

# Traveling Beyond Genre: Reviewing Anthony Bourdain: Parts Unknown's Africa

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Cable News Network. (2013–). “Anthony Bourdain: Parts Unknown”

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If you have been in an airport or waiting room in the last four years, you may have noticed an interruption to Cable News Network's 24-hour news cycle. Instead of news programming, *per se*, you can watch the irreverent and provocative chef, Anthony Bourdain, eating, drinking, and chatting his way through (primarily peripheral) countries. Bourdain (2000) is known for his no-nonsense, exposé approach to institutions, politics, and food.

Travel shows typically avoid overly complex political commentary or historicized accounts of localities (Fürsich 2002). The genre has the potential to challenge patronizing dichotomies of exotically other places constructed in “Western” imaginaries (Mathers 2010; Said 2003) but often falls short of realizing this ideal. Instead, locations are suspended from their sociopolitical milieu, locals are used as voiceless set pieces, and exotic lands are presented as fundamentally other (Fürsich 2002). *Parts Unknown* is clearly a travel show; however, I will argue—using five episodes from Central, Southern, and East Africa as evidence (ep. 1:8; ep. 2:6; ep. 4:5; ep. 5:4; ep. 6:5)—that it successfully addresses many of the problems of representation tied to the genre.

The concept of Africa—specifically sub-Saharan/black/tropical Africa—as an entity, while not anthropologically *correct*, is worthy of examination as it pervades public discourse (Ferguson 2006). Conceptually, Africa is imagined as the antithesis to the West, often presented as a place devoid of modernity and civilization, a primordial frontier where sensible animals share space with hopeless people (Echtner and Prasad 2003; Mathers 2004; Mostafanezhad 2013). Consider images of Africa: There is the smiling African child, depoliticized and stripped of agency (Manzo 2008), the leisurely gorilla and the wilderness surrounding it (Gahutu 2016), and traditional kings and customs that allow a journey in Africa to seem

through space *and* time (Mathers 2010). The image easily ignored—competent African adults with smartphones residing in major cities—perhaps says just as much about the paternal stereotypes. We must determine how *Parts Unknown* understands Africa if we are to make claims of its resistance to hegemonic narratives.

Firstly, Bourdain's Africa is a place of varying, though usually postcolonial, histories. At the top of each episode Bourdain, with the aid of historic photos and maps, talks of colonialism and power vacuums. He is critical of the Persians in Zanzibar, the Apartheid regime in South Africa, Ethiopia's Derg, and the French in Madagascar. However, he saves the most cutting criticism for Leopold's Congo,

The Congo . . . The people forget, or never even knew, that the 20th century's first holocaust happened here . . . Leopold's agents . . . raided, slaughtered, mutilated and pressed into forced labor much of the population, in a bloodthirsty quest for first ivory and then rubber. When independence finally came, the Belgians trashed what they could and left behind a completely unprepared, tribally divided and largely ungovernable land mass, filled with stuff that everybody in the world wanted. (ep. 1:8)

This description is apt. Not only does it touch on the horrors of the past, but it also contextualizes the Congo's present within the modern hegemony.

Africans, to Bourdain, are problem solvers who negotiate the neocolonial realities of globalization. Bourdain meets with the adult children of revolutionaries from Zanzibar and Ethiopia and a current member of parliament in Madagascar. He also visits diligent Congolese professionals who, despite not being paid, try to maintain the railway and a scientific research library. In South Africa, Bourdain features (and names) band members, a comedian, a taxi driver, a chef, and a DJ to tease out some political nuance within the modern "rainbow nation." These informants are more than set pieces; they provide critical assessments of their countries from varying positionalities.

Africa is shown to have a complicated social present—a uniquely adapted modernity. This is best represented when the host visits a Congolese chief wearing a Western suit and traditional headgear. Bourdain also forces the viewer to see Maasai warriors with cell phones and interviews a Maasai leader whose son attends college in New Jersey. The show presents the cityscapes of Addis Ababa and Johannesburg as vibrant cosmopolitan urban scenes where "traditional life" is more or less absent. Africans, while different from the likely viewer, are never irreconcilably exotic. As one Congolese informant puts it, "people [in Congo also] like listening to music, drinking their beers, eating" (ep. 1:8).

Perhaps most interestingly, Bourdain's Africa is a place where young people are not nameless victims of poverty, instead they are politicized social actors. He highlights young people's dissent of the African National Congress (ANC) in Johannesburg. One informant there suggests teens are ambivalent about past liberation struggles but care deeply about modernity, joking, "we weren't part of the struggle. I don't care. Thank you for the struggle. I've got Twitter now" (ep. 2:6). Bourdain also features young skaters in Addis. He reminds us that they do not associate with

Live Aid narratives but rather are enthusiastic about the city's recent economic boom. Most subtly, after talking to a political operative in Zanzibar, Bourdain narrates over stereotypical footage of smiling children, "whatever your feelings on revolutions, it is probably worth remembering they start in places like this: people talking. And when they are won, they are often won by people who sat at the feet of the original planners. People who look like this" (ep. 4:5). Instead of invoking compassion or goodwill to overshadow the geopolitical and historical realities (Conran 2011), Bourdain consistently politicizes the past, present, and future of Africa while acknowledging that Africans, not the West, are in the best position to act.

In Madagascar, Bourdain looks inward at his own positionality representing the other. He narrates, "The camera is a liar. It shows everything. It shows nothing. It reveals only what we want. Often, what we see is seen only from a window, moving past and then gone. One window. My window. If you had been here, chances are you would have seen things differently" (ep. 5:4). The image then cuts to a previous scene, reedited to imply hopeless poverty. This nod to the stereotype suggests that Bourdain is cognizant of his alternative narratives and understands his work as transcending popular notions of Africa and limits of the genre. Criticism can always be found: perhaps he spends too much time in the Serengeti, perhaps he features too many expatriates, and perhaps another reviewer "would have seen things differently." However, the evidence provided here indicates that *Parts Unknown* largely succeeds in providing a widely available (Emmy Award winning) counter-hegemonic narrative of Africa and should stand as a model for the rest of the travel show genre.

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