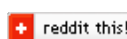


## Zero Latitude unpacks colonial attitudes

BY CHRIS THURMAN, OCTOBER 16 2014, 06:02



EXPLORER'S ART: Artist Bianca Baldi rediscovered Pierre de Brazza's bed. Picture: GOETHE-INSTITUT

EBOLA is dangerous and scary. The virus is especially dangerous and scary to citizens of a handful of countries in west Africa. There is no reason why it should be perceived as an imminent threat to people in America or Europe. But try telling that to CNN.

Undoubtedly spotting a ratings opportunity that would give it an edge over cable news rivals, it has plumbed the depths — as low as television news goes, at the level of Fox News — in its sensationalist coverage of the epidemic.

First there was the risible rhetorical question: "Is Ebola the ISIS of biological agents?" This

absurdly inappropriate headline has been widely derided since Nigerian-American writer Teju Cole's evisceration of the comparison in *The New Yorker*.

Undaunted, CNN's next gambit was to solicit expert advice on epidemiology from Robin Cook, a doctor-turned-novelist whose 1987 thriller *Outbreak* "predicted" (so viewers were told) the current Ebola "crisis". So far removed is this fiction from the facts that media watchdogs wonder how CNN gets away with it.

After all, the US Federal Communications Commission does not have the excuse of, say, the Broadcasting Complaints Commission of SA — which is burdened by its apparent deference to self-important, neurotic and Stalinist cabinet ministers. The most likely explanation for the general tolerance of CNN's recklessness is, sadly, the most obvious: alarmist and inaccurate reporting on Ebola is a function of its putative origins on the African continent. The centuries-old tropes that reinforce a simultaneously exotic and savage "Africa" in the global imagination, making Africa by turns appealing and appalling, continue to shape mainstream media narratives.

Monkey-eating Liberians? Check. Endemic poverty, ignorance and violence? Check. Failed states, porous borders and desperate refugees? Check.

It is timely, then, that Bianca Baldi reminds us in her online publication and exhibition, *Zero Latitude* (Goethe-Institut, 119 Jan Smuts Avenue, Parkwood to October 28), that "Africa" is as much a symbol constructed by the West as it is a distinct geographical area.

The exhibition title refers literally to equatorial regions and, in particular, to the Congo: the river, the countries and the colonial history that still seems to shape them. Schemers like Henry Morton Stanley and King Leopold of Belgium have a lot to answer for in this regard, but what about men like the elaborately named Pierre Paul François Camille Savorgnan de Brazza?

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The Italian-French explorer gave his name to Congo-Brazzaville (the Republic of the Congo) and its capital city, along with other local phenomena such as De Brazza's Monkey. Baldi lifts this eccentric figure from the archive and, by emphasising his connection to the photographer Nadar, ties late-19th century colonial history to a particular art-historical context.

Nadar was both a portraitist, using the vanity of socialites to turn his famous studio into an experimental space, and a photographic pioneer: he developed new techniques of artificial lighting, and was the first person to take aerial photographs.

If the politicians and monarchs of Europe, in their dealings with African colonies, were defined by their arrogance, a character like De Brazza is perhaps better understood in terms of extravagance. This is demonstrated by the "Louis Vuitton Explorer", a portable bed designed by the French luggage-maker for De Brazza in 1905. Baldi tracked this curious object down and has revived it through video and photographic installations.

Baldi is aware of the critical framework offered by her discovery of the trunk; one could trace a trajectory from it to the Louis Vuitton handbags that act as metonyms for 21st century consumerist excess, and then connect this to the economics of the colonial project. But she also admits to a certain fondness for De Brazza's creativity, and indeed much of this exhibition is a reflection on the "zero latitude" from which art is born — the blank canvas, the imagined space.

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