

The New Slave Narrative

THE BATTLE OVER REPRESENTATIONS
OF CONTEMPORARY SLAVERY

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BLACKFACE ABOLITION

Frederick Douglass's 1855 narrative *My Bondage and My Freedom* provides critical personal insight into the influence white abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison had on the shape and structure of his earlier life narrative and of the lectures he was invited to give while touring the United States for fourteen years. The combination of his intimate personal experience of slavery, his extraordinary intellect, and his autodidactic education in the politics and economics of the "peculiar institution" put Douglass in a unique position to provide the "philosophy" and expound upon his own sophisticated political claims. As far as many white abolitionists were concerned, however, Douglass was merely the black face of the movement, relegated to the role of illustration, instead of political philosopher. He recalls how this realization became sedimented in his understanding of his colleagues' perception of him: "'Give us the facts,' said Collins, 'we will take care of the philosophy.' . . . 'Tell your story, Frederick,' would whisper my then revered friend, William Lloyd Garrison, as I stepped upon the platform. I could not always obey, for I was now reading and thinking. New views of the subject were presented to my mind. It did not entirely satisfy me to narrate wrongs; I felt like denouncing them." Douglass's own politics were not of particular concern to eminent abolitionists like Garrison and his colleagues in the Massachusetts antislavery movement. In fact, when Douglass drew his own conclusion that the Constitution was a document that held within it the

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requirement of a slave-free nation, a contention to which Garrison was adamantly in opposition, Douglass was exiled, and his life story was no longer of use to the revered white activist.

In the same year as Douglass published *My Bondage*, a small coalition of revolutionary activists, including Gerrit Smith, James McCune Smith, Frederick Douglass, and John Brown, splintered from the mainstream abolitionist movement to form the Radical Political Abolitionists. They admitted to only one ambition: the immediate emancipation through governmental decree of all enslaved people in every U.S. state. In *The Black Hearts of Men*, John Stauffer suggests that John Brown and Gerrit Smith transcended the pervasive sense of racial superiority among white abolitionists in that their “individual self-definitions crossed racial lines. They defined themselves publicly by constructing authentic, intelligent, and black performative selves—the wearing of a mask, so to speak—that helped them to blur and subvert racial barriers.”¹ To the New York-born African American James McCune Smith, that black mask, or “black heart” (as Stauffer calls it), was the only way for a white American to genuinely embrace the cause of abolition; he had to viscerally experience the shame of slavery and forgo the sin of white privilege. That “black heart” led John Brown to sacrifice his own life for the cause of his black and black-hearted brethren.

Even as Douglass’s fellow abolitionists were cultivating “blackheartedness” as a sign of their progressive stance toward race and their spiritual transcendence of the American sin of slavery, the black minstrel tradition was taking root in the United States, entertaining white audiences with parodies of black life. Frederick Douglass wrote in the *North Star* of October 27, 1848, that minstrel shows were produced by “the filthy scum of white society, who have stolen from us a complexion denied to them by nature, in which to make money, and pander to the corrupt taste of their white fellow citizens.”² Douglass knew the difference between a black heart and blackface. Both are imbued with a peculiar desire regarding blackness. The difference is in the motivation for and means of engaging that desire. For the Radical Abolitionists, “the true spiritual heart was a black heart that shared a humanity with all people and lacked the airs of superiority of a white heart.”³ The minstrel show, on the other hand, was no spiritual engagement with the oppressed black community. Blackface instead provided license to white actors to behave in absurd and childish ways, to perform the fop and the dandy, as if those behaviors and types were innate to

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the black race. Blackface provided white minstrels a taste of the freedom of expression they imagined to be an inherent aspect of black life, even as people of African descent lived in slavery and had their own expressions entirely circumscribed by law and practice. It “conveniently rationalized racial oppression,” as Eric Lott contends.⁴ “Minstrelsy was an arena in which the efficient expropriation of the cultural commodity ‘blackness’ occurred,” but it was also the cultural space in which “racial conflict and cultural exchange are negotiated between men.”⁵ The blackface imagination of black life was limited, not transcendent; it was a display of the radically other that merely implied the radically intimate.

But white abolitionists were not entirely free from the snares of a blackface style of engagement with the black community. Even abolitionist heroes like William Lloyd Garrison (who was, not coincidentally, the source of much of the Radical Political Abolitionists’ consternation) were likely to expect a caricature of blackness from the formerly enslaved people with whom he worked, seeking out only the facade of black sentiment and thought, while maintaining white people at the core of the movement and its politics. The black former slave on the stage was a puppet, a mask for the white abolitionists’ agendas. Indeed, Frederick Douglass was explicitly told to tell only his life story when on stage and to leave the “philosophizing” to the white abolitionists who surrounded him. Douglass represented the black public face of the movement, relegated to the role of exemplar instead of philosopher. Even more gallingly, he was also encouraged to put on a “little of the plantation manner” in order to convince others that his story was a legitimate contribution to the movement.⁶ Douglass’s life story was material to be exploited toward the political ends that the white abolitionists devised and promoted.

Despite the ambition of cultivating “black hearts,” many abolitionists often exploited the life narratives that formerly enslaved people contributed to the abolitionist movement as merely living and breathing evidence of the larger political messaging that white abolitionists devised and deliberately curated. Douglass’s revelation of the control white abolitionists demanded over the framing of the slave’s narrative was a political claim that condemned the appropriation of black experience for white ends. It disclosed the abolitionists’ regulation and management over what and how Americans learned about slavery. It called into question the agency and control that the life narrative is supposed to represent to the enslaved or to any

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writer who chooses to tell his or her own story. It indicted abolitionist motivations for engaging fugitives in the movement. It suggested that abolitionists had not achieved the “spiritual heart” that would allow them to identify with their black counterparts but instead had reinscribed the political and intellectual hierarchies inherited from institutionalized slavery. It accused the most prominent antislavery activists of using formerly enslaved people as the black faces of the movement while white men remained behind the mask, determining the image of blackness that was to be available to their audiences and the politics that would be communicated. Douglass essentially charged Garrison and his colleagues with being blackface abolitionists.

As the slave narrative tradition—for which Frederick Douglass is the standard bearer and most revered representative—has reemerged in the last twenty-five years, so has the accompanying apparatus of the antislavery movement and its attendant crises in the representation of bondage and freedom. As was the case in the nineteenth century, much of the political messaging that the new slave narrative promotes is packaged and framed by white activists. First-person narratives provide the evidentiary foundation upon which nonprofits, legislators, lawyers, researchers, and activists make their claims for justice. The few printed life stories of formerly enslaved people are promoted by U.S. retailers, Christian bookstores, and nonprofit e-stores, and they fund a renewed twenty-first-century abolitionist movement, but they cannot possibly provide a representative sample of the approximated tens of millions of people who are enslaved today. Instead, the subjects who are chosen to tell and publish their stories are few, and the sample group is quite deliberately selected to represent the agendas of the groups that engage in the antislavery cause. Today, it is often through nonprofit organizations, think tanks, and politicians with their own particular agendas, anxieties, and needs in mind that we learn of slavery. As we have seen in the first chapters of these books, narrative tensions in the new slave narratives reveal fissures in ideological, political, and intellectual concerns, and there is no doubt that some of those dissonances grow out of both the competing ideological claims of the antislavery movement and the competing narrative impulses of the named narrators and their amanuenses. As I will argue in this chapter, the lives and narratives that do gain public attention can sometimes be co-opted by blackface abolitionists who seek, as Garrison did, to control the narrative of slavery that is made

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available even in first-person narratives that are not their own. Douglass's experience of the thin line between black hearts and blackface is instructive as we consider the political implications of the genre and of antislavery discourse as it takes on twenty-first-century contours.

CRUSADE POLITICS: THE NEW SLAVE NARRATIVE FROM AFRICA

Recent statistical estimates of global slavery (as widely disputed as they may be) suggest that in sub-Saharan Africa alone, there are approximately 6.2 million people currently enslaved—that means sub-Saharan Africans account for approximately 15.4 percent of the estimated 40.3 million enslaved laborers in the world, which corresponds fairly closely to the ratio of sub-Saharan African people in the global population in general.⁷ From the chattel enslavement of people in Mauritania to the debt bondage practiced in the mines of Tanzania to forced foster-child labor in Benin to child soldiering in Uganda and the sexual enslavement of women from Nigeria, we find versions of every form of slavery practiced in the world today in Africa.

Nonetheless, it is curious that victims of slavery in Africa (and other survivors of African descent) are so overrepresented among slave narrators and have so often been employed as poster children for the new abolitionist cause. African authors compose 30 percent of all book-length new slave narratives being considered here and 45 percent of those published before 2010, when the trend turned toward domestic child sex trafficking narratives (which use the language of “slavery” to define their experiences). Not insignificantly, many of the most widely disseminated of them are tales of African captivity, including, of course, Mende Nazer's and Francis Bok's memoirs but also Grace Akallo's *Girl Soldier*, Evelyn Amony's *My Name is Evelyn Amony*, Tina Okpara's *My Life Has A Price*, Bukola Oriola's *Imprisoned: The Travails of a Trafficked Victim*, Fatima's *Esclave à 11 ans*, and Henriette Akofa's *Une esclave moderne*. If we count narratives by people of African descent in the diaspora (including Jean-Robert Cadet, Brooke Parker-Bello, and Mimi Crown), of course, the numbers rise even higher.

It might be that people in the West gravitate to images of slavery that depict people of African descent as its victims because of the West's history of racialized slavery. However, African settings are often employed as a convenient facade for the neoliberal political agendas and post-9/11

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anti-Muslim sentiments that dominate the form and content of some of the most popular new slave narratives. Indeed, 30 percent of all the narratives involve a captor who is Muslim and corresponding anti-Islamic sentiment. This particular strain of the narratives is used to promote a crusade politics, mobilizing antislavery discourse as an irrefutably ethical facade for barely hidden agendas aimed at deposing African leaders such as Uganda's Joseph Kony and Sudan's Omar al-Bashir, dismantling Muslim governments, and promoting Christian-led U.S. policy abroad. Far more insidious than Garrison, who wanted to control the political messaging that accompanied Douglass's personal experience, white, conservative Christians who control a significant sector of twenty-first-century antislavery activism employ enslaved people's narratives as illustrations while they provide their own "philosophy" of universal Christian persecution and justified military and political engagement in Africa. In this politicized setting, some of the most widely distributed narratives are those from Africa, and the specter of blackface abolition finds its way into mainstream depictions of slavery once again as Africa becomes the battleground for an ideological war.

Many of the religiously motivated activists engaged in antislavery advocacy indicate sincerely that their inspiration for pursuing the abolition of contemporary forms of slavery is their sense of it as a fundamental duty of their faith and a legacy of their ancestors' commitment to abolition. Linda Smith, former congresswoman from the state of Washington and founder of Shared Hope International, remembers in her memoir/humanitarian narrative/religious tract *From Congress to the Brothel* that "God burdened my heart for the [trafficked] girls. I didn't know exactly what it meant or what it might require, but at that moment, I overwhelmingly knew it was my calling."⁸ Faith McDonnell, religious director of the Institute for Religion and Democracy and coauthor of Grace Akallo's child soldier narrative *Girl Soldier* (discussed at length below), suggests that "the Christian community is on the cutting edge of history that is being written today. It is the history of how God's people are answering His call to help save the children of northern Uganda."⁹ The framing of humanitarian commitment through the discourse of a call to "save" people (especially Africans) is typical of the white "savior or redeemer," as described by Makau Mutua, who "protects, vindicates, civilizes, restrains, and safeguards."¹⁰ The condescending role of the savior implies the helplessness and lack of agency of

those being rescued by those who believe they are called by God and history to act.

Some contemporary abolitionists attempt to resist such critiques by invoking an inheritance of the motives of black-hearted, self-sacrificing abolitionists. For instance, Sam Brownback, a former Republican senator and governor of Kansas and current U.S. ambassador at large for international religious freedom, who has championed the abolitionist cause in the U.S. legislature, “literally sees his work on Sudan as rooted in his Kansas forebearers’ agitation against American slavery,”¹¹ which links him to the Radical Abolitionists and to John Brown in particular. While the religiously based organizations, activists, and legislators that employ the new slave narrative as evidence for their causes trace their roots to biblical imperatives and antebellum abolitionist causes, their agendas are born of uniquely contemporary political concerns. The new slave narratives are employed as weapons in twenty-first-century ideological battles, the likes of which would be completely foreign to a slave narrator of the nineteenth century. Allen Hertzke, author of *Freeing God’s Children: The Unlikely Alliance for Global Human Rights*, characterizes the new Christian abolitionist movement as being driven by a “concern for the persecuted church,”¹² which can “dramatize the plight of the ‘suffering church’ abroad.”¹³ The evangelical ambition is to “stem the pandemic of global religious persecution,” by which they mean specifically Christian persecution and only very rarely that of other religions.¹⁴

Evangelical attention to the issue of contemporary slavery emerged from Cold War anticommunist anxieties that pit the civilized, democratic, Christian West against a nebulous and nefarious array of communists who, according to the evangelicals’ argument, waged a war focused on the religious persecution of Christians.

With the end of the Cold War, conservatives sought and clearly found a new way to project their political anxieties onto national political debates. Their search for a human rights angle to their anticommunist, pro-Christian platform was answered in a variety of humanitarian causes, including the Sudanese genocide, while they kept an eye on North Korea and Cuba as the last remaining communist strongholds.¹⁵ All along, the specter of religious persecution was used as a proxy war for run-of-the-mill Cold War anti-communist sentiments. In 1998 a broad coalition of evangelicals pressured Congress to pass the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), which

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was meant to focus on Christian persecution but eventually had to be expanded to protect all religions in order to pass.¹⁶ Through this bill, the Christian Right put Christian persecution at the center of U.S. foreign policy. The binaristic logic of the Cold War (which itself is a legacy of colonialism) finds continued resonance among these religious activists who continue to define their political agendas in opposition to a foreign enemy.

In the years after the Cold War ended, many of old so-called cold warriors transferred their anxieties to global Islam, again often framing it in terms of religious persecution, but by the 2000s, it was also framed in the guise of antislavery activism. Indeed, some stalwarts of the Cold War era have rebranded themselves as champions of the abolitionist cause. The Institute for Religion and Democracy, for instance, which has taken up slavery in Uganda as one of its flashpoint issues, is presided over by Mark Tooley, a former CIA analyst who first became involved in the issue of religious persecution in the late 1980s when he wrote a critical report about religious funding of pro-Marxist organizations for his congregation of the United Methodist Church.¹⁷ Perhaps the most notorious among converts to the cause of contemporary slavery is John Eibner of Christian Solidarity International (CSI), who began his career with the conservative Keston Institute, which was founded in 1969 to research religious persecution in the USSR and other communist countries.¹⁸ Now he is the CEO of an organization that was originally founded to “smuggle Bibles and broadcast an evangelical radio show to Eastern bloc countries” and which is now (in) famous for its purported (and much maligned and discredited) cash purchases of southern Sudanese people whom CSI claims were enslaved by the mujahideen. Benjamin Skinner’s investigations proved that the supposedly enslaved people were, in fact, actors and that the funds were being funneled to the Sudanese People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) so that they could fight the Muslim-dominated North. Christian Solidarity International mobilized the public horror regarding the revelation of contemporary slavery to raise funds that allowed them to support covert militarized operations in Sudan.¹⁹

The bombing of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, provided even greater political impetus and elite political willpower to propel these religious anxieties to the policy level. Hertzke, who was a leader in the effort to make Christian persecution an issue at the foreign policy level, admits that “in the literature of Christian advocacy groups, in fact, we see the twin specters of militant Islam and the Communist remnant as the key threats

to the faithful abroad. The September 11 attack by Islamic radicals only crystallized an emerging ecumenical consciousness among disparate Christian groups.”²⁰ The focus on a Muslim enemy was bolstered by U.S. anxieties about national security, which provided opportunities for wider networks of religious affinity. In the years after 9/11, national security and the struggle against vague but constantly proliferating enemies became the focus of U.S. foreign and domestic policy as well as the paranoia of the average U.S. citizen.

Sub-Saharan Africa seems to represent a favored case study for the intersection of human rights concerns and the conservative agenda against socialist governance and Islamic extremism. The binaristic logic of colonialism finds continued resonance among these religious activists who continue to define their political agendas in opposition to a foreign enemy. They suggest that what Islamists do in Africa is merely a precursor for attacks they are planning and, in fact, carrying out in the West. The fear stoked by those claims justifies government military action against African enemies. In this way, as Eric Lott argues of blackface, blackness (or in this case, more specifically, Africanness and African oppression) becomes a commodity to be co-opted and marketed.²¹ In the post-9/11 milieu, this means that advocacy groups that laid claim to that commodified black suffering could bring in significant funding and lucrative aid dollars that were funneled through U.S. charitable organizations such as the Institute for Religion and Democracy, Christian Solidarity International, or the American Anti-Slavery Group and justified the expansion and political influence of the military-industrial complex. Abolitionist blackface is lucrative just as blackface has been for almost two hundred years.

This abolitionist blackface is being mobilized to mask nefarious and racialized acts of intellectual and political violence that only thinly veil the anti-Muslim hatred that serves as the impetus for the publication of some new slave narratives. In this particular strain of new slave narrative, the black storyteller, the one who can be the example of slavery, is merely a mask for the politics espoused and disseminated on the abolitionist lecture circuit. By using the nonfiction, first-person testimony of formerly enslaved people, some white abolitionists are thus able to play a black masquerade, implying that their message is the authentic, genuine, legitimate product of enslaved Africans in the twenty-first century, while they infuse the narratives with their own anti-Islamic sentiments. The new slave narrative

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provides a striking example of how the language and processes of identification characteristic of human rights discourse are co-opted and corrupted to serve conservative political goals, which are often out of sync with the politics espoused by the narrators themselves.

Blackface functions to distort black experiences in several distinct ways. The most apparent distortion is the exoticization of imagined African attributes and black culture. It also elides the oppression that white people have enacted upon people of African descent by suggesting that black people are happy in their positions or that they are responsible for their lot in life (by, for instance, suggesting that they are lazy or stupid or inherently evil). At the same time, and perhaps counterintuitively, blackface allows white people to identify with black culture, or at least with their imaginary construction of the black experience, be it their perceived ignorant happiness, supposed uninhibited behavior, or even their very real suffering and oppression. This allows for white audiences and blackface performers to imagine themselves as joyous and playful at the same time as it allows them to adorn themselves with the persecution and othered status of people of African descent, evoking both a sympathy for the oppressed and a fear that one might fall into the same lot as the people being ventriloquized.

As we will see through the example of Faith J. H. McDonnell and Grace Akallo's *Girl Soldier: A Story of Hope for Northern Uganda* (2007), these exoticizing, exonerating, and identificatory mechanisms of blackface are precisely those that a particularly conservative religious strain of antislavery activists in the twenty-first century mobilize to replicate, evoke, and promote their own neoliberal politics. For them, the individual narrative of slavery is not one through which formerly enslaved people express their humanity or a mechanism through which they might express their own theories of slavery and freedom. Instead, for these activists, the new slave narratives are employed as what Gillian Whitlock describes as "soft weapons," texts that humanize marginalized voices but that can be appropriated and weaponized through propaganda.²² In this way, these life narratives are "politics by other means,"²³ a compelling and seemingly unassailable human rights facade that justifies their arguments for actions that many advocates would deem human rights violations. Through closely reading this one, admittedly exaggerated, example of the co-optation of the slave narrative, we can expose this trend in the antislavery movement that largely goes unnoticed and uncritiqued.

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NARRATING SLAVERY

Fifteen-year-old Grace Akallo was captured by the Lord's Resistance Army rebels in 1996 and was forced to fight in the Ugandan civil war. After emancipating herself and her friends, she founded and worked as president of United Africans for Women and Children Rights. She publicly shares her experience as a forced child soldier and advocates for other children's rights in regions that are experiencing political crises. The book that includes her first-person narrative of enslavement is composed with an unusual multi-vocal narration. Chapters in the book alternate between the nonfictional, historical voice of coauthor Faith McDonnell and the first-person, autobiographical voice of Grace Akallo. In her remarkably brief chapters, Akallo tells a story infused with religious significance. The narrative begins with a sort of resurrection in which she has been buried alive, but she miraculously survives and digs her way out of the shallow grave in which she was left for dead. In her resurrection, she "become[s] a skeleton that will not stay peacefully in its grave," and her story seems to allude to Jesus Christ's resurrection and its redemption of others from sin.²⁴ Her resurrection and redemption allow Akallo, later shaped as a modern-day Moses, to lead her friends out of the desert and into freedom from slavery. Like so many of the slave narrators who came before her as well as those who are writing today, Christian faith is at the foundation of Akallo's activism, and churches form a major support network and promoter for her career as she continues to do Moses's work of leading people out of slavery.

As is the case in nearly all the new slave narratives written by authors from the Global South, Akallo begins her narrative in medias res with a gripping narrative set during her time in captivity—in this case, a story of her near death and seeming resurrection—but then turns quickly to a narrative of her idyllic enslavement origins. She begins that origin narrative with the phrase "I was born," unknowingly echoing the nineteenth-century slave narrative tradition.²⁵ As I argued in chapter 1, Akallo's use of the phrase "I was born" is meant to establish her enslavement birth into freedom. Akallo's opening, and indeed the entire chapter "Safe Times with Grandpapa," establishes her as a human person imbued with dignity, rights, and freedom, enmeshed in family structures and village life. She shares stories of her innocent childhood during which she was raised in a poor but loving family in a beautiful and peaceful village. She writes, "The village I knew when

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I was a child was a special place. We children felt loved and taken care of. Life could be hard, so everyone looked after everyone else.”²⁶ It was in this idyllic environment that Akallo learned a seemingly universal morality of sharing and assisting others in a place where children never had to worry about being harmed. Akallo establishes her royal origins in the midst of her poverty, stating, “My grandfather was the son of a chief. He believed he had power to control and protect people the way his father had.”²⁷ Having established the foundation of her existence, her humanity, her dignity, her lineage, and thus her roots in freedom and even power, she then describes her culture and practices, grounded in a lively market culture, a hard-working agricultural community, and a storytelling tradition that provides the foundation for an ethical originary world. Much like many of the approximately fifteen nineteenth-century slave narrators who wrote of their lives before slavery in Africa, these anthropological digressions are reminiscent of those found in the traditional slave narrative, providing the (still largely unknowing) Western reader with a rendering of life in Africa that establishes the universal moral values, humanity, and freedom that connect African narrators with their readers.

It is from these idyllic beginnings that Akallo is then snatched into a life of captivity and begins to establish her experience as slavery within the text. She explains that she and the other girls who were captured in her school were “led like slaves” and “taken to a life of torment.”²⁸ She laments that they were captured on Uganda’s Independence Day because it was the day she lost her own freedom. In her depiction of her time in captivity, she describes the constant forced marches they went on like slaves in a coffle and how, when they cried, they were threatened with rape or murder. Her story takes her to Sudan, where she and the other girls were forced to become child brides (or “sex slaves” in McDonnell’s description) to commanders in the Lord’s Resistance Army. She describes meeting LRA leader Joseph Kony, who ordered that the girls be trained to fight and forced to serve on the battlefield. She depicts her own radical depression and subsequent suicidal obsession, which seemed to her to be the only escape from captivity. Even her attempts at suicide were met with death threats from the commanders, confirming that there was no escape from the service of the LRA other than death. Here we see the definition of slavery emerge—she was held captive, compelled to work as both a forced child bride and a child soldier. She was held by extraordinary but very real violence, and her escape options were

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largely limited to suicide. In her descriptions of her life in Kony's army, she establishes herself as an enslaved captive.

Having established the nature of her enslavement, Akallo retreats to the vague, reportorial, metaphorized, passive, and euphemized descriptions of suffering that are relatively characteristic of slave narratives and other traumatic life narratives in which people testify to atrocities,²⁹ and Akallo's contributions to the text indicate those familiar displacement strategies discussed in chapter 1. In the two short chapters in which Akallo discusses the horrific conditions of her enslavement, including the brutality she was forced to inflict on others or the rape she endured, she typically turns away from specific details, writing euphemistically of violence and displacing the most traumatic experiences onto other people she knew. Though Kony commanded that the girls be taught to fight, she admits, "Hunger taught me how to fight," and she quickly notes, "We raided villages, looking for food and water," commenting on the persistence of deprivation. She discusses none of the violence that she may have taken part in or at least witnessed on those raids.³⁰ She worries about how she might eventually help other children who "are dragged into the bush and taught to smash people's heads and cut people's lips, hands and limbs," but she never describes committing any atrocities and rarely even describes seeing anything like that in her own life narrative.³¹

Akallo euphemistically describes the rape she endured as being "distributed" to a commander who "forced me to go to bed with him," and when he first assaulted her, she says only that she "felt like a thorn was in my skin as my innocence was destroyed."³² Akallo was repeatedly brought before commanders to be punished, sometimes even to be executed, but she narrowly escaped in nearly every instance she reports. When she wants to evoke the constant terror of punishment, she typically turns to other children's suffering instead of her own, and in those moments, she nonetheless adopts a reportorial tone, writing in simple declarative sentences. "A twelve-year-old girl tried to escape two weeks after our capture. Her head was smashed. This was scary."³³ In the one scene in which she depicts violence in any extensive detail, she writes only, "Through the pain in my skin, I could not cry any more. I felt the earth rotating. Maybe I was going to die this time."³⁴ Her slave narrative is riddled with narrative gaps that signify the reduction of the physical and psychological experiences of enslavement to psychically manageable metaphors and understatement.

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Whatever condemnation of the war that Akallo may reveal in her part of the narrative is directed at the commanders and the nameless and faceless child soldiers who were the perpetrators of the violence and the enforcers of her captivity, but elision of those violent actors and even sympathy with them are more often the routes she takes. Sometimes, all she reveals of the perpetrators are their specters, which lurk in the spaces of passive-voice sentences, as in the time when Akallo writes that her friend's "head was smashed," without ever accusing anyone of the violence.³⁵ She writes that for those who had been in the army for a long time, "constant anger made their eyes red and bloodshot. The soldiers with red and bloodshot eyes are no longer children but killers."³⁶ She restores humanity to them, or at least to the selves they had to shed in the process of becoming soldiers, suggesting that they were all innocent children at one time.

Even in her descriptions of meeting Kony while she was captive, she discloses absolutely no anger or even fear, describing him simply as "the leader of the rebel movement, Joseph Kony." She says that he "believed in a mix of Christianity and a mystical sort of spiritism," and in her chapter about her escape, she describes his failure as a military leader, suggesting that he was "a proud man" who was "trying to make his name great with the Sudan government." She punctuates the story of the legacy he was trying to build with a powerful single-sentence paragraph: "He left the children to die."³⁷ Reportorial and unemotional, she briefly condemns Kony for being a failure and a pawn of the Sudanese government, and then she quickly returns to the story of her escape. This characteristically unemotional and relatively distanced description of the suffering and terror of slavery is typical of the genre of the slave narrative.

Akallo's experience of slavery, captivity, and child soldiering, however, fills only a mere thirteen pages of the book. Like so many slave narrators, past and present, much of her focus is on the faith that sustained her through her captivity instead of on her suffering or anger and on the plans of escape and activism that her faith propelled her toward. She says that she "promised God she would never turn [her] back on Him if [she] survived."³⁸ Her suffering, so obscurely described, is sublimated into her higher vocation as activist, through which she can act as God's missionary to the children of Uganda. Like many other slave narrators (both in the nineteenth and the twenty-first centuries), Akallo focuses the vast majority of her narrative on her "freedom narrative," replete with tales of her miraculous escape, her

commitment to her own inherent freedom, and the spiritual strength she found to lead others out of captivity. As discussed in chapter 2, however, she is left with the sense of “not-yet-freedom” as well, as she laments that she will never be free until all her friends and fellow citizens of Uganda are also free. In this way, Akallo becomes a survivor activist in that long-revered tradition—no longer one of millions who suffer, but one who stands up, so often with a spiritual purpose, to eradicate the injustice that she and the others endured. In all these ways, Akallo’s own sections of the narrative of *Girl Soldier* reveal a fairly standard new slave narrative, conforming, likely unintentionally, to the conventions of the genre as it was taking shape in the years in which she wrote and over the next several years after it was published.

CO-OPTING A GIRL SOLDIER

Akallo’s chapters of *Girl Soldier* mark it as a relatively representative example of the new slave narrative, and they provided the platform from which Akallo’s activist career was launched. Akallo’s narrative also echoes the conventions of the nineteenth-century slave narrative tradition in its reliance on a paratextual apparatus that establishes the veracity of her narrative through the voices of external authorities. As Olney writes of the nineteenth-century slave narratives, the conventions of the slave narrative “tend to turn up as often in the paraphernalia surrounding the narratives as in the narratives themselves.”³⁹ It is critical to pay attention to the way the slave narrative is framed in order to understand how the life experiences of enslaved people are shaped and packaged for antislavery purposes.

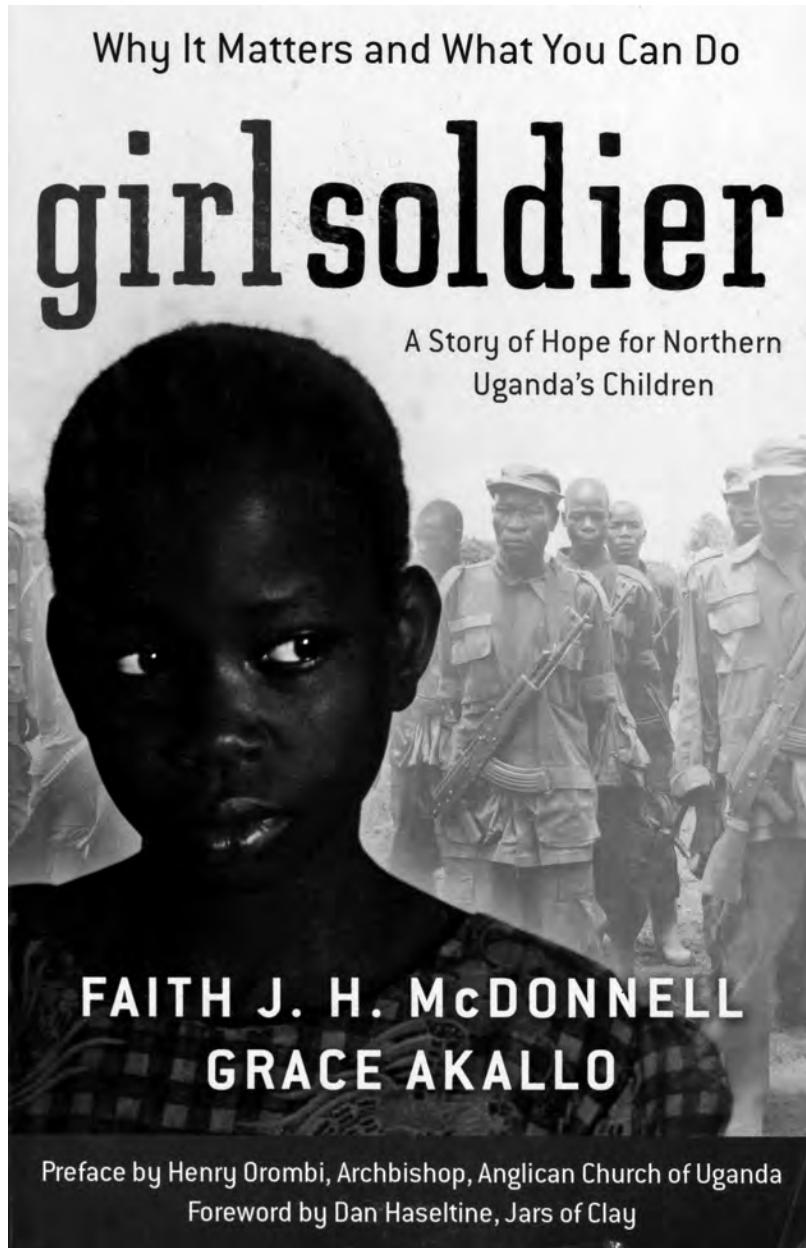
Girl Soldier was published by Chosen Books (a division of the evangelical Baker Publishing Group), whose mission is to “help believers to better know and love the Lord Jesus Christ; to pray about the concerns that are on God’s heart; to be empowered by his Spirit for ministry; to fulfill the Great Commission; and to transform their communities and their world.”⁴⁰ The paratext of the book sets the scene for the spiritually transformative and identificatory experience that the publisher expects Akallo’s slave narrative to render. Michael Card, a Bible teacher and musician, endorses the book as a “precious gift from two women, both uniquely qualified to speak for the suffering children of Uganda” and promises that the book will help readers imagine “the enormous monolith of the suffering of Africa.”⁴¹ This

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familiar, reductive vision of continental suffering is paired with a testimony from Steven Haas of World Vision International that the book is also a sign that “there is still One who understands and redeems.”⁴² The framing of the text significantly evokes the word “slavery” and plays on the image of suffering Africa to promote the spiritual redemption that is available to us through our engagement with Akallo’s life story.

Coauthor Faith J. H. McDonnell’s introduction reiterates the significance of the crisis in Uganda in terms of suffering and slavery: children are being “used as slave laborers, and girls serve the sexual lusts of older soldiers.”⁴³ McDonnell’s description of Akallo’s experience as slavery taps into the rhetorical power of twenty-first-century antislavery discourse, supported by an endorsement on the cover by the former director of U.S. Trafficking in Persons, John R. Miller, who calls the book a “moving call to prayer and action” that represents the “moving story of horror and redemption” of “child soldier slavery survivors in Uganda.”⁴⁴ The paratext of the book invokes the power of the term “slavery” and the tradition of the slave narrative to authorize Akallo’s story as one worthy of our attention even before Akallo begins to narrate her own experience or define it.

Akallo’s book is extraordinary, however, in that the voice of the external authority, which typically remains in the paratext, is woven around and practically overwhelms the narrative of her life in captivity. In fact, McDonnell’s long historical sections form the primary frame of the book into which Akallo’s narrative is episodically interspersed, effectively reshaping Akallo’s narrative in a way that is unlike any other. Based on the paratextual apparatus of the text, it would seem that Akallo’s self-representation is the central concern of *Girl Soldier*. In fact, the back cover announces, “More than 30,000 children have been kidnapped in Uganda. Now one of them has a voice.” Nevertheless, the voice of this book is not solely Akallo’s. The voice of this narrative is explicitly divided between Akallo’s own and McDonnell’s. However, Akallo’s narrative constitutes only sixty-four of the 225 pages of the book. Akallo’s chapters are often as short as two to three pages, whereas McDonnell’s chapters sometimes extend to twenty pages. The distribution of narrative voice in *Girl Soldier* is a quantifiable representation of the battle being waged offstage between survivors and other anti-slavery activists in the twenty-first century. McDonnell’s sections ostensibly serve to fill in the blanks left by Akallo’s fragmented recounting of her experience; however, the contexts McDonnell supplies do not correspond



FIGS. 3.1.-3.2. Front and back covers of Faith McDonnell and Grace Akallo's *Girl Soldier: A Story of Hope for Northern Uganda's Children* (2006) reveal the bifurcation of narrative voice into seemingly mutually exclusive roles of experience and expertise.

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More than 30,000 children have been kidnapped in Uganda. Now one of them has a voice.



When Grace Akallo was fifteen years old, rebels from the Lord's Resistance Army raided her school. Thus began her nightmarish existence as one of northern Uganda's thousands of child soldiers. Forced to endure savagery, starvation, abuse and other horrors with only her faith to sustain her, Grace eventually escaped to share her story with the world.



Faith McDonnell is an American activist and writer with a special concern for the future of the vulnerable Acholi people of northern Uganda. In *Girl Soldier*, Grace's personal account and Faith's historical and spiritual insights are woven together to tell the story of Uganda's forgotten children. Be inspired by this heartfelt account and moved to do your part in making sure that these children will not be forgotten.

"A precious gift from two women, both uniquely qualified to speak for the suffering children of Uganda, one an eloquent survivor and the other a fearless advocate. It is no coincidence that their names are Grace and Faith."

—**Michael Card**, Bible teacher and musician

"*Girl Soldier* is not fiction, yet that fact becomes harder to believe with every page we turn. This book is more than just a call to action. It is a challenge to our moral compass."

—**Adrian Bradbury**, founder and director, GuluWalk

"A much-needed reminder of the suffering and faith of the people of northern Uganda. Both have gone largely unnoticed for too long."

—**The Rt. Rev. Robert W. Duncan**, bishop, Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh; moderator, Anglican Communion Network

"A poignant reminder that the darkness of the soul and the cruel behaviors it leads to are more devastating than we could imagine. This is an incredible account that demands a hearing and invites a response."

—**Steven W. Haas**, vice president, World Vision International

Cover design: Today's Outwear for Books
Cover photo of girl: © Per-Anders Pettersson/Getty Images
Cover photo of soldiers: © Johnnie Ngai/CORBIS

 **Chosen**
www.chosenbooks.com



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**Girl Soldier: A Story
AMZNBB**

FIGS. 3.1.–3.2. (continued)

to Akallo's narrative impulse, and, in fact, the two voices seem to work in tension with or as distractions from each other. The distribution of voices in *Girl Soldier* and the tensions between them provide a unique opportunity to understand the very different ways African victims of human rights violations and Christian evangelical political activists frame the same events as they shape a narrative of enslavement.

In the case of *Girl Soldier*, Akallo's authority extends only to her personal experience of soldiering and slavery, whereas McDonnell is authorized as the "humanitarian hero" in the text to serve as a "proxy witness" for Akallo and claims she can more adequately address the history and politics that made such an experience possible.⁴⁵ Of course, this usurpation of the narrative's messaging is reminiscent of Douglass's situation among the Garrisonian abolitionists. McDonnell writes that her part offers "the historical context for the current crisis in Uganda and provides the resources for prayer and activism."⁴⁶ In addition, McDonnell fills in the gaps created by Akallo's displacement strategies with the melodrama and the spectacular violence that the white activist perceives to be central to the narrative of Ugandan history and the narration of slavery. McDonnell includes numerous graphic stories of children who were mutilated or raped in her narratives to exemplify the horrors that Akallo typically turns away from. By the end of the book, however, McDonnell turns her attention from the religious salvation that Akallo prescribes and focuses it on "rescue" and political intervention strategies, providing the political framing for U.S. engagement in the region and producing recommendations for how churches, communities, and individuals might encourage interventionist U.S. foreign policy.

BLACKFACE ABOLITION

McDonnell is the director of Religious Liberty as well as of the Church Alliance for a New Sudan at the Institute for Religion and Democracy (IRD), a nonprofit think tank whose self-proclaimed conservative Christian mission is to "work to reaffirm the church's biblical and historical teachings, strengthen and reform its role in public life, protect religious freedom, and renew democracy at home and abroad."⁴⁷ The IRD contends that "the most fundamental of all human rights is the freedom of religious faith and practice," and their publications and social media postings explore a number of political issues through the lens of religious freedom, by which they

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typically mean specifically Christian religious freedom. McDonnell's work is particularly focused on what evangelicals call the "persecuted church," which is largely grounded in co-opting violence against Christians abroad to enhance their claims regarding the perceived suffering of Christians in the United States.

As McDonnell appropriates Akallo's narrative for her own political ends, she quickly employs the mechanisms of blackface described earlier. As is true of most blackface performances, McDonnell's representation and understanding of Africa are limited to the stereotypes that grow out of an exoticized, colonial imaginary of the continent. Her fantastical conception of Uganda is summed up in the following passage: "A raw and savage grief fills the air in Uganda. The sadness in that grief is overlaid with an evil so irrational and unfiltered that it seems like the stuff of folk tales. It belongs to a nether world of ogres, monsters, and demons of the night that come in the dark to snatch the innocent."⁴⁸ This familiar exoticization that depicts an entire African nation as plagued by indigenous and irrational evil appears throughout the text and her writings on the IRD blog, where she admits to never having visited Uganda until long after the book was published.

The vast majority of *Girl Soldier* is consumed by McDonnell's interpretation of the history of Uganda. She reduces a complicated regional conflict—driven by the need for resources, legacies of colonial oppression and discrimination, ethnic tensions, and border disputes, all exacerbated by Western interventions and covert financial and military support—to merely a centuries-long "struggle between Christianity, Islam and spiritism that is still going on."⁴⁹ McDonnell employs the discursive strategies of a historian, including footnoting her sources, but her sources are drawn almost exclusively from Christian webzines and books like F. A. Forbes's 1927 *Planting the Faith in Darkest Africa*. In her amateur history, when Christians arrived in Uganda in the 1880s, they "soon threatened powerful witch doctors and Arab Muslims who operated the slave trade and promoted Islam."⁵⁰ The insidious parallel structure she employs here equates the sale of human beings with the promotion of the Islamic religion, allowing her to fashion an indictment of Islam's role in the history of Uganda and completely ignore the role that Christians played in the slave trade in Uganda and elsewhere. She focuses instead on a vague and incomplete lineage of Ugandan rulers, whom she characterizes (as if homogeneous) as responsible for the "persecution and death of hundreds of Christians."⁵¹ She

writes, “They have ‘channeled’ evil to steal, kill, and destroy God’s children in Uganda.”⁵² Throughout her indictment of Ugandan indigenous rule, there is no moment of circumspection regarding the role Christians played in destabilizing Ugandan politics through religious missions. When she does refer to British colonial policies that privileged the South and divided the people of the region, she does not condemn them. She even justifies colonial discrimination by insisting that “war and competition among tribes and ethnic groups existed before Africa was divided into colonies,” again asserting the indigeneity of discord and violence.⁵³ Her largely American Christian readership, educated in Euro- and U.S.-centric values and historical concepts, are likely to consume this racist narrative of Ugandan history with little critical judgment.

Although Akallo’s part of the narrative is silent on the question of her captors’ religion (they were Christian) and does not suggest that religion played a significant role in her own personal experience as a child soldier (though she does use “Muslim” and “Arab” interchangeably for Sudanese in one very brief section), and, as we have seen, she shies away from anger or blame, McDonnell’s depiction of the conflict is quite different. For McDonnell, the crisis is entirely driven by the “demon seed” of Muslim war-mongering aggression and financial funding, which makes the region “vulnerable to the spread of radical Islam.”⁵⁴ McDonnell’s nightmare depictions of otherworldly terrors support her narrative of a Uganda under the sway of Joseph Kony, whom she indicts as a Christian apostate and pagan maniac supported by the allegedly satanic Islamists in Khartoum.⁵⁵ McDonnell’s monolithic vision of Islam takes center stage and is the focus of all her condemnation, despite the fact that Akallo’s narrative shares none of the same vitriol.

There is no doubt that Sudan’s support of Kony enabled him to expand his power and extend the viability of the conflict, nor will I offer any debate regarding whether Kony’s tactics were legitimate or appropriate. However, the sensational insistence upon the indigeneity of evil in Uganda, grounded in the essentialized malevolence of Islam, works to naturalize violence as inherently African and Muslim, thereby justifying and exonerating all who might intercede against that evil. In this depiction, the reasonable but faithful Christian West (which teams up with people practicing traditional religions) is pitted against the irrational and demonic forces of Islam (which is joined by the so-called pagans). This blackface-style caricature of Ugandan

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history allows McDonnell to valorize generations of Christian missionaries as saviors within the narrative of Ugandan history and politics.

The image of African conflict that McDonnell inscribes in the text is drawn straight from the Samuel Huntington “clash of civilizations” school of thought.⁵⁶ It is no coincidence that many of McDonnell’s colleagues at the IRD and other similar groups were Huntingtonian cold warriors before they became antislavery activists. McDonnell’s version of the clash of civilizations theory pits the Christian West against pagan, Islamic Africa, but it is rhetorically framed as a mission to deliver the “protection of love” to Uganda children. In *Girl Soldier*, McDonnell commends Invisible Children, Uganda Conflict Action Network (now the Resolve), GuluWalk, and World Vision, all organizations founded by or sponsored by Christian faith-based groups, because they “urge activism by U.S. citizens to push for more political involvement by the U.S. government.”⁵⁷ The “love” that McDonnell prescribes takes the form of peace talks and negotiations but also demands International Criminal Court indictments, the murder of Joseph Kony, and U.S. military intervention in the region. Huntingtonian logic justifies U.S. intervention in the Ugandan conflict because Christians in the West are called into battle against the enemy of their purported ally—in this case, persecuted Ugandan Christians. As a result, the Ugandan conflict reinforces and justifies aggressive American attitudes and policies toward Islam and toward the region. These intervention strategies are underwritten by the “unwarranted faith in the benign nature of a human rights presence” that David Kennedy warns is at the heart of so much of the “emancipatory intervention” justified by human rights law and discourse.⁵⁸ Indeed, McDonnell’s co-optation of Akallo’s narrative is revelatory of the way in which “the interventions and exercises of state authority” that human rights vocabulary “legitimizes are more likely to track political interests than its own emancipatory agenda.”⁵⁹

Despite these overt calls to political action and what seems to academic readers as explicitly racist and Islamophobic discourse, the book does not fashion itself as a tract on the Islamic oppression of women and children or a political treatise on American intervention, and most readers would not recognize it as such. Indeed, it is Akallo’s first-person slave narrative interspersed in the text that provides a unique vehicle through which McDonnell can disguise and justify her mythological depictions of Africa

and Islam. In an interesting twist on the traditional slave narrative, which typically is understood to be validated by the white interlocutors appended to the text, Akallo's own autobiographical sections are appropriated to validate McDonnell's political positions. By mobilizing the truth value of a first-person narrative, McDonnell utilizes Akallo's very real experiences as a blackface of African insider knowledge through which she can justifiably attack (seemingly from the inside) African Islam and the supposedly indigenously evil that taints Kony's version of Christianity.

Even as McDonnell's crusade politics posit Christian heritage as the diametrical opposite to the monstrous African cultures caricatured in the narrative, she has to confront the problem of Akallo's own Africanness. McDonnell manages this tension by holding up Akallo as an exception to this pervasive African evil and as a sign of hope for a new promise of Christian revival on the continent. The Christian imagery of Akallo's own story makes her the perfect victim for the conjuring of a Christian persecution narrative. While she does not invoke the Islamic menace of McDonnell's sections, she does highlight her own persecution, resurrection, and escape through the desert in recognizable biblical imagery that appeals to the Christian reading audience that the book is intended to engage. *Girl Soldier* employs the familiar tropes of Christian suffering to successfully bridge the geographic and cultural divides to evoke sympathies for the distant suffering of Ugandan girls. In this way, McDonnell can depict Akallo dualistically as both the benighted African and the redeemer, and thereby she exempts her from the damnation of the rest of the country. Though once a child soldier fighting other children in a violent conflict, Akallo "now fights to call the world to the difficult task of helping return emotional, physical and spiritual peace to the people of northern Uganda."⁶⁰ She creates a melodrama of an innocent and naïve Christian victim by setting her against the backdrop of a caricatured African landscape. As was the case for the blackface performers of the nineteenth century, the new slave narrative provides an opportunity for McDonnell to adorn herself and her politics with Akallo's suffering and at the same time allows her to pit herself and her fellow Christian advocates—as well as their racial whiteness itself—as radically other from the malevolent Africa of their imaginations. She does this through creating an identification between the reader and Grace that transcends Grace's African origins.

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THE IMPULSE TOWARD FIRST-PERSON IDENTIFICATION

Since the publication of the earliest slave narratives, the first-person narration of captivity has provided readers an opportunity to engage in an imaginative identification process that encourages them to act against human rights violations. The voice that speaks intimately of rights violations calls out to us and asks us to intuit suffering, to identify with it for just long enough to attempt to comprehend, and then to act. Reading a first-person narrative is a willful engagement with another person and thus with their dignity and rights, freedom and reason. As we read “I” in our own minds, that subjectivity becomes our own for just a moment, even if it is always mediated by the page and our material realities.

Akallo’s narrative works in this way—it is a heart-wrenching narrative of extraordinary suffering that we can hardly imagine, but imagine it we do through the identification with her subjectivity, with her “I” voice. Even when Akallo only obliquely gestures to the persistent rape she suffered at the hands of a man forty years her senior, we fill in the silences left by her traumatic abuse and imagine what she has implied. We do the work to conjure those horrific moments and identify with her horror and suffering. The ambition of the narrative is that we are, in turn, motivated by this rendering of human suffering, if only insofar as it shapes our morality and judgment.

Human rights as a universal project relies on our empathizing with others in this way; it implies that each of us must see each and every other human being as a rational, individual subject who, like us, can suffer. As Thomas Laqueur suggests, this recognition of inherent similarity encourages and indeed compels us to “regard the suffering of distant humans as making the same sort of claim on us as the suffering of proximate ones.”⁶¹ The human rights movement so often employs the first-person narrative precisely because it encourages us to contemplate others’ suffering as if it were our own, and through that process, we imagine a tangible, knowable other who does not deserve to suffer.

It is this very process of identification at the foundation of human rights discourse that has been co-opted by some faith-based antislavery activists and organizations to mask their crusade politics. In McDonnell’s sections of *Girl Soldier*, readers are explicitly urged to identify with those innocent African Christians who profess faith in a Christian God but who are unable

to escape purportedly endemic African brutality. Throughout the book, McDonnell uses identificatory strategies to encourage this process. In one particularly direct moment, she asks her readers to “imagine being abducted in the middle of the night. Imagine a friend or a sister or a brother forced to march barefoot through a wilderness of rocks and thick trees for days at a time with no food or water. Imagine that it is your daughter or son who must make a decision between killing another child, perhaps one of their own playmates, or being killed.”⁶² McDonnell explicitly asks us to identify with the child soldier’s experience, to make it our own. She later celebrates the work of Invisible Children, who “encouraged public identification with the Acholi.”⁶³ In his preface, Christian singer Dan Haseltine reinforces this mechanism of the book, suggesting that it might help us to see “God or ourselves in the story of Uganda” by putting “ourselves in the place of the story’s characters.”⁶⁴ He describes the difficulty of motivating readers to take action because “we will not readily find ourselves in the numbers and words of information”; instead, we are to listen to stories that effectively communicate the “cruel things that could happen to our own children.”⁶⁵ Here, the external authorities, not the first-person narrative voice of Akallo, attempt to force the identification. In so doing, McDonnell explicitly describes the implicit work that first-person narratives tend to do and takes it as her own responsibility as the third-person, outsider expert to instruct the reader on precisely how to engage in a very particular sentimental reading practice.

The prescribed identificatory structure built into the dual-voiced text of *Girl Soldier* powerfully encourages the American Christian reader to imagine him or herself as a feminized, innocent, persecuted Christian in Uganda. As an African female child, Akallo is a model victim who cannot be reproached or held responsible for her own victimization. This figure is one that is exonerated from the many evil forces that clearly infect the rest of McDonnell’s imagined “ogres” of Uganda. From this space of innocence, the white Christian readers are instructed to imagine their very selves in Akallo’s position, taking that identification back with them into the comfortable library space, pondering the possibility of their very own suffering. This is precisely the structure of sentiment that McDonnell is shaping through her interventions in the text. As McDonnell instructs us to imagine ourselves as an innocent child soldier, we are given permission to appropriate Akallo’s oppression instead of sympathize with it.

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In light of the radical difference between Akallo's experience and that of the armchair Christian humanitarian, McDonnell's call to don the mask of African suffering effects another aspect of blackface. When McDonnell explicitly calls on us to identify with Akallo, asking us to "imagine being abducted in the middle of the night" or "imagine that it is your daughter or son," she asks her Christian readership to imagine themselves and their loved ones as child soldiers.⁶⁶ Instead of that radical empathy for and imagination of another, she recruits the readers' self-concern and familial bonds. Readers do not have to imagine the suffering African girl; they are asked to imagine *themselves* as suffering Africans. By identifying with an imaginary Akallo and wearing the blackface for a moment, readers are able to project their imagined construction of African suffering onto their own life narratives, which allows McDonnell to maintain the idea of the mythologically evil Uganda that the intervening chapters describe. This aspect of blackface also has political implications for McDonnell, who is deeply concerned with what she calls "Christian persecution." By putting on the blackface of an irreproachably innocent child, Christians are able to perceive themselves as persecuted through their identificatory process. The fear for the global persecuted church that pervaded evangelical discourse in the decade and a half since the World Trade Center bombings is born of this kind of appropriation of others' suffering. Akallo's black face of Christian suffering serves as justification of a global Christian crusade against Islam.

THE APPROPRIATION OF PERSECUTION

McDonnell's co-optation of the narrative attempts to effect what I call a transitive property of suffering: if Akallo is a Christian, and she is suffering, then Christians worldwide are suffering. The appropriation of Akallo's suffering lends credence to the imagined persecution of Christians domestically. Read in the context of the crusade politics espoused by McDonnell and others, the character of a child soldier becomes a metaphor for global Christian persecution rather than a voice representing a particular experience of human oppression or a unique individual seeking human rights recognition and intervention.

McDonnell published Akallo's particular story because, as the IRD website attests, "IRD's Religious Liberty Program highlights the connection between the situation of Christians in the Islamic world and the effect and

influence of global jihad/radical Islam on Western civilization in order to both support our brothers and sisters in their ongoing struggle and to learn from their experience.”⁶⁷ In this reach toward global solidarity, the IRD evokes that cosmopolitan discourse that Costas Douzinas critiques: “Cosmopolitical space turns all relations into domestic affairs. . . . Liberal aggression is justified because liberalism provides the universal standard of decency, while the indecent character of the rogues makes war against them just.”⁶⁸ The projection of black suffering onto Western Christianity constitutes a blackface abolitionism that calls on readers to make an intervention in the lives of Ugandans at least in part because of the implication of the need for a domestic defense of the Western Christian tradition and the church’s Western membership. In this way, their anti-trafficking discourse echoes Bush-era post-9/11 sentiments that justify U.S. intervention in the world through a mirage of self-defense rhetoric that hinged on the defense of innocents abroad.⁶⁹

Far more nefarious than any of the appropriations evidenced in Douglass’s experience is McDonnell’s employment of the African former slave as the example while the politics are driven by the interests dictated by the Christian conservative think tank that supported the publication of the book. Through the processes of identification with black suffering, McDonnell centers the conflict within the otherwise safe-seeming boundaries of the American Christian home and makes the reader a crusader in a conflict against an evil Muslim other that is presumably hell-bent on oppressing Christians worldwide. We might then reread the structure of the book and Akallo’s brief and unintegrated chapters as a sign that it is, in fact, Akallo’s story that is interspersed in brief minichapters amid McDonnell’s history in order to act as a convenient metaphor for the larger claims of global persecution and divinely promised salvation of Christians that McDonnell is elaborating.

As Eric Lott suggests of nineteenth-century blackface performance, “The narratives . . . are riveted by the moment of cultural expropriation, and we should look to them . . . as much for what they do not say as for what they do—the way they construct, and then sometimes blur, racial boundaries.”⁷⁰ In the blurring of racial and geographic boundaries through mobilization of the term “the persecuted church,” the American religious Right appropriates the suffering of Christian people in Africa. It is their common experience as Christians that allows the white activists to appropriate the

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suffering of Christians anywhere in the world and wear it as their own, which, in turn, allows them to shed their racial responsibility for regional conflict. Whatever racial tensions might exist and whatever responsibility Christians might have for conflict in the region are erased in their appropriation of persecution. As Leshu Torchin argues of similar identificatory strategies designed to address the Armenian genocide, these efforts represent “the more broadly ecumenical appeal of the project in which the visual and narrative traditions of Christian suffering convert the faraway violence into a shared cause for injustice, compassion, and concern.”⁷¹ American evangelical groups today promote their cause through websites like persecution.org, persecution.net, persecution.com, and christianfreedom.org. They run an online radio station, Voice of Martyrs Radio (vom-radio.net), the tagline for which is “Hear the Voice of Your Persecuted Christian Family.” There is a dedicated segment of *Christianity Today*’s website devoted to essays on Christian persecution. Articles on that site celebrate Christian martyrdom, document the international confinement of Christians, rank the top offending nations for Christian persecution, raise awareness about international Islamic threats, and explicitly incite Christian rage.⁷² At one and the same time, this wearing of a black face indicates the desire to wear the mask of suffering and the terrifying fear that what happens in that other place might, in fact, happen to them. Add that to a diminishing number of Christians worldwide at the same time as there is an increase in global (read: black and brown) Christianity, leading evangelicals to fear that they will grow increasingly insignificant on the global stage and will have less control over the messaging and practice of the church. The persistent dread is that they may themselves become other, marginalized.

In the face of these supposed threats, human rights discourse is being exploited as a language through which thinly veiled racial and religious discrimination can be justified. This formal appropriation of the identity of the victim helps American Christians to imagine a worldwide conspiracy against their own people (suddenly framed by a religion that transcends race), further exonerating them for whatever privilege and guilt they inherit from colonialism, neocolonialism, Western dominance in the world economy, and the forced conversion of people all over the world—the very historical realities that led to the conflicts in Uganda but which McDonnell entirely erases in her narrative. Saidiya Hartman writes of white abolitionist

John Rankin, who tried to imagine himself as an enslaved black person on a coffle, that his “efforts to identify with the enslaved [are thwarted] because in making the slave’s suffering his own, Rankin begins to feel for himself rather than for those whom this exercise in imagination presumably is designed to reach. . . . In making the other’s suffering one’s own, this suffering is occluded by the other’s obliteration.”⁷³ Akallo’s ability to be God’s soldier in her fight to save child soldiers is clearly an enviable role for McDonnell. But in the process of identification, she has erased Akallo, Akallo’s voice, Akallo’s politics.

Evoking the discourse of human rights allows political groups to mobilize for their own causes a language that is designed for universal appeal and universal power. It is the very process of identification, so integral to human rights activism, that makes the suffering of individuals so easily co-optable for larger political causes. Human rights claims to that vague and much-contested universality obfuscate the ideological foundations of McDonnell’s project and obscure both the financial support that makes the publication of the book possible and the religious mission she is trying to defend. “Human rights is the only universally available moral vernacular that validates the claims” of people against oppressive practices and cultures, and thus, people “seek out human rights protection precisely because it legitimizes their protests against oppression.”⁷⁴ Organizations like the IRD, in turn, co-opt the moral power of human rights language and the oppression of others to legitimize their own ideological battles.

The valence of domination is shifting as a result of global human rights culture, and privileged Western Christians reflect those changes in their understanding of themselves. Domination in the religious marketplace once was read as a sign that Christianity was true and endorsed by God. Today, domination is so explicitly and intimately linked to oppression in public discourse that privileged members of cultures of domination ironically desire the cultural cachet attached to suffering. The position of the oppressed begins to be seen as desirable because it is a sign of one’s status as just, innocent, and chosen by God. Because it is ethically untenable to deny another person’s suffering, especially that of an African female child, McDonnell and her colleagues don a blackface of African suffering and appropriate the discourse of human rights to describe their own perceived persecution and as a formal means of exonerating themselves for centuries of religious domination and oppression all over the world.

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I evoke the specter of blackface not as a reductionist argument about racism in the renewed antislavery movement (though, as is evidenced here, there is certainly a strain of very traditionalist, neocolonial racism present). But the concept and practice of blackface resonate so well in this context because they require that we interrogate the complicated political terrain around race that emerges in moments of heightened binaristic tension in which the black community and black experiences suddenly become emblematic of crises in American culture. As Yogita Goyal contends in her reading of Francis Bok's slave narrative, "Assign[ing] Africa to tragedy and the U.S. to promise" allows American readers to imagine that they have "transcended their own history, rather than encouraging them to think more deeply about how events in the U.S. and Sudan have common politically entangled roots."⁷⁵ The white evangelical abolitionists that constitute perhaps the most politically powerful arm of the contemporary antislavery movement exonerate themselves for the oppression of African people through participation in an abolitionist project through which they co-opt the suffering of enslaved Africans as a way of eliciting sympathy for their own contrived persecution. This allows them to obfuscate their own participation and complicity in the legacies of slavery that are a part of everyday life in the United States as well as in Africa. They identify with global black oppression rather than examine its root causes and take responsibility for it.

A POPULAR FACADE

It is the irrefutability of black suffering behind which this segment of the antislavery movement hides its anti-Muslim agenda. It is no coincidence, then, that so many of the new slave narratives focus on African scenes of subjection and that they began to flourish in the first years of the twenty-first century. The new antislavery movement is a curious coalition that emerged out of a unique post-9/11 political atmosphere that was charged with religious messaging and Islamophobia. As Allen Hertzke contends, activist causes like the antislavery and the Sudan genocide campaigns united "evangelicals into coalition with the Congressional Black Caucus, Catholic bishops, Jews, Episcopalians, and secular activists appalled by the indifference of the West toward this humanitarian tragedy."⁷⁶ Many (though not all) of these groups utilized similar abolitionist blackface

tactics to hold up African oppression as a justification of their own political agenda against Islam.

Anti-Islamic sentiments might be an easy target in *Girl Soldier*, but identifying McDonnell's appropriation of Akallo's narrative guides us in reading other narratives and in locating these politics within antislavery discourse. One narrative that notably echoes the anti-Islamic agenda is Francis Bok's, the publication of which was encouraged and supported by the American Anti-Slavery Group and Bok's "American father," Charles Jacobs. Charles Jacobs persistently focuses his sights and the work of his organization on an unvariegated, monolithic "Muslim world" that is purportedly unchecked by the human rights establishment. According to Jacobs, in that world, "there are millions of blacks, women, gays, apostates, atheists, labor leaders, freedom fighters and racial and religious minorities who live without basic human rights and who desperately need help from the human rights community."⁷⁷ Jacobs positions himself and the American Anti-Slavery Group as the only activists who rise above the fear of being labeled racist, or worse, "Islamophobic," a dread that he diagnoses as endemic among the "decent middle-class white people" who make up the human rights community. He claims he and his colleagues are a vanguard who lead the charge against "evil done by non-Westerners."⁷⁸ Jacobs, ignoring America's long history of disproportionately holding people of the Global South to account for their rights abuses, touts himself as the unusual white middle-class American man who will denounce people of color who dare enslave other people of color. According to Bok's narrative, the Sudanese survivor of slavery was coached and promoted by Jacobs and his colleague Jesse Sage as part of Jacobs's campaign to reveal injustice in Sudan. Sage told Bok, "We want to help you tell your story," and he encouraged Bok to add details to his story that would pique audience interest, including asking him "What were you thinking?" and "What was going on in your mind when that happened?"⁷⁹ Their coaching assisted him in developing his narrative for audiences and publication.

It is no coincidence, then, that while Bok's narrative is otherwise largely uninterested in religion or Islamic oppression, it ends with a long treatise on Islamic radicalism in Sudan. The American Anti-Slavery Group focus their work primarily on Sudan and Mauritania, Islamic countries they argue the Western human rights industry is neglecting. Bok's discussion of the Sudanese conflict, which he describes in a footnote as having been

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learned from two books by Sudanese experts in addition to the coaching he received from Jacobs, Sage, and Eibner of Christian Solidarity International,⁸⁰ focus on the North-South religious divide and northern Sudan's politics of jihad that were encouraged by successive regimes over the course of the 1980s and '90s. While the religious tensions in the region are indisputable, Bok's discussions of politics, guided by the coaching of Jacobs, mobilizes Americans' fears of their own vulnerability to Muslim attacks by making repeated recourse to comparisons to the U.S. fear of Osama bin Laden and the Taliban after the 9/11 bombings. Bok recounts that "audiences were even more interested—and better informed—about Islam and *jihad*" after 9/11.⁸¹ People at his events would pepper him with questions about the Sudanese civil war as anxiety about Muslim global political power was increasing, and his popularity as a speaker against Sudan increased as that fear increased. Through the co-optation of a largely unrelated narrative of Bok's enslavement, Jacobs and his colleagues were afforded an authentic Sudanese voice that could promote their political agenda regarding the global threat of Islam.⁸²

A wide variety of radical anti-Islamic groups exploit the new slave narrative as evidence of their claims. JihadWatch.org suggests that Mende Nazer's slave narrative should be of interest to those who "who are concerned about the equality of rights of all people in Islamic societies as an example of the fact that Muslim radicals will enforce Sharia in its fullness, including its institutionalized discrimination against non-Muslim dhimmis and women."⁸³ In their hurry to condemn Islam, these Christian jihad monitors overlook the fact that Nazer's enslavers were not known to be radicals, and Nazer is herself a Muslim instead of an oppressed non-Muslim woman. For these pundits, Nazer, like Ayaan Hirsi Ali, represents an insider black African voice that aligns with the critiques that Western Christian groups level against Islam's practitioners. Incited by fear mongering, American Christians have virally circulated factoids drawn from Peter Hammond's *Slavery, Terrorism, and Islam: The Historical Roots and Contemporary Threat*, which proposes that "the most convulsive conflict of the past century, and indeed the most convulsive conflict of the past millennia, has undoubtedly been between Islam and Civilization; it has been between Islam and Freedom; it has been between Islam and Order; it has been between Islam and Progress; it has been between Islam and Hope."⁸⁴ The book also uses Mende Nazer's autobiography as evidence, in this case in the

service of his larger argument that slavery in Africa is intrinsically Islamic. In Hammond's brief history of slavery, told from an explicitly Christian perspective, the relative harm of the Christian-led slave trade in Africa is weighed against that of the Islamic, finding the Islamic in all respects more brutal and deadly. Hammond traces a narrative from "the pagan origins of slavery" to "the Christian roots of liberty" to exonerate Christians for the role they played in the history of enslavement around the globe and placing Christians as the victims of Islamic slavery.⁸⁵ It relieves Christians of any responsibility they may have had for slavery because Christian missionaries "set [Africans] free to serve Christ," and his use of Nazer as an example is evidence that there is still much work for missionaries to do.⁸⁶

In the 2010s, as Western governments turned their focus to the Islamic State as the most powerful Islamic adversary, the narratives of Yazidi women rose in popularity. Farida Khalaf's *The Girl Who Escaped Isis: This Is My Story* (2016) and Nadia Murad's *The Last Girl: My Story of Captivity and My Fight Against the Islamic State* (2017) suggest a recent turn in the anti-Islamic antislavery agenda, wherein young women in the Middle East are now used to effect the same transitive property of suffering seen in Akallo's narrative. As non-Muslims, the Yazidi women's narratives provide fertile ground for the antislavery imagination and for emphasizing the need for military interventions in the region. Narratives of Boko Haram's kidnapping of the girls from the Chibok region of Nigeria are functioning in the same role. Both likewise invite the sympathy for military intervention that is endemic in this strain of the new slave narrative, as they typically suggest that this particular form of oppression is one that cannot be abided.⁸⁷ What is always missing from the published narratives and the discussions that surround them is a systemic critique of the political mechanisms that maintain global inequality as regards income, welfare, and quality of life—in particular for women in the Global South—or of the local Islamic antirepression activists who prove that slavery and oppression are not endemic to Islam.

The narratives that contain anti-Islamic sentiment do not represent the majority of the new slave narratives. They are, however, indicative of a powerfully vocal part of the anti-trafficking movement that promotes militarized agendas through the publication of slave narratives, appropriating the life experiences of African (and now Arab) children as a means of supporting anti-Islamic agendas abroad. It is not that opposing oppression at the hands of some Muslims is unwarranted. But we must pay attention to how

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this strain of the antislavery movement focuses on Christian-Muslim conflict. Organizations use African survivors of slavery as the poster children for the detrimental effects of radical Islam to mask their Islamophobia in the legitimizing garb of suffering. Thus, it is critical that we note the cultural and political contexts within which slave narratives emerge. And given the preceding critical analysis of the anti-Islamic threads that appeared in the early years of the new slave narrative, we must continue to carefully analyze the ways the specter of international sexual enslavement continues to be mobilized by conservative Christian organizations as a means of evoking sympathy for Western military and political intervention in the Global South as these crises continue and new ones emerge. Our critical reading of these literary texts helps expand our understanding of antislavery activism and the uses and abuses of human rights discourse.

Antislavery movements are often depicted as monolithic, as singular entities that share a particular commitment, the same ideological motivations, and the same means for addressing labor exploitation.⁸⁸ Instead, when we look to the narratives and the contexts in which they are written, we begin to see unfolding a larger picture of the current antislavery movement. Many forces are at play here, all of which are seeking the eradication of slavery, perhaps, but many of which have other motivating factors that we might not otherwise detect. The narratives, in their individual differences, allow us to see those politics at work and understand better how the different motivations for abolition are expressed in the very language used to describe the horrific experience of slavery.

LESSONS FROM GARRISON

William Lloyd Garrison was an extraordinary activist. Few of us could claim that we give of ourselves to any cause—especially a cause that does not directly affect our own personal lives or families—with such vigor, conviction, and generosity. Nevertheless, if we are to take Douglass at his word, Garrison fell prey to his pride, allowing his own message to overwhelm the voice and “philosophy” of the people for whom he ostensibly worked, the enslaved. He sought out but did not attain that “black heart” to which so many of today’s antislavery activists likely aspire.

The end goal of any critical approach to the slave narrative should not be to indict the contemporary antislavery movement as if it were a monolithic

enterprise. Indeed, I am very much engaged on both a personal and a political level with the movement to eradicate contemporary forms of slavery, and much of my larger project of analyzing the new slave narrative is meant to act as a megaphone for the work that survivors of slavery are doing to address this human rights violation. What this analysis reveals, however, is that any human rights project must be vigilant not to ask survivors to perform as a minstrel act, replicating Western stereotypes and desires. As a black man, Douglass was being asked to perform the distorted white image of blackness. The concern about being a black man used for blackface troubled Douglass so much that he broke free from the Garrisonians. And the same will be true of survivors of contemporary slavery if their own politics, messages, and experiences are not privileged, and especially if they are asked to perform the politics of others.

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83. Robert Spencer, “My Life as a Modern-Day Slave,” *Jihad Watch* (blog), January 26, 2004, www.jihadwatch.org/2004/01/my-life-as-a-modern-day-slave.
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4. SEX PROBLEMS AND ANTISLAVERY'S COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

narratives are currently only available online, but one example of a published book of shorter narratives is Wolfgang Bauer, *Stolen Girls: Survivors of Boko Haram Tell Their Story* (New York: New, 2017).

88. Kamala Kempadoo, for instance, recognizes three strains in the antislavery movement and then argues that they should be evaluated together because, in her estimation, they all equally represent “a neoliberal white chivalrous crusade across the world, born of a moral sense of goodness that shores up the power and subjectivity of the North, with the ‘developing’ Global South and East as the dumping grounds for helping imperatives involving rescue and charity. They have little effect on the causes of the problem, and the subjectivity and humanity of the Other is secondary.” Kamala Kempadoo, “The Modern-Day White (Wo)Man’s Burden: Trends in Anti-Trafficking and Anti-Slavery Campaigns,” *Journal of Human Trafficking* 1, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 18.

4. SEX PROBLEMS AND ANTISLAVERY'S
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4. Dank; Murphy.
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