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Book Review: A Fraught Embrace: The Romance & Reality of AIDS Altruism in Africa by Ann Swidler & Susan Cotts Watkins

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Swidler, Ann and Susan Cotts Watkins. *A Fraught Embrace: The Romance & Reality of AIDS Altruism in Africa*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017. xvi + 280 pages. Paperback, \$24.95.

A Fraught Embrace, a collaborative work from sociologists Ann Swidler and Susan Cotts Watkins, explores the complex relationships underpinning the efforts to treat and control the AIDS epidemic in the nation of Malawi. Specifically, the authors investigate who they see as the primary actors in the mission to fight AIDS, from the “altruists” who envision themselves playing a critical role in saving African lives, to the African “brokers” who act as the middlemen and guides between Western altruists and the communities they want to affect, to the “villagers” who dream of their lives being dramatically transformed by the intervention of Westerners. Swidler and Watkins also work to characterize the entirety of AIDS altruism culture in Malawi, including the various governmental and non-governmental organizations that operate there, and the various employees and volunteers that work for them. Ultimately, *A Fraught Embrace* creates a detailed picture of the inner workings of every aspect of the “AIDS enterprise” in Malawi and both the positive and negative impacts it has on the lives of everyone involved.

Much of the evidence comes from the authors’ combined twenty years of travel and experience in Malawi and the plethora of stories, personal relationships, and interviews with Malawians, students, colleagues, Western altruist “donors,” AIDS industry employees, volunteers, and “brokers.” The authors also make use of various family and health survey data, bureaucratic documents and reports, and even literature from NGOs and church groups operating in the country. Perhaps most impressive is the collection of over twelve hundred diaries and field reports that the authors collected from Africans detailing their thoughts and impressions dealing with the AIDS epidemic in their homes and communities.

Through the course of the book, the authors walk their readers through every stage of the industry and movement that makes up the so-called “AIDS enterprise” built around addressing the AIDS crisis in Malawi. In chapters two and three, the authors introduce their reader to the people that often become the altruists or donors seeking to help the less fortunate in a place like Malawi. Often, these are well meaning Westerners who have been “hooked” on Africa through humanitarian, mission, or recreational visits; others are employees for Western or international aid organizers. In chapter four, Swidler and Watkins contrast the growth of the AIDS relief industry—and the money and resources pumped into it—with what it produces. This includes, as the authors state, “the often-frivolous cultural productions meant to make AIDS prevention appealing” (p. 18). Perhaps the most interesting part of the book is in chapters five and six where the experiences of the “brokers,” those Africans who serve as the middlemen for the Western aid projects and the Africans they are trying to reach, are detailed. The authors explain the dreams, desires, and disappointments that are inherent in the system for many brokers who aspire to full-paying jobs or career advancement through their work with these Western aid organizations—advancement that, for many, never materializes. The final chapters chart the reconciliation of this “drama” or “romance” between African brokers and Western donors.

Overall, this is an enlightening work that offers a look into an entire aid enterprise in Africa through the eyes of those who have experienced it first-hand over the course of two decades. It also takes an overtly skeptical tone towards the efforts of many aid organizations and their ability to effect positive change on the ground from, very often, an ocean away. It highlights what should be for any scholar of Africa, many of the familiar tropes and issues that remain in the twenty-first century about Western fantasies of saving Africans from their

problems. But the authors are also careful to empathize with the intentions of the many people and organizations that come to Malwai (or Africa in general), with a genuine desire to help others. The book's conclusion offers advice on working with African brokers, on overcoming the cultural disconnects that often arise, and on how to ensure success by limiting expectations. This book should be recommended to anyone interested in the realities of foreign aid work in Africa or in social and ethnographic analysis.

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