

BOOK REVIEW

Krotz, Larry. 2008. *The Uncertain Business of Doing Good: Outsiders in Africa*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press. ISBN 9780887557071. Paperback 24.95 CAD. Pages: 232.

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This is an easy and enjoyable book stylistically, probably because it was written by a journalist rather than an academic. There's an abundance of humour, metaphor, and of course irony, that indispensable survival tool of the professional expatriate. The content, however, as is apparent from the title, is not at all light, at least in tone and with regard to the fundamental issue being discussed – is it possible for non-Africans to somehow 'save' the continent from itself and its Others? And, perhaps more importantly, is it desirable to even try to do so?

This is where the book got tougher to read, by which I mean, to comprehend as putting forth a particular position with regard to a particular question. Mixed, apparently uncontrolled, messages abound. The reader is provided, right at the outset, with a liberal dose of 'White Man Meets Third World' clichés – the 'chaos,' 'the horrible, heavy, wafting odours of charcoal smoke and rapidly decaying food,' leading to 'revulsion' on the part of the intrepid narrator (24). 'This grand scene had its logic,' writes Krotz, 'but I couldn't find it' (24).

I had a similar struggle with this book. Was this invocation of 'the horror' ironic? Was I in the presence of a nihilistic reporter pushing the pedal to the metal on the 'Africa as victim' train, so that he could show how these emotions were part of his own process of self-overcoming, his realization that this was in fact Step 1 in the process of desiring to do good? I kept turning the pages, waiting for the big reveal, but that moment never came. Or, I should say, that moment came, but then left again, and again and again. I suppose that could be good poetry, but it struck me as a serious flaw in any kind of consistent analysis the book might have to offer. What *does* the author think about the uncertain business of doing good in Africa? He understands that it's people like him who have created and sustained the continent as it is known by the North. He appreciates the complex legacy of colonialism, as well as the ongoing inroads of neoliberalism. But I was left thinking: yes, and so? What do you have to say about all of this? Not that we shouldn't be reminding ourselves, constantly,

of our complicity in 'the horror,' but perhaps we should also be thinking about how we might disconnect from it, stop perpetuating it.

Here, it seemed to me, the text was silent, and this felt like a bit of a broken promise. What had gone wrong? My best guess is that it was a result of the fact that Krotz never stayed in one place for long, was always passing through as a visitor, a viewer, an externality. I know very well that it's impossible to become other than what one is. However, I also think I know that one can sometimes *try* to break through the veil, that one can succeed more or less in this task, that one can struggle and live and even *write* about it all. I suppose this is the fatal lack, in this text, for me – the author doesn't even try to be anything other than a reporter, he doesn't ever take the risk of being called a do-gooder, or a colonizer, or even perhaps, a friend. He doesn't enter into the fray, so that even though this is supposed to be a 'personal reflection', it suffers from an ongoing, seemingly unconscious distancing that, while it keeps the writer safe, deprives the reader of what s/he is led to expect by the title and introduction to the book.

This is one aspect of what I earlier identified as an apparently uncontrolled multiplicity. Another problem I had was trying to figure out exactly what the book was about. After the introduction, the author relates, in that easy yet conflicted way I've already lamented, his experiences in Angola and Kenya, with no real through line that I could apprehend. But when he moves on to discuss Rwanda, it seems that 'the topic' has finally appeared – a reevaluation of the carnage there, through a window looking into the UN war crimes trials held in Arusha, Tanzania. A similar re-reading has been advocated by some academic scholars. So here we have a nice set of connections – between the writer's personal experiences, his professional work as a journalist, what's going on among academics, and the general theme on the doing of good in Africa. These connections are almost made...but not quite, or at least not in a way that left me feeling good about the time I devoted to reading this book.

I was, of course, doing so as a scholar and a theorist, and my guess is that I'm not among its intended audience, even though it was published by a university press. I wasn't really surprised by anything Krotz felt or thought or saw, even though I'm not an Africanist per se. Perhaps a general reader who is unfamiliar with colonialism, development, and neoliberalism, someone who has never seen – or smelled - flayed, fly-ridden goats strung up on a hook, would benefit from reading this book. Sadly, however, as much as I have a soft spot for good-hearted journalists who have been deeply wounded by their calling, there wasn't much here

for me. Nor, I would wager, would there be much for most readers of *Socialist Studies*.