where they find the physical trappings of Western civilisation consumed by unchecked African nature. What is more, they are set upon by a pack of dogs, once domesticated but now wild and savage without the firm, guiding hand of their former white colonial masters. While Kaplan avoids using such transparent and highly racist metaphors, his own narrative continues the larger trend: portraying African nature as a security threat that must be contained. Its movement must be held in check for the good of the First World.

Yet underlying this anxiety with spatial movement is a concern with temporal movement. This is most clearly found in Kaplan’s discussion of the ‘societal stress’ behind his vision of a ‘coming anarchy’. Basically, Kaplan’s message is that the postcolonial world has failed to grasp ‘modernity’ and is sliding backwards into a ‘re-primitivised’ temporal space. This is specifically tied to assumptions about temporal movement within the development discourse of modernisation theory discussed above. Rather than embrace the established rhetoric of linear progress, Kaplan asserts that Samuel Huntington’s earlier fears that Western modernisation may lead to societal decay in developing societies have come true. Dismissing African practices of Western beliefs as ‘superficial’, Kaplan paints a picture of Africa populated by ‘Juju warriors’ and ‘primitive savagery’. 
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The basic tenet of this thesis is that Africa is an inherently wild and dangerous place, plagued by politically meaningless violence brought about by the failure of Africans to ‘progress’. In terms of temporal movement Kaplan’s narrative contains an anxiety about Africans’ movement away from ‘traditional’ society to the corrupt and superficial façade of modernity. For Kaplan, this temporal movement is actually a backward movement, towards an imagined pre-colonial barbarism. As Dalby observes: ‘Kaplan notes that the disintegration of order is not a matter of a “primitive” situation, but...a matter of “reprimitized” circumstances in which high-technology tools are used for gang and “tribal” rivalries’.47 But what, in Kaplan’s narrative, is the cause of this temporal backsliding? Kaplan paints a picture in which Africa is undergoing a breakdown of its social fabric because, well, it is Africa. In Kaplan’s narrative Africa simply can not sustain basic elements of civilisation. What should the West’s response be? As Paul Richards observed, ‘Insulation rather than intervention is the rational response of the major powers’.48 Kaplan’s narrative is, to a certain extent, a renunciation of the ‘civilising mission’—‘Africa is beyond hope; we give up’.

Conclusion

In his writings Kaplan is creating a vision of the world through the employment of dichotomies: here/there, First World/Third World, modern/backward, us/them, order/anarchy. The ‘authenticity’ of his narrative rests on his act of travelling, of crossing these boundaries. But to the extent that a traveller traverses boundaries, they are boundaries that the traveller participates in creating.49 Through his act of travel and representation, Robert Kaplan creates, confirms and legitimates his social ‘reality’. Kaplan and his readers are not implicated in his vision of Africa. He is just travelling through the region and we are his voyeuristic extensions. Kaplan, like other Western travellers to Africa before him, wants confirmation of ‘reality’ without acknowledging his own role as agent in the construction of that reality. Yet Kaplan’s vision is saturated by the ideological systems that inform it, particularly in classed, raced and gendered ways.

The fact that Kaplan’s article has become part of the USA’s foreign policy vision of the world makes it highly alarming. Kaplan’s writings, the project of postcolonial travel to Africa, the policies they engender, and the ideological systems underpinning them all, are dangerous and should be critiqued. The Western-defined project of modernity has created normative landscapes where only one way of narrating or experiencing that space is allowed. Within international relations the status quo has created a system of gross inequalities between the First and Third Worlds. Yet African resistance to the established meanings and boundaries of this project undermines the project itself. Rejection of this narrative represents a powerful challenge to the exclusive Western authorship of modernity, as well as to its assumed primacy. Just as the rap group Public Enemy critiqued the anxieties many white Americans have about black Americans crossing socially imposed boundaries in Fear of a Black Planet, there is an urgent need to critically engage existing travel narratives and images of Africa, as well as a need to increase the circulation of counter-hegemonic
discourses and representations. Such responses are particularly important in the current context of the USA’s quasi-imperial ‘war on terror’ which increasingly resembles a protracted war on the Third World.

Notes
1 ‘Britain lifts flights ban to Nairobi’, The Monitor (Kampala), 27 June 2003, pp 1–2.
2 In the wake of the USA’s 2003 war on Iraq, Robert Kaplan published ‘Supremacy by stealth’, Atlantic Monthly, July/August 2003, pp 66–83. In this article Kaplan laid out his 10 rules for how the USA should successfully manage its global empire.
3 For a more sustained examination of these events and their implications, see Kevin C Dunn, Imagining the Congo: The International Relations of Identity, New York: Palgrave, 2003 (esp ch 2).
10 Ibid, p 134.
16 Caren Kaplan, Questions of Travel, p 63.
21 Ibid, p 12.
26 Time, 12 September 1960, p 29.
29 Ibid, p 73.
33 Kaplan, ‘The coming anarchy’, pp 60, 62, emphasis added.
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34 Ibid, p 45.
36 Ibid, p 46.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid, p 62.
39 Dalby, ‘Reading Robert Kaplan’s “The coming anarchy”’, p 200.
40 Ibid, p 197.
41 Kaplan, ‘The coming anarchy’, p 54, emphasis in original.
42 Kaplan, The Ends of the Earth, p 7.
47 Dalby, ‘Reading Robert Kaplan’s “The coming anarchy”’, p 201.
48 Richards, Fighting for the Rain Forest, p xiv.
49 Caren Kaplan, Questions of Travel, p 58.