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Ann SWIDLER and Susan Cotts WATKINS, *A Fraught Embrace: The Romance and Reality of AIDS Altruism in Africa*  
(Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2017)

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It has become somewhat of a running joke that Malawi boasts the largest number of American sociologists per capita. *A Fraught Embrace* is the culmination of these efforts by the two intellectual engines behind this “Malawi explosion”—Susan Watkins and Ann Swidler. And, as its culmination, it does not disappoint. *A Fraught Embrace* is both an important piece of transnational public sociology and one of the most important works in cultural sociology to have been published in a long while. It is both an examination of the transnational world of aid wrought by the AIDS epidemic, and of the Malawians who live through and by it.

At the heart of the book are two powerful assertions. First, that perhaps the most important denizens of the world of AIDS-altruism are the brokers who connect altruists and poor villagers, orphaned children and “vulnerable women.” These actors, who usually disappear from the imaginations of both altruists and social researchers, are the true heroes of this tale. Second, a core metaphor: that the relationship between altruists and brokers can be productively understood in terms of romance. That is, a relationship partially made of threads of fantasy—some of which stand the test of time, others that wither and tear as they are pulled by the challenges of an actual relationship.

The book’s form follows the metaphor of the relationship. It begins with one lover, turns to the other, and traces the tale of their sometimes-disappointing affair. Thus, the first part of the book, in chapters 2-4, follows the altruists. It describes who they are: immense bureaucracies as well as the small churches and colorful characters who come to Malawi to build wells or test their latest cure for AIDS. It follows their imagination of “the third world” in general and of Malawi in particular—a country seemingly overflowing with smiling, desperate, people; and even describes the cultural trinkets and gifts they bring their loved ones: the leaflets, the workshops, the AIDS-dramas they fund so that the villagers will finally learn about AIDS. (The fact that everybody knows someone who has died and,

that to all intents and purposes there is no one in Malawi who is not intimately aware of AIDS, is often seems lost in the rush to “do something”.)

The second part of the book, in chapters 5-6, describes the brokers. Again, it begins by painting a picture of who they are: the true transnational elites living in the capital; the “interstitial elites,” with high school education or even some college, whose very existence as such is dependent on the altruists, and the sporadic funding by INGOS; the “volunteers,” mostly high-school graduates desperately trying to move forward in a precarious world that could collapse at any given moment, sending them back to subsistence farming. And then, in chapter 6, it describes what it means to yoke one’s life to the rhythms and vicissitudes of foreign money and the logics of altruism. Here, in what is perhaps the most powerful chapter in the book, Swidler and Watkins describe how such a life comes to be marked by both the precarity of poverty but also the constant possibility (usually just around the corner but sometimes truly encountered) of “miracles”—of opportunities falling into people’s laps as they are selling tomatoes in the market or a steady job that seems to serendipitously appear when they have lost all hope.

Having described the protagonists, *A Fraught Embrace* then considers other aspects of the relationship. And, in what is perhaps one of the signal achievements of the book, Swidler and Watkins describe the AIDS-altruism relationship as an existentially earnest one, even when it is short-lived. The altruists, by and large, are really there to “do good”; the brokers care about what they do, even though their projects are intertwined with their own attempts to both secure their futures and effect their transformation into modern, Western subjects.

However, if the relationship between brokers and altruists is partly woven of overlapping fantasies, how do they manage to keep it alive on the ground? The answer, not surprisingly, is they do not always manage to do so very well. Sometimes they succeed. The category of “orphans,” evoking Dickens-like images for Western altruists, has little to do with social reality in a world made up of extended kin, where those who have both their parents may well be as needy and poor as nominal-orphans. Yet, by re-shaping the category of afflicted children to become “orphans and vulnerable children (OVC),” the imagination of the altruists is kept intact, while any and all children who need assistance sneak in through the back door.

Other categories, such as “vulnerable women” do not fare as well. It is not clear that the women *are* indeed more vulnerable. And if they are, brokers and villagers alike do not play along. In other words, the double fitting of imaginaries takes creative work that involves the crafting of boundary objects and categories. But, as an achievement, these boundary categories sometimes fail, and need to be actively worked upon.

Lastly, the question that haunts this romance, as it haunts any other: how do we know that the relationship is successful? Beyond the moment of infatuation, the culmination of the AIDS altruism romance resides in testimonials, evaluations, and never-ending reports. Although such cultural products have been extensively mined by anthropologists of development and NGO-work, Swidler and Watkins present them in a new light—as a way of substantiating romance. Not only the testimonials but even the tedious reports (limited as they are) are ways to perform the relationship and give it flesh in the usual absence of actually knowing whether or not the intervention “worked.” This does not, of course, turn these practices into a “good”—Swidler and Watkins are deeply critical of many of the ways in which the attempt to provide aid becomes sidelined by such rituals. And yet it does make them legible in new ways.

*A Fraught Embrace* can be read in two ways. In one light, it is an important piece of public sociology. Its audiences are the multitudes of Westerners trying to alleviate distant suffering and poverty, from those who steer the “lumbering behemoths” of UNAIDS to the fluttering butterflies who hop on a plane in search of a way to better the world. Reading the book should, for them, clarify what it is that they do and why they so often fail. It should give them a sense of how their labors can shape the countries in which they work in unexpected ways. By way of some seemingly small examples: understanding who “volunteers” are in these contexts, along with their aspirations and insecurities, would hopefully make altruists think more about their responsibilities to these people; truly understanding that the way to combat AIDS is probably not through “raising awareness,” may free funds for other projects; assuming that villages already have working social arrangements may temper the fantasies concerned with “saving the locals.”

In this sense, the way this book emerged is telling. Like a lot of good social science, it seems to have started almost by accident. While they were staying in Malawi for several months a year, thinking about

the AIDS epidemic, sex, condoms, and mortality rates, Swidler and Watkins kept bumping into the brokers they write of as they were flitting from workshop to workshop. They also found themselves sitting with altruists who told them stories of their current or future projects. As importantly, taking a healthy distance from their work, they realized that their own research endeavor was only possible through the mediation of brokers—people with whom they spent most of their time, and for whom they have become powerful patrons, assisting them in more than employment. Although the book is about AIDS altruism, it is also an auto-ethnography of sorts, as research projects in poor countries share many of the same characteristics as AIDS-altruism—the brokers, foreign money, targeted villagers, shared fantasies. Sociologists, like AIDS-altruists, need to think carefully about the kind of world they help create with their projects, of their own fantasies and those of the brokers they inevitably recruit.

As a work of cultural sociology, *A Fraught Embrace* is understated. It does not situate itself “in the literature,” and often does not even cite what we might think of as “the relevant literatures.” For all that, this book truly breaks new ground. At its heart is the insight that understanding these kinds of mediated worlds is to understand how fantasies are made to fit, or grate, against each other. The brokers, in that sense, are fantasy-workers. As noted above, they constantly need to fit the fantasies of altruists, and those of the villagers. But, more crucially, the brokers themselves have their own fantasies and imaginaries, mostly made invisible for altruists. They are the aspiring elites, attempting to construct upwards mobility, or at least a modicum of stability, in a precarious social world. The entire book, then, revolves around the order that is constructed as fantasies are crystallized into working arrangements.

Rather than beginning with the interaction itself, Swidler and Watkins thus begin with the parties’ fantasies—both of each other and of their own imaginary futures. It is only by understanding these fantasies that we can understand what happens in the relationship. But, even more importantly, rather than thinking about fantasies as the past of the relationship, and the actual as its present, *A Fraught Embrace* shows the complex work in which actors engage in order to sustain the fantasy and develop it, as well as the patterned distribution of such fantasy-work among actors.

The interaction of fantasies and the creative work necessary to sustain them, as the book convincingly shows, matters deeply. The

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ultimate achievement of the book is to convince the reader that focusing on such fantasies matters not just for our understanding of culture, but for people's lives and for the emerging macro-social arrangements we call the world of transnational aid.

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