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Blackface Abolition and the New Slave Narrative

Laura T. Murphy
Loyola University, New Orleans

Since the 1990s, survivors of forced labor have been authoring first-person narratives that consciously and unconsciously reiterate the tropes and conventions of the nineteenth-century American slave narrative. These "new slave narratives" typically conform to the generic tendencies of the traditional slave narratives and serve similar activist purposes. Some of the most popular of the narratives have taken a particular political turn in the post-9/11 context, however, as neoliberal political agendas and anti-Muslim sentiments come to dominate the form and content of many of the African narratives that have been produced. This paper identifies a "blackface abolitionist" trend, in which the first-person testimonies of formerly enslaved Africans is co-opted by some politically motivated white American abolitionists to play a black masquerade, in which they adorn themselves with the suffering of enslaved Africans to thinly veil the self-exonerating and self-defensive crusade politics that motivate their engagement in anti-slavery work.

Keywords: slavery, slave narrative, abolition, human trafficking, blackface

> "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 [emphasis original].[1]

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,

Laura T. Murphy is an assistant professor of English at Loyola University New Orleans and director of the Modern Slavery Research Project. She is author of *Survivors of Slavery: Modern-Day Slave Narratives* and *Metaphor and the Slave Trade in West African Literature*. This paper is a part of a book project titled *The New Slave Narrative*.

1 Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855; New York: Dover Publications, 1969), 361–62.

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however, Douglass was merely the black face of the movement, relegated to the role of illustration, instead of political philosopher. Douglass's own politics were not relevant to the eminent abolitionists like Garrison and his colleagues in the Massachusetts antislavery movement. When Douglass drew his own conclusion that the Constitution was a document that held within it the 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 Garrison.

In *The Black Hearts of Men*, John Stauffer suggests that the "Radical Political Abolitionists" John Brown and Gerrit Smith transcended this persistent sense of racial superiority, 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."[2] To the New York–born African American James McCune Smith, donning that black mask, or "black heart" (as Stauffer suggests), was the only way for a white American to genuinely embrace the cause of racial equality; he had to viscerally and spiritually imagine the horrors of slavery and denounce his own white privilege.[3]

Douglass admired John Brown, but he also knew the difference between black hearts and blackface, which he wrote was 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."[4] Both the black heart and blackface are imbued with a desire for blackness. The difference between the concepts, however, 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."[5]

The minstrel show, on the other hand, was no spiritual engagement with blackness. 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 the black race. Blackface provided for white minstrels a taste of the freedom of expression they imagined to be a part of black life, even as people of African descent lived in bondage. It "conveniently rationalized racial oppression," as Eric Lott contends.[6] "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."[7] The blackface imagination of black life was limited not transcendent; it was a display of the radically other that merely implied the radically intimate.

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

2 John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 46.
3 Ibid., 1.
4 Frederick Douglass, "The Hutchinson Family—Hunkerism," *The Northstar* 1.44 (October 27, 1848).
5 Stauffer, 18.
6 Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 15.
7 Ibid., 18–19.

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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 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 former slaves as the black face of the movement, while white men remained behind the mask determining the image of blackness available to their audiences and the politics that would be communicated. Douglass essentially charged Garrison and his colleagues with being blackface abolitionists.

The New Slave Narrative

The literary tradition for which Frederick Douglass is largely considered the standard-bearer and most revered representative—the slave narrative—has reemerged in the last twenty-five years as an apparatus of the anti-human-trafficking movement. The continued existence of slavery in the twenty-first century is now extremely well documented.[8] What has not been so widely studied is the way people who have been recently enslaved document and politicize their own experiences.[9]

A diverse body of first-person accounts of modern slavery has been published in the United States, Britain, and France since 1991, including more than twenty book-length narratives, three edited collections of shorter narratives, and innumerable testimonies found in government documents, interview transcripts, and television broadcasts.[10] In those narratives, people from all parts of the world describe

8 Kevin Bales, *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Kevin Bales, *Ending Slavery* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Siddarth Kara, *Sex Trafficking: Inside the Business of Modern Slavery* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); Anthony Appiah and Martin Bunzl, eds., *Buying Freedom: The Ethics and Economics of Slave Redemption* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Joel Quirk, *The Anti-Slavery Project: From the Slave Trade to Human Trafficking* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); Joel Quirk and Darshan Vigneswaran, eds., *Slavery, Migration, and Contemporary Bondage in Africa* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2013); Jean Allain, *The Legal Parameters of Slavery: From the Historical to the Contemporary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

9 Three collections of short narratives of modern slavery frame the contributions as "slave narratives" in introductions. Jesse Sage and Liora Kasten, eds., *Enslaved: True Stories of Modern Day Slavery* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Kevin Bales and Zoe Trodd, eds., *To Plead Our Own Cause: Personal Stories of Today's Slaves* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 2008); Laura T. Murphy, *Survivors of Slavery: Modern-Day Slave Narratives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

10 See Murphy, *Survivors of Slavery,* "Introduction," for a discussion of the new slave narrative genre. In addition to the narratives that are cited within this paper, the following are also considered to be "new slave narratives." Henriette Akofa, *Une esclave moderne* (Paris: M. Lafon, 2000); Fatima, *Esclave à 11 ans* (Paris: Flammarion, 2011); Ishmael Beah, *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2007); Beatrice Fernando, *In Comtempt of Fate: The Tale of a Sri Lankan Sold into Servitude Who Survived to Tell It* (Merrimac, MA: Bearo Publishing, 2005); China Keitetsi, *Child*

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experiences that are far too familiar to those who study historical slavery—the forced labor, the denial of wages, the violent means of control, and the attempts at escape.[11] They also describe their "corporeal domination" and "natal alienation," conforming to the definition Orlando Patterson uses to describe both historical and modern slavery.[12] The narratives describe a wide spectrum of forced, unpaid labor, including chattel slavery, child soldiering, inherited debt bondage, sexual captivity, agricultural labor, and domestic servitude.

What unites them is that the narrators depict their experiences as enslavement—asserting the compulsory and dehumanizing nature of the labor, often explicitly describing their experiences as "slavery" or comparing their lives to that of nineteenth-century slaves and slave narrators. Furthermore, in a compelling revival of the American slave narrative, they see their memoirs as activist and advocacy testimonies committed to eradicating forced labor.[13] The texts shape themselves as slave narratives not only in the narrative conventions, but even in their titles, through the cover images, through the paratextual materials that are included in the texts, and through their committed missions.

As I have demonstrated elsewhere, in the late twentieth century, we start to see the formation of a new slave narrative and can begin to trace its contours.[14] I have begun to outline the generic conventions of the new slave narrative in other venues, so I won't rehash the entirety of those arguments, but it is worth taking a moment to investigate how the mobilization of the word *slavery* and the slave narrative tradition emerges. One of the earliest first-person memoirs of captivity to explicitly associate itself with the slave narrative tradition after the Works Progress Administration is Zana Muhsen's 1991 story of her time as a captive child bride in Yemen, which she titled *Sold: A Story of Modern-Day Slavery*.[15] In 1998, Jean-Robert Cadet published a memoir of his life as a child laborer in Haiti, titled *Restavec: From Haitian Slave Child to Middle-Class American*, once again evoking the power of the word *slave* to describe the forced labor he experienced in his fostered family.[16] Those two texts largely stood

Soldier (London: Souvenir Press, 2004); Rachel Lloyd, *Girls Like Us: Fighting for a World Where Girls Are Not For Sale, an Activist Finds Her Calling and Heals Herself* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011); Somaly Mam, *The Road of Lost Innocence: The True Story of a Cambodian Heroine* (New York: Spiegel & Grim, 2008), 189; Timea Nagy, *Memoirs of a Sex Slave Survivor* (Self-published: Communication Dynamics Publishing, 2010); Tina Okpara, *My Life Has a Price: A Memoir of Survival and Freedom*, trans. Julie Jodter (Senegal: Amalion Press, 2012).

11 This definition is drawn from Kevin Bales's work. See Kevin Bales, *Ending Slavery*, 9–12.

12 Orlando Patterson, "Trafficking, Gender, and Slavery: Past and Present," ed. Jean Allain, *The Legal Parameters of Slavery: From the Historical to the Contemporary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 324–26.

13 Kelli Lyon Johnson, "The New Slave Narrative: Advocacy and Human Rights in Stories of Contemporary Slavery." *Journal of Human Rights* 12.2 (2013): 243–244.

14 Murphy, *Survivors of Slavery*, 9–12; Laura T. Murphy, "The Reemergence of the Slave Narrative Tradition and the Search for a New Frederick Douglass," eds. Alexandra Schultheis Moore and Sophia McClennen, *Routledge Companion to Literature and Human Rights* (New York: Routledge, forthcoming 2015); Laura T. Murphy, "The New Slave Narrative and the Illegibility of Modern Slavery." *Slavery and Abolition* 36: 1.

15 Zana Muhsen and Andrew Crofts, *Sold: One Woman's True Account of Modern Slavery* (London: Time Warner Books, 1991).

16 Jean-Robert Cadet, *Restavec: From Haitian Slave Child to Middle-Class American* (Austin: University of Texas, 1998).

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alone until the beginning of the twenty-first century. In 2003, Sudanese activist Francis Bok published his memoir *Escape From Slavery* and Mende Nazer published hers titled *Slave*, both evoking the concept of "slavery" to describe their experiences as forced child laborers from Sudan in the midst of the Civil War.[17] Since the publication of the two Sudanese narratives, hardly a year has gone by without the publication of at least one new narrative of forced labor being published (though, admittedly, not every one evokes the term *slavery*), and new self-proclaimed slavery survivor-activists are increasingly speaking on lecture circuits as Douglass did in the nineteenth century.[18] Many of these narrators invoke the names of Douglass, Sojourner Truth, Olaudah Equiano, Solomon Northup, Linda Brent, and even Kunta Kinte (of Alex Haley's *Roots*) to describe their experiences. The people who record their experiences of enslavement follow (some consciously and others less so) in the footsteps of the nineteenth-century American slave narrators who utilized the authority and widespread dissemination of the printed text to fight a form of oppression that otherwise seemed too deeply ingrained in the global capitalist system to overcome.

Crusade Politics

Strikingly, nearly half of the narratives, and (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*, Ishmael Beah's *Long Way Gone,* China Keitetsi's *Child Soldier*, Tina Okpara's *My Life Has a Price*, 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, of course the numbers rise even higher.

Despite the fact that slavery is illegal in every country in the world, it is also a problem that every country and every race faces. In sub-Saharan Africa alone, there are approximately 5.6 million people currently enslaved—that means Africans account for nearly one in every seven of the estimated 35.8 million enslaved laborers in the world.[19] 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 sex trafficking 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 black survivors) are so overrepresented among slave narrators and are so often used as poster children for the new abolitionist cause. 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. As this paper will demonstrate, however, neoliberal political agendas and post-9/11 anti-Muslim sentiments dominate the form and content of some of the most popular new slave narratives. This particular

17 Francis Bok and Edward Tivnan, *Escape from Slavery: The True Story of My Ten Years in Captivity—and My Journey to Freedom in America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003); Mende Nazer and Damien Lewis, *Slave: My True Story* (New York: Public Affairs, 2003).

18 For a more detailed discussion of the development of the new slave narrative, see Murphy, "The New Slave Narrative and the Illegibility of Modern Slavery."

19 "Global Slavery Index 2014," *Walk Free Foundation*, November 2014. www.globalslaveryindex.org.

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strain of the narratives is used to promote a crusade politics that mobilize an anti-slavery stance 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, neoliberal Christians employ enslaved people's narratives as illustrations, while they provide their own "philosophy." Through the use of first-person testimony of formerly enslaved people, some politically motivated abolitionists are able to play a black masquerade, implying that their agenda is the authentic, genuine, legitimate product of enslaved Africans while they infuse the narratives with their own anti-Muslim sentiments. 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.

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 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 counter-intuitively, 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, uninhibited behavior, or even sadness and oppression. This allows for white audiences and 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 they might fall into the same lot as the people they are ventriloquizing.

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 replicate, evoke, and promote. Through closely reading this one, admittedly exaggerated, example of the co-optation of the slave narrative, we can unveil a trend in the antislavery movement that largely goes unnoticed and uncritiqued. I will begin by discussing Akallo and *Girl Soldier*'s place in the slave narrative tradition and then focus on McDonnell's appropriation of the slave narrative for her own political cause.

Girl Soldier

Girl Soldier is composed with an unusual multivocal narration. Chapters in the book alternate between the nonfictional historical voice of Faith McDonnell and the first-person autobiographical voice of Grace Akallo. McDonnell's introduction frames 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."[20]

20 Ibid., 24.

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McDonnell's description of Akallo's experience as slavery taps into a powerful twenty-first century antislavery movement, supported by an endorsement on the cover by the former director of U.S. Trafficking in Persons, John R. Miller, who called the book a "moving story of horror and redemption" of "child soldier slavery survivors in Uganda."[21] McDonnell invokes the power of slavery and 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. Indeed, Akallo's narrative is interestingly resonant with the new slave narrative I have been describing, and it is crucial that we see how she establishes her own life narrative before we can understand how others have appropriated it.

Akallo's narrative is interspersed between McDonnell's long historical chapters. Akallo was captured at the age of fifteen by the Lord's Resistance Army rebels in 1996 and was forced to fight in the Ugandan civil war. She is now president of United Africans for Women and Children Rights, an organization she founded in 2009. She publicly shares her experience as a forced child soldier and advocates for other children's rights in regions experiencing political crisis.

As is the case in nearly all of the new slave narratives written by authors from the Global South, Akallo begins her narrative *in medias res* with a gripping frame 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 preslavery origins. She begins that origin narrative with the phrase "I was born," unknowingly echoing the nineteenth-century slave narrative tradition. James Olney astutely observed in his 1981 article in the journal *Callaloo* titled "'I was Born': Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature" that this phrase evoking origins was a generic convention of the slave narrative and a means by which to establish the narrator's very existence, "the sense being that the narrative will be continually called into doubt, so it cannot even begin, until the narrator's real existence is firmly established."[22] Akallo's opening and indeed the entire chapter "Safe Times with Grandpapa" establishes her as a human person, imbued with dignity and rights, enmeshed in family structures and village life. She shares stories of her innocent childhood, raised in a poor but loving family in a beautiful and peaceful village. She writes, "The village I knew when 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."[23] It is in this idyllic environment that Akallo learns 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 that "My grandfather was the son of a chief. He believed he had power to control and protect people the way his father had."[24] Having established the foundation of her existence, her humanity, 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

21 Ibid., 2.

22 James Olney, "'I Was Born': Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature," *Callaloo* 20 (Winter 1984): 52.

23 Faith J. H. McDonnell and Grace Akallo, *Girl Soldier: A Story of Hope for Northern Ugandan Children* (Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen Books), 48.

24 McDonnell and Akallo, 49.

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hard-working agricultural community, and a story-telling tradition that provides the foundation for an ethical originary world.[25] Much like the approximately fifteen nineteenth-century slave narrators who wrote of their lives in Africa,[26] new slave narrators often use these anthropological discussions to provide the (still largely unknowing) Western reader with a rendering of life in Africa that establishes the universal moral values, humanity, and freedom that link African narrators to 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."[27] She laments that they were captured on Uganda's Independence Day because it was the day she was to lose 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.[28] 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 (LRA).[29] She describes meeting LRA leader Joseph Kony, who ordered that the girls be trained to fight and forced to serve on the battlefield.[30] She describes her own radical depression, which led her to a suicidal obsession, which seemed to her to be the only escape from captivity. Here we see the definition of *slavery* emerge—she is held captive, compelled to work as both a forced sex slave and a child soldier. She is held by extraordinary but very real violence, and her escape options are 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,[31] and Akallo's contributions to the narrative indicate those familiar displacement strategies as well.[32] She describes the rape she endured as being "distributed" to a commander who "forced me to go to bed with him,"[33] and when he first assaulted her she says only that she "felt like a thorn was in my skin as my innocence was destroyed."[34] Akallo is repeatedly brought before commanders to be punished, sometimes even to be executed, but she narrowly escapes in nearly every

25 Ibid.

26 Jerome Handler, "Survivors of the Middle Passage: Life Histories of Enslaved Africans in British America." *Slavery and Abolition* 23:1 (April 2002): 25–56.

27 Ibid., 105.

28 Ibid., 106.

29 Ibid., 110.

30 Ibid., 109.

31 Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Cathy Caruth, ed., *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

32 For a longer discussion of the displacement strategy in the new slave narrative, see Murphy, "The New Slave Narrative and the Illegibility of Modern Slavery."

33 Ibid., 112.

34 Ibid., 110.

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instance she reports. When she wants to evoke punishment, she typically turns to other children's suffering instead, but she nonetheless adopts a reportorial tone, written in simple sentences: "A twelve-year-old girl tried to escape two weeks after our capture. Her head was smashed. This was scary."[35] 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."[36] The slave narrative is riddled with narrative gaps that signify the reduction of the physical and psychological experience of enslavement to psychically manageable metaphors.

Whatever condemnation Akallo may reveal in the text 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. Sometimes, all we have of the perpetrators are their specters, which lurk in the spaces of passive voice sentences, as in the time when Akallo writes, "Her head was smashed," without ever accusing anyone of the violence.[37] 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."[38] 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,"[39] 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."[40] She punctuates the story of the legacy he was trying to build with a powerful single sentence paragraph: "He left the children to die."[41] Reportorial and unemotional, she briefly condemns Kony for being a murderous pawn of the Sudanese government and returns to the story of her escape.

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 maintains her through her captivity instead of on her suffering or anger. She says that she "promised God she would never turn [her] back on Him if [she] survived."[42] 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. In this way, Akallo becomes an activist slave narrator 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 they endured. Like many other slave narrators (both in the nineteenth and the twenty-first centuries), Akallo centers the vast majority of her narrative on her "freedom narrative," replete with tales

35 Ibid., 106.
36 Ibid., 111.
37 Ibid., 106.
38 Ibid., 124–25.
39 Ibid., 109.
40 Ibid., 139.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid., 106.

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of her miraculous escape, her commitment to her own inherent freedom, and the spiritual strength she found to lead others out of captivity.[43]

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 voice 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."[44] Attention to the way the slave narrative is framed is critical for understanding who and how the life experiences of enslaved people are shaped and packaged for abolitionist purposes.

Akallo's narrative is extraordinary, however, in that the voice of the external authority, which typically remains in the paratext, invades the narrative of her life in captivity. Coauthor Faith J. H. McDonnell's explicitly politicized intratextual interjections are woven in between the chapters of Akallo's narrative and effectively reshape the narrative in a way that is unlike any other. Despite (or perhaps because of) its atypical structure and its extraordinarily overt politics, *Girl Soldier* helps us to recognize a particular strain of the new slave narrative that otherwise might be overlooked if we focus too narrowly on generic conventions that are universal in the genre or if we read the genre primarily as a means of sociologically understanding modern slavery. As literary critics, we can employ the tools of generic analysis to dissect the rhetorical mechanisms utilized by narrators and coauthors, and we can contextualize narratives in terms of their production histories, allowing us to highlight the appropriation of human rights discourse when it might otherwise remain unexplored.

Thus, we cannot understand McDonnell's contribution to Akallo's narrative unless we contexualize it within her own political and activist career. McDonnell is the director of Religious Liberty as well as of the Church Alliance for a New Sudan at the Institute on 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."[45] 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 typically mean specifically Christian religious freedom. McDonnell's work is particularly focused on what the evangelical movement calls the "persecuted church."

43 For the concept of the "freedom narrative," see Paul Lovejoy, "'Freedom Narratives' of Transatlantic Slavery." *Slavery and Abolition* 32:1 (Spring 2011), 91–107.

44 Olney, 52.

45 Institute for Religion and Democracy, "Issues," *Institute for Religion and Democracy*. http://theird.org/.

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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." Nonetheless, 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 64 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 off-stage between survivors and other antislavery activists in the twenty-first century. Faith 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 to Akallo's narrative impulse, and, in fact, the two voices seem to work in tension 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 in the text to address the history and politics that made such an experience possible, 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 stories of children who were mutilated or raped in her narratives to exemplify the horrors that Akallo sometimes 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 US engagement in the region and producing recommendations for how churches, communities, and individuals might encourage interventionist US foreign policy.[47]

Blackface Africa

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 is 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.

46 McDonnell and Akallo, 22.
47 Ibid., 219–20.

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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.

The vast majority of *Girl Soldier* is consumed by McDonnell's interpretation of the history of Uganda, in which what we know to be a complicated region-wide conflict that is driven by the need for resources, legacies of colonial oppression and discrimination, and border disputes is reduced 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 primarily from Christian webzines and books like F. A. Forbes's 1927 *Planting the Faith in Darkest Africa*. In her compromised 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 Christians played in the slave trade in Uganda and elsewhere. She focuses instead on a vague and incomplete lineage of Ugandan rulers who 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 US-centric values and historical concepts are likely quick to consume this racist narrative of Ugandan history with little critical judgment.

While Akallo's part of the narrative is silent on the question of the religion of her captors (who were Christian) and doesn't 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, 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"[54] of Muslim war-mongering aggression and financial funding, which makes the region "vulnerable to the spread of radical Islam."[55] McDonnell's nightmare depictions of otherworldly

48 Ibid., 30.
49 McDonnell and Akallo, 37.
50 Ibid., 41.
51 Ibid., 39.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid., 71.
54 Ibid., 70.
55 Ibid., 103.

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terrors undergird her narrative of a Uganda under the sway of Joseph Kony, who she indicts as a Christian apostate, pagan maniac supported by the allegedly satanic Islamists in Khartoum.[56] McDonnell's monolithic 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 has enabled him to expand his power and extend the viability of the conflict, nor is there any debate over whether Kony's tactics are legitimate or appropriate. However, the sensational insistence upon the indigeneity of evil in Uganda, grounded in the essential malevolence of Islam works to (a) naturalize violence as inherently African and Muslim, thereby (b) justifying and exonerating all who might intercede against that evil. In this depiction, the reasonable but faithful Christian West (who team up with people practicing traditional religions) is pitted against the irrational and demonic forces of Islam (who are joined by so-called "pagans"). This blackface-style caricature of Ugandan history allows the Christian crusaders to place themselves as saviors within the narrative of Ugandan politics.

The image of African conflict that McDonnell inscribes in the text and that is promoted among many evangelical and neoliberal Christians is drawn straight from the Samuel Huntington school of thought.[57] It is no coincidence that many of McDonnell's colleagues at the IRD and other similar groups were Huntingtonian Cold Warriors before they became anti-trafficking activists.[58] McDonnell's version of the clash of civilizations pits the Christian West against pagan Islamic Africa, but it is rhetorically framed as a mission to deliver the "protection of love" to Ugandan children.[59] 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."[60] 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 US military intervention in the region. Huntingtonian logic justifies US intervention in the Ugandan conflict because Christians in the West are called into battle against their ally's enemy. 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

56 Ibid., 99–103.

57 Samuel P. Huntington, "Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* 72:3 (Summer 1993). Huntington, in his now infamous essay "The Clash of Civilizations," first published in *Foreign Affairs* in 1993, predicted, "Civilization identity will be increasingly important in the future, and the world will be shaped in large measure by the interactions among seven or eight major civilizations. These include Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American and possibly African civilization," 25.

58 Indeed, some stalwarts of the Cold War era have reemerged as champions of the abolitionist cause. John Eibner of Christian Solidarity International began his career with the Keston Institute. The Institute for Religion and Democracy itself 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.

59 McDonnell and Akallo, 197.

60 Ibid., 198.

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so much of the "emancipatory intervention" justified by human rights law and discourse.[61] 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] legitimates are more likely to track political interests than its own emancipatory agenda."[62]

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 was understood to be validated by the white interlocutors' contributions appended to the text, Akallo's 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 mask of African insider knowledge through which she can justifiably attack (seemingly from the inside) African Islam and the supposedly indigenous evil that taints Kony's version of Christianity.

Even as McDonnell's crusade politics posit Christian heritage as the diametrical opposite to the 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. In this way, McDonnell can depict Akallo dualistically as both the benighted African and the redeemer. Though once a child soldier involved in this crisis, 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."[63] She creates a melodrama of the narrative of an innocent and naive Christian victim by setting it 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 pit herself and her movement, as well as their racial whiteness itself, as radically other from the malevolent Africa of their imaginations.

The First-Person Identification Impulse

Since the publication of the earliest slave narratives, the first-person narration of captivity has provided readers an opportunity to engage an imaginative identification process that encourages them to act against human rights violations.[64] The voice that speaks intimately of human 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

61 David Kennedy, *The Dark Sides of Virtue: Reassessing International Humanitarianism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 24.
62 Ibid., 26.
63 Ibid., 26.
64 Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007).

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to act. Reading a first-person narrative is a willful engagement with another, 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 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 upon 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."[65] It is no surprise, then, that the human rights movement so often employs the first-person narrative because it encourages us to contemplate others' suffering as 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 anti-trafficking 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 African brutality. Throughout the book, McDonnell uses identificatory strategies to encourage this identification 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.[66]

McDonnell asks us to identify with the child soldier's experience, to make it our own, and to incorporate it into our own sense of ourselves. She later celebrates the work of Invisible Children who "encouraged public identification with the Acholi."[67] In his preface, Christian singer Dan Haseltine reinforces the same premise of the book, that it might help us to see "God or ourselves in the story of Uganda" by putting "ourselves

65 Thomas W. Laqueur, "The Moral Imagination and Human Rights," in Michael Ignatieff, *Human Rights as Politics and Idolatry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 132.
66 McDonnell and Akallo, 127.
67 Ibid., 208.

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in the place of the story's characters."[68] 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."[69] Here, it is those external authorities, not the first-person narrative voice of Akallo, that encourages the identification. In so doing, McDonnell explicitly describes the implicit work that first-person narratives tend to do, but takes it as her own work as the third-person, outsider expert to instruct the reader on how to engage in a very particular identificatory practice.

The prescribed identificatory structure of *Girl Soldier* powerfully encourages the American Christian reader to imagine him- or herself as a feminized, innocent, persecuted Christian in Uganda. This figure is one that is exonerated from the many evil forces that clearly infect the rest of McDonnell's imagined Uganda. From this space of innocence, the white Christian audience is able to imagine their very selves in this 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 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.

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. 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, the reader is able to mobilize the imagined construction of African suffering, supported by the mythological Uganda that McDonnell describes. This aspect of blackface also has political implications for McDonnell, who is deeply concerned with what she calls "Christian persecution."

The Appropriation of Persecution

McDonnell's co-optation of the narrative attempts to effect 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.

68 Dan Haseltine, "Foreword," in Faith J. H. McDonnell and Grace Akallo, *Girl Soldier: A Story of Hope for Northern Uganda's Children* (Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen Books, 2007), 13–14.
69 Ibid., 12–13.

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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*" [emphasis added].[70] 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."[71] 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 human rights defense of innocents abroad.[72]

Far more nefarious than any of the appropriations evidenced in Douglass's experience, McDonnell employs the formerly enslaved African's life 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 in fact it is Akallo's story that is interspersed in brief minichapters amid McDonnell's history in order to act as a convenient metaphor of 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."[73] In the blurring of racial and geographic boundaries through mobilization of the term *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 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. American Evangelical

70 Institute for Religion and Democracy, "International Religious Freedom," *Institute for Religion and Democracy*. https://theird.org/international-religious-freedom/.

71 Costas Douzinas, *Human Rights and Empire: The Political Philosophy of Cosmopolitanism* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 173.

72 Antony Anghie, *Imperialism, Sovereignty, and the Making of International Law* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 273–79.

73 Lott, 39.

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groups promote their cause through websites like persecuted.org, persecuted.net, persecuted.com, chrsitianfreedom.org, and beavoiceformartyrs.com. There is a dedicated segment of *Christianity Today* devoted to essays on Christian persecution.[74] Articles on that site celebrate Christian martyrdom, document the international confinement of Christians, rank the top offender nations for Christian persecution, raise awareness about international Islamic threats, and explicitly incite Christian rage.

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, 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.

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 obscures as well both the financial support that makes the publication of the book possible and the religious missions she is trying to defend. As Michael Ignatieff (who at times defends interventionist strategies to address human rights violations) has argued, "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."[75] 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 feel the need to embrace 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.

74 "Persecution," *Christianity Today*. www.christianitytoday.com/ct/topics/p/persecution/.

75 Michael Ignatieff, *Human Rights as Politics and Idolatry*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 68.

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I evoke the specter of blackface not as a reductionist argument about racism in the new abolitionist movement (though as is evidenced here, there is certainly a strain of very traditionalist, neocolonial racism present). But the concept and practice of blackface resonates so well in this context because it requires 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 emblems of crises in American culture. Blackface points to the appropriative property of blackness in white discourse. 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. Evoking black suffering provides legitimacy and moral sentiment that is seemingly irrefutable. It is this irrefutability behind which they hide their anti-Muslim agendas.

A Popular Facade

It is no coincidence, then, that so many of the new slave narratives focus on African scenes of subjection and that they begin to flourish in the first years of the twenty-first century. The new abolitionist movement is a product of 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 in the antislavery movement. One notable example is Francis Bok's narrative, 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. 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's promotion of Bok's career included coaching Bok on the politics of the country from which he came and centered on this notion of a Muslim threat.[78]

76 Allen D. Hertzke, *Freeing God's Children: The Unlikely Alliance for Global Human Rights* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), 238.
77 Charles Jacobs, "Amnesty's Dirty Little Secret," *The Jewish Advocate* (February 8, 2007). http://archive.is/vMF3b#selection-569.155-569.398.
78 Bok and Tivnan, 230.

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Similarly, Jihadwatch.org suggested that Mende Nazer's slave narrative should be of interest to those "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."[79] 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 Western Christian groups level against Islam's practitioners.

Incited by fear tactics, American Christians have virally circulated factoids drawn from Peter Hammond's *Slavery, Terrorism, and Islam: The Historical Roots and Contemporary Threat*,[80] 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.[81]

The book uses Mende Nazer's autobiography as evidence of his larger argument that modern slavery in Africa is intrinsically Islamic.[82] This binaristic logic, again reminiscent of Samuel Huntington's clash of civilizations, mobilizes the first-person narratives of African slavery as justification for Islamophobic foreign policy.

The narratives that contain anti-Islamic sentiment by no means represent the majority of the new slave narratives. They are, however, indicative of a powerfully vocal part of the anti-trafficking movement that promotes their causes through the publication of slave narratives, appropriating the life experiences of African children as a means of supporting anti-Islamic agendas. It is not that opposing oppression at the hands of some Muslims is unwarranted. But we must pay attention to how this strain of the African narratives focuses on Christian-Muslim conflict. Organizations use African survivors of slavery as the poster children for the detrimental effects of radical Islam and mask their Islamophobia in the legitimizing garb of suffering. Thus, it is critical that we note the cultural and political context within which slave narratives emerge. Our critical reading of these literary texts helps us to expand our understanding of antislavery activism and the uses and abuses of human rights discourse.

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 heart. But still,

79 Robert Spencer, "My Life as a Modern Day Slave," *Jihadwatch.org* (January 26, 2004). www.jihadwatch.org/2004/01/my-life-as-a-modern-day-slave.

80 Peter Hammond, *Slavery, Terrorism, and Islam: The Historical Roots and Contemporary Threat*, (Cape Town: Christian Liberty Books, 2005).

81 Hammond, 1.

82 Ibid., 17.

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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 abolitionists likely aspire. The aspects of the movement I critique here and the people who lead the charge in the religiously based abolitionist movement are not easily jettisoned or dispensed with either, nor should they be. Many of them bring a genuine concern for the lives of others to their antislavery work. But it is critical that we recognize the varied political ends to which the abolitionist movement shapes the new slave narrative.

The end goal of any critical approach to the slave narrative is not to indict the abolitionist movement as if it were a monolithic enterprise. Indeed, I am very much engaged on a personal and political level with the movement to eradicate modern 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 modern 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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