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**PUTTING GOVERNMENT IN ITS PLACE: CULTURAL RACISM,  
SENTIMENT, AND NEOLIBERALISM IN CONTEMPORARY  
UNITED STATES RESPONSES TO NATURAL  
DISASTERS ABROAD**

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A Dissertation Presented to the Graduate Faculty of  
Saint Louis University in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

2015

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For a critic of sentimentality, I am very sentimental about those people who have helped me complete this project. Thank you to journalist Kathryn Joyce; to pastor Rick Morton; and to members of the evangelical adoption community in Haiti, including Shasta Grimes, Tara Livesay, and especially Corrigan Clay, all of whom generously lent me their insights on the burgeoning orphan care movement. Another anonymous interviewee was gracious in sharing with me her difficult story. Thank you to my friends in Tochigi prefecture in Japan and especially to my former student Akane Mashiko Dunkin and my dear friend Craig Brierley for help in locating and translating Japanese newspaper articles—and for helping me navigate Japan, too. Thanks as well to the many online adoption groups through which I have learned very much of both personal and professional significance.

At Saint Louis University, thanks to the many friends who have made a community for me, including Betsy Schlabach, Rob Hawkins, Brandy Boyd, Maurice Tracy, and especially Jody Sowell, as well as those peers and friends who have read drafts of my work, including Nicole Haggard, Adam Kloppe, Jackie Kirouac-Fram, Brian Greening, Trevin Jones, Aretha Butler, Anna Schmidt, Jeff Dorr, and Karen Smyth. I am grateful to the excellent Jan Barber for her assistance in complicated paperwork issues. Deep thanks to the wonderful Terri Foster for many years of patience and paperwork. I am so glad that Joseph Heathcott recruited me into American studies many moons ago. Matthew Mancini arranged ongoing support for which I am profoundly thankful, and Sister Elizabeth Kolmer provided me a solid grounding in this field. Thanks go to Cindy Ott and Ben Looker for their assistance on my literature review and oral exams. I am

especially indebted to my early mentor Shawn Michelle Smith, who was the first to show me the imaginative range of this field and with whom I began to explore adoption as an academic topic, and to Jonathan Smith, who sharpened my thinking on race more than anyone and with whom I shared many enjoyable and very wide-ranging conversations over coffee and poems. Susanne Wiedemann deserves credit for her early faith in and help with developing the terms of this project. Deepest thanks to my committee, Heidi Ardizzone, Emily Lutenski, and Kate Moran, who are every good thing one hears a graduate committee usually is not. I cannot thank Heidi enough for the support I desperately needed when I was ill. The energetic and animated conversations I enjoy with her, Emily, and Kate have made this work a genuine pleasure and reminded me of what I love about the field even when I felt discouraged.

At Fontbonne University, I owe much to those who made this work financially and logistically possible, especially Jack Luzkow, Nancy Blattner (now of Caldwell College), Joyce Starr Johnson (now of Saint Louis Community College), and Greg Taylor. I am humbled by the support of my colleagues and friends Mary Carol Anth, Heather Norton, Jason Sommer, Randy Rosenberg (now of Saint Louis University), Ben Moore, Angie Liljequist, Leslie Doyle, Kevin Eiler, Lisa Oliverio, Deanna Williams, Edem Dzunu, Julie Portman, Jane Theissen, Justin Megahan, Peggy Ridlen, Jayme Abbott, Mark Glenshaw, Elizabeth Willey Guthrie, Melissa Eichhorn, and Sue Ebenreck and their various and sundry ways of being wonderful.

With great pride and affection, I thank my current and former students in English, American history, and American and African-American studies at Fontbonne. It still surprises and delights me to know that it is my job to share with them the topics that I

love. They have made me a better scholar with a clearer purpose. I am especially proud that I can turn to Mary Maxfield and Dan O’Keefe as peers today. Special thanks and good wishes to my former student Austin Skinner for providing me a beautiful writing space at the Saint Louis Writers’ Room that was pivotal to completion of this work.

Thank you to my friends Kathleen Hulton and James Austin, for many kinds of accountability, and to the women of the Guinness Book for their laughter and love. Thank you to Jason Taff for his longstanding confidence in and support for my writing and my work, logistically and personally. Thank you to Maggie Mason for listening to me think aloud at the dinner table, for sometimes thinking it wasn’t so boring, and for her courage to challenge cultural narratives at a young age. Thank you to Jada Holmes for always forgiving my distractions. Brandon Mason has been a patient listener, proofreader, background musician, and picker-upper of slack while I think and talk and write (and repeat). His kindness, tenderness, humor, and love are my sustenance and treasure.

Lastly, I thank my daughter Miriam Taff, who is still a little miffed that I missed her kindergarten zoo field trip to present my proposal for this project. Miriam is the laboratory in which my ideas about so many big questions meet lived experience. Her strong sense of social justice is directly related to my work in this field, and her compassion, humor, intelligence, and *joie de vivre* amaze me. Her pride in both in the substance and effort of this work matters more to me than anyone’s. Loving her deepens the meanings of everything else I do, this project included.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Two days after a devastating earthquake struck Haiti on January 12, 2010, U.S. President Barack Obama published an editorial in *Newsweek* magazine. Obama announced that he was “mobilizing every element of our national capacity” to assist the Haitians. Among those resources, he argued, the “most important” was “the compassion of the American people.” Although Obama mentioned briefly the strategic wisdom of providing assistance to Haiti, the thrust of his argument focused on the moral character of the people of United States: their compassionate response to suffering in other nations. “That is who we are. That is what we do,” Obama claimed, and when we act this way, the world views “us with a mixture of awe and admiration” as the United States acts “on behalf of our common humanity.”<sup>1</sup>

Less than a month later, on February 1, 2010, popular musicians from across the United States and Canada and across musical genres assembled to record a new version of “We are the World,” 25 years after the original song had been recorded to raise funds to combat famine in Africa. Led by executive producers Quincy Jones, Lionel Richie, and Haitian-American Wyclef Jean, the production benefited relief efforts for the earthquake. The song argues for global solidarity, even kinship, between people of all nations and

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<sup>1</sup> Barack Obama, “Obama: What We Must Do in Haiti and Why,” *Newsweek*, January 14, 2010, accessed December 21, 2014, <http://www.newsweek.com/obama-what-america-must-do-haiti-and-why-71211>.

urges its listeners to feel for and with the earthquake victims: “We are all a part of God’s great big family,” sings Mary J. Blige, “And the truth, you know love is all we need.”<sup>2</sup> In a similar vein, Miley Cyrus intones, “Send them your heart so they’ll know that someone cares.” The song ends with will.i.am chanting, “they need us; they need us; they need us.” This popular song reflects the same sentiment of individual care and concern across national, racial, cultural, and religious borders that Obama advocated in his *Newsweek* piece. The resulting outpouring of support from sentimental appeals such as these was financial, material, and emotional, seeming to transcend race, religion, or politics in the name of a shared humanity.

Yet in the early weeks of the disaster, the Haitian government received approximately one cent of each dollar donated by U.S. Americans, and only approximately ten cents went to food. Thirty-three cents, on the other hand, went directly to the United States military’s security and relief operations. The Associated Press reported, “Relief experts say it would be a mistake to send too much direct cash to the Haitian government which is in disarray and has a history of failure and corruption.”<sup>3</sup> While individual U.S. Americans were encouraged to see themselves broadly as a part of Haiti’s extended family, the government’s response was a more rigid and predictable structure: paternalism.

Moreover, American businesses were chomping at the bit to profit from rebuilding efforts in Haiti, citing opportunities for growth amidst the devastation. Anti-

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<sup>2</sup> Artists for Haiti, “We are the World 25 for Haiti,” 2010, CD single and music download. Written by Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie.

<sup>3</sup> Associated Press, “Haiti Government Gets 1 Cent of U.S. Aid Dollar.” *MSNBC*, January 27, 2010, accessed January 10, 2013, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/35103622/#.UO62j83fygR>.

globalization activist Naomi Klein issued warnings about the likelihood that Haiti would face the same “shock doctrine” treatment that poor black residents of New Orleans faced after Hurricane Katrina in 2005.<sup>4</sup> In her *Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, Klein argues that corporations often view disaster as generative of “exciting market possibilities,” a phenomenon she calls “disaster capitalism.”<sup>5</sup> Klein names economist Milton Friedman as the father of disaster capitalism, quoting his contention that

only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable.<sup>6</sup>

Of concern to Klein and her supporters is that these opportunistic interventions are seldom presented in the language of the marketplace; instead their proponents purport to advance free trade, democracy, and growth. They are not presented with force but rather with “the pretext of mutual consent between the governments doing the negotiating, as well as a consensus among the supposed experts.”<sup>7</sup> Klein and others clearly did not see the compassionate rhetoric around Haiti as a sign of the United States’ global benevolence but rather as a cover for the opportunity to push redevelopment for Haiti that would benefit corporate interests in a world dominated by neoliberal economics.

As I noticed the disconnect between the compassionate rhetoric around Haiti and the actual interventions undertaken in Haiti in 2010, I became interested in the cultural

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<sup>4</sup> Naomi Klein, “Naomi Klein Issues Haiti Disaster Capitalism Alert: Stop Them Before They Shock Again,” *Democracy Now!*, January 14, 2010, accessed March 12, 2015, [http://www.democracynow.org/2010/1/14/naomi\\_klein\\_issues\\_haiti\\_disaster\\_capitalism](http://www.democracynow.org/2010/1/14/naomi_klein_issues_haiti_disaster_capitalism).

<sup>5</sup> Naomi Klein, *Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007): 6.

<sup>6</sup> Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom: Fortieth Anniversary Edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002): xiv.

<sup>7</sup> Klein, *Shock Doctrine*, 11.

work that compassionate sentiment performs. The question of how these seemingly competing discourses intertwine remained in my mind for more than a year when, in March of 2011, I first read with horror about the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear crisis in the Tohoku region of Japan, where for a year in the late 1990s I lived and taught through the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program. In reading about the Japanese disaster, I noticed the recycling of much of the sentiment from the Haitian disaster—language of love, hope, and compassion. But I also heard differences—language about race, culture, and law and order. Many of these depictions struck me as caricatures of the Japan I knew, and that fact prompted me to think more about the characterizations of Haiti after its earthquake. I wondered if these depictions of Haiti diverged from reality as much as those of Japan seemed to. But more importantly, I wondered what these differences in representation said not about Haiti or Japan, but about the United States and its sense of itself in the world.

This dissertation engages, then, with the apparently paradoxical relationship between popular sentimental expressions of U.S. support and solidarity for disaster victims, on the one hand, and the privatizing, nondemocratic interventions that support neoliberal capitalism, on the other. I argue that, ultimately, these responses are not actually contradictory but rather are mutually constitutive. The popular cultural productions that I study here, including song lyrics, memoirs, documentary films, telethons, evangelical Christian popular theology, and online political discussions surrounding these disasters, manifest a cultural logic that authorizes the United States government to intervene—or not—on behalf of private property and investment. These priorities take precedence over the lives and interests of people of color not only at home,

as the 2005 Hurricane Katrina response demonstrated, but also abroad. Yet the sentimental rhetoric they employ obscures the racism inherent in these texts because the United States' credibility as a world power relies on its inclusive, multicultural image. This logic forecloses political critique while focusing on the hearts of U.S. Americans.

Rebecca Wanzo argues that “we ignore, to our peril, sentimentality’s embedded presence in the public imagination.”<sup>8</sup> I borrow Wanzo’s definition of the sentimental:

repeated representations of the sweet, innocent, or cute; provoked tears in response to a melodramatic or tortuous turn in a story; repetitive and nostalgic renderings of either a sorrowful event or happy times so that the audience is reminded of how painful or joyous a recent occurrence is; long testimonies about a person’s emotions or feelings; and seemingly excessive emotion in response to an event.<sup>9</sup>

The sentimental has a long history of political deployment in popular culture, as scholars such as Ann Douglas and Lauren Berlant have described.<sup>10</sup> However, as Wanzo explains, the sentimental is neither inherently good nor bad, progressive nor conservative. It is one tool in the struggle for hegemony. As Stuart Hall discusses in his “Notes on Deconstructing ‘the Popular,’” popular cultural productions do not necessarily offer resistance to dominant ideologies. The same is true with sentiment. Rather, the “people”—whether commenters on news websites, evangelical Christian adoptive parents, or hip-hop performers—that I explore here reproduce dominant ideology even as they also resist aspects of it. As Hall explains, “there is a continuous and necessarily

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<sup>8</sup> Rebecca Wanzo, *The Suffering Will Not Be Televised: African American Women and Sentimental Political Storytelling* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2009):13.

<sup>9</sup> Wanzo, 8.

<sup>10</sup> Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 1977); Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2008).

uneven and unequal struggle, by the dominant culture, constantly to disorganise and reorganise popular culture; to enclose and confine its definitions and forms.”<sup>11</sup> Capital, he argues, has a stake in the popular. This tension is central to my understanding of these texts, because I do not see the producers of these materials as conscious ideologues but rather actors who produce sentiments “from their hearts,” which they explicitly separate from the political or economic. My project reveals that those hearts, in fact, are shaped by racial politics and capitalist economics. Following Hall, I “start here: with the double stake in popular culture, the double movement of containment and resistance, which is always inevitably inside it.”<sup>12</sup> This project offers some maps of those sites of contestation in popular culture to demonstrate that intentions that mean to redress inequalities more often reproduce them than meaningfully critique them.

It is important to understand that the racial ideologies these texts employ are seldom framed as explicitly racial. Rather, they use the coded language of “culture.” The descriptions of Haitian or Japanese culture that I read here bear more resemblance to U.S.-based domestic racial stereotypes than to any deep understanding of the people they purport to describe. In depicting Haitians as miserable and helpless and the Japanese as stoic and strong, these texts employ what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva calls “cultural racism” to explain the differences between the experiences of victims in each nation. Cultural racism contends “that minorities’ standing is a product of their lack of effort, loose family

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<sup>11</sup> Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘the Popular,’” *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, ed 4, ed. John Storey (London: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 1998): 447.

<sup>12</sup> Hall, 443.

organization, and inappropriate values.”<sup>13</sup> In this discourse, culture, rather than biology, becomes the explanation for racial inequality.

Perhaps the most famous and influential manifestation of this thinking was the 1965 Moynihan Report, commissioned by the United States Department of Labor to study the black family. Moynihan, a liberal, famously referred to the problems of the black family as a “tangle of pathology” and asserted that the black family, especially its matriarchal structure, was “the fundamental source of the weakness of the Negro community at the present time.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, to achieve racial equality, social programs ought to focus on strengthening the black family, Moynihan asserted. Although Moynihan’s report provided justification for much of Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty, it also provided a cultural basis on which to blame a failure of black *culture* rather than blaming either biological inferiority *or* the structural inequalities that resulted from centuries of systematic disenfranchisement.

Although Moynihan, like the Kerner Commission Report of 1968, underscored the role of white racism as the aspect of culture that created inequality, the matriarchal family structure of black families was what, with time, came to be viewed as pathological. The gender biases implicit in this argument notwithstanding, the legacy of this report is not on the pathology of racism but on the pathology of the black family. Therefore, it becomes black, rather than white, culture that needs to be remedied, and white patriarchal families’ normativity is reified.

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<sup>13</sup> Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and Racial Inequality in Contemporary America* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010): 40.

<sup>14</sup> Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington: Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor, 1965): <http://www.dol.gov/dol/aboutdol/history/webid-meynihan.htm>.

Robin D.G. Kelley is among many scholars who argue that as a result of the Moynihan report and similar assessments, black people “have been consistently marked as dysfunctional” and that black people are “the thing against which normality, whiteness, and functionality have been defined.”<sup>15</sup> In short, cultural racism denies the institutional contexts responsible for racial inequalities in the United States in a way that protects the racial status quo by blaming black people for their own problems. These texts export that ideology to apply to people of African and Asian descent in other countries. What I demonstrate in this discussion is that sentimentality is integral to narratives cultural racism around disaster.

Indeed, Bonilla-Silva points out that cultural racism does not require a conscious articulation of racism. In fact, he contends, it is often articulated “in a gentler, at times even ‘compassionate’ way.”<sup>16</sup> Because it does not argue that biological differences account differential experiences, cultural racism seems, to its many proponents, not to be racism at all. As I will show, the same idea permeates the production of compassionate sentiment as it is expressed in fundraising telethons for Haiti and in the memoirs of U.S. American writers visiting Haiti and Japan after their respective disasters. In fact, it is an inherently sentimental discourse that works ultimately not only to maintain white supremacy but also to support neoliberal capitalism.

Aihwa Ong defines neoliberalism’s core tenets as these: “(a) a claim that the market is better than the state at distributing public resources and (b) a return to a

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<sup>15</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley, *Yo’ Mama’s Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1997): 3.

<sup>16</sup> Bonilla-Silva, 41.



‘primitive form of individualism: an individualism which is ‘competitive,’ ‘possessive,’ and construed often in terms of the doctrine of ‘consumer sovereignty.’”<sup>17</sup> She continues,

neoliberal logic requires populations to be free, self-managing, and self-enterprising individuals in different spheres of everyday life—health, education, bureaucracy, the professions, and so on. The neoliberal subject is therefore not a citizen with claims on the state but a self-enterprising citizen-subject who is obligated to become an ‘entrepreneur of himself or herself.’

This logic produces “new requirements that individual subjects be responsible for themselves.”<sup>18</sup> To depend on government, then, is to fail as a neoliberal subject.

Communications scholar Dana L. Cloud has shown how the values and expectations that Ong describes get translated in popular discourse. Cloud argues that an emphasis on personal responsibility, self-expression, coping, and familial values that has emerged since the Vietnam War is “rhetorical strategy of offering therapeutic consolation as a substitute for political and economic compensation” that “has become a commonplace diversion from political engagement in contemporary American society.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, by focusing on the values of neoliberalism, such as individuality, self-help, and the family, contemporary culture masks the relevance of “[r]acism, sexism, and capitalism” in “structuring social reality.”<sup>20</sup> Cloud sees these “rhetorics of therapy” as instrumental to the spread of capitalism. “The history of capitalism,” she writes, “is also the history of the elaboration and intensification of the therapeutic imperative.” Thus cultural racism, which blames victims for their own oppression, and the rhetorics of

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<sup>17</sup> Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2006): 11.

<sup>18</sup> Ong, 14.

<sup>19</sup> Dana L. Cloud, *Control and Consolation in American Culture and Politics* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 1998): xiii.

<sup>20</sup> Cloud, xvi.

therapy that also blame people rather than institutions for poverty and suffering, overlap and intertwine, marginalizing meaningful structural critique.

Although I am interested in neoliberalism, my interest is not in critique of any particular economic policy. Rather, I focus on articulations of this therapeutic ethos in a wide range of cultural productions, from memoirs to telethons to popular evangelical Christian theology, that feature similar sentiments, authored by members of diverse communities for members of diverse communities. This range suggests the hegemonic reach of these values to authorize certain kinds of responses by government, broadly speaking (for instance, to intervene or not to intervene). Yet because popular culture is a site of constant struggle and resistance, this project does not suggest that neoliberal ideology is neatly and directly translated into the texts I analyze; rather, it offers impressionistic sketches of how these ideologies manifest in a diverse range of primary sources.

In short, this dissertation describes the ways in which sentiments expressed in popular culture employ cultural racism to put government in its place, in a neoliberal world order: supporting the free market while leaving to private individuals or families the work of caring for those who are most vulnerable, both in the United States and in Haiti. This disciplining of not only other governments but also its *own* government—putting it in its place—is essential to the flourishing of neoliberal capitalism of the type that Klein describes. American popular responses to these disasters have situated, as Obama's *Newsweek* editorial suggests, the American people—their hearts—as central to disaster reconstruction. This formulation rhetorically separates the hearts of the American people from the political realm, from government, and especially from acknowledgment

of racial inequalities. By painting individuals, families, and private organizations as the proper vessels for compassion—and by contrasting them with the values of governments, their own and others’—the cultural productions that I study in this project suggest that the United States government has a limited role in care for disaster victims in Haiti and Japan, or elsewhere. The government is portrayed as cold and inefficient, whereas individuals are warm, compassionate, and interesting.

These sentiments are *imperial* because they help to create and justify dimensions of control and power that consistently benefit those very American hearts more than the disaster victims they purport to serve. Definitive descriptions of the *imperial* or of *empire* are notoriously difficult to articulate, particularly with regard to the United States, which is commonly understood to have experimented with empire only briefly after the conclusion of the Spanish-American War in 1898. There is no precise cartography of U.S. empire, no clear demarcations of colonialism in the European sense. Nonetheless, we know that the United States had wielded disproportionate power in the world since the end of World War II and only grew in power after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Moreover, the effects of this power manifest around the globe, and its benefits accrue to U.S. American citizens, especially those with access to capital. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have argued that empire in this new millennium is not based in one particular nation but is “the political subject that effectively regulates...global exchanges, the sovereign power that governs the world.”<sup>21</sup> That power, they argue, has “the capacity to present force as being in the service of right and peace.”<sup>22</sup> To serve right and peace, the

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<sup>21</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001): xi.

<sup>22</sup> Hardt and Negri, 15.

United States manufactures, as it has since at least the Cold War era, its global legitimacy in part through its appeals to multiculturalism.<sup>23</sup>

It is this kind of seemingly benevolent empire, as expressed through cultural productions that emphasize care and compassion, with which this project is concerned. That this empire has no geographic boundaries means that, as Paul A. Kramer has contended, it is more fruitful to examine what the imperial *does* rather than what empire *is*. Kramer defines “the imperial” as “a dimension of power in which asymmetries in the scale of political action, regimes of spatial ordering, and modes of exceptionalizing difference enable and produce relations of hierarchy, discipline, dispossession, extraction, and exploitation.”<sup>24</sup> He encourages scholars to use the imperial as a category of analysis, examining the how these asymmetries have been produced and reproduced; this is my method in my analyzing the cultural productions I study in this project. Kramer argues that regardless of whether the United States *has* an empire, it requires “an imperial historiography.”<sup>25</sup> He thus encourages “inquiries about three key historical themes: the way that power resides in and operates through long-distance connections; the mutual and uneven transformation of societies through these connections; and comparison between

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<sup>23</sup> Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011); Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and US Interests in the Middle East Since 1945* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2005); Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2003); Penny M. Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2006).

<sup>24</sup> Paul A. Kramer, “Power and Connection: Imperial Histories of the United States in the World,” *The American Historical Review* 116, no. 5 (2011): 1349.

<sup>25</sup> Kramer, 1350.

large-scale systems of power and their histories.”<sup>26</sup> Throughout this study, I consider the imperial ramifications of the neoliberal hegemony in popular culture. Specifically, I articulate how sentimental cultural productions deploy domestic racial ideologies to articulate and rearticulate the specific role for the United States government that I mentioned above: protection of neoliberal capitalism’s emphasis on free trade and private sector development around the world. Because, as Hall has claimed, “popular culture has historically become the dominant form of global culture,” it is intrinsically important to a discussion of U.S. empire.<sup>27</sup>

These questions are especially compelling in the context of natural disasters for several reasons. The chaos generated by disaster and the urgency required in its response creates opportunities for temporary suspension of normal paradigms of governance, examples of the so-called “state of exception” that Giorgio Agamben argues is, in fact, less and less often *actually* temporary. He writes that “the voluntary creation of a permanent state of emergency (though perhaps not declared in the technical sense) has become one of the essential practices of contemporary states, including so-called democratic ones,” thereby imperiling democratic citizenship, especially because public sentiment seldom translates “into a sustained political resistance.”<sup>28</sup> Although Agamben does not include natural disasters as precursors to the state of exception, anthropologists Didier Fassin and Mariella Pandolfi have argued that natural disasters and war are both “embedded in the same global logic of intervention, which rests on two fundamental elements: the temporality of emergency, which is used to justify a state of exception, and

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<sup>26</sup> Kramer, 1350.

<sup>27</sup> Stuart Hall, “What is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?,” in Gina Dent, editor, *Black Popular Culture* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992): 24.

<sup>28</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005): 2.

the conflation of political and moral registers manifested in the realization of operations which are at once military and humanitarian.”<sup>29</sup> Although Klein does not specifically reference Agamben’s “exception,” her contention that the rise of global capitalism has depended on a series of disasters and ensuing chaos certainly parallels the rise of the “state of exception” that can facilitate the sorts of shocks that stimulate the market. Moreover, as Klein notes, climate change is producing a “steadily increasing flow of new disasters,” thus providing “simply too hot an emerging market to be left to nonprofits.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, natural disasters will remain important prospects for capital.

Yet although disasters are on the rise, this dissertation is not truly concerned with geological or meteorological events *per se*. There are a variety of kinds of “shock doctrine” moments—war, urban riots, epidemics—that can occasion the kinds of suffering that I describe in this project. However, my concern is not truly about how the United States responds to natural disasters but rather about how the people of the United States deploy rhetorics of race, culture, and compassion that naturalize and even soften interventions taken by the United States to protect whiteness and private property at the expense of black lives. That the “shock doctrine” moment in Haiti and Japan was geological in both cases is valuable for this project because earthquakes and tsunamis are seen as apolitical, choosing their victims at random. Thus my focus on natural disasters rather than on other, more apparently political “shock doctrine” moments, such as war or urban riots, serves as a kind of control: similar disasters, similar levels of devastation, similar calls for Americans to feel for the plight of victims, similar denial of political

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<sup>29</sup> Didier Fassin and Mariella Pandolfi, *Contemporary States of Emergency: The Politics of Military and Humanitarian Interventions* (New York: Zone Books, 2010): 10.

<sup>30</sup> Klein, *Shock Doctrine*, 13.

frameworks. Yet the stark racial, economic, and geopolitical differences between the two nations highlight the differential ways that popular culture interprets these places—and reveals their deeply political roots. Indeed, I would suggest that one reason these two disasters seem to have garnered more attention than others is that their racial demographics make them interpretable through American domestic racial ideology.

The chapters are not organized chronologically but rather thematically. I begin and end with Japan to illustrate the way that admiring descriptions of Japanese culture contrast with those used to describe black cultures in New Orleans in 2005 and in Haiti five years later. In Chapter Two, I focus on online discussions that frame poor black people in New Orleans as dependent on government and dangerous to the welfare of the United States, as well as to private enterprise everywhere. In Chapters Three, Four, and Five, I describe what seem to be opposite attitudes toward the disaster victims—ones rooted in compassion, colorblindness, and care across racial and national borders. By beginning with an explication of cultural racism in a domestic context, I hope that it will be made more visible in the chapters that follow, which focus on compassionate sentiments and the language of love, hope, and healing in Haiti and Japan. As I show in Chapters Three, Four, and Five, these seemingly positive attitudes, examined more closely, actually reflect and reify the asymmetries of power between people on opposite sides of these borders in ways not dissimilar to assumptions in Chapter Two. To articulate plainly the racial assumptions behind these characterizations would be to disrupt the image of the United States' imperial project as “in the service of right and peace,” which is essential to the operation of American empire—an unacceptable consequence that might lead to political upheaval that would imperil the free market.

Thus, these compassionate responses promote inequalities and maintain the status quo while suggesting that they themselves are above politics or the market, concerned only by matters of the heart. They stridently deny that which they reinforce.

Yet, despite these patently racist attitudes, in most of the cultural productions I analyze here, the authors seem sincerely committed to “right and peace,” to a world in which the United States acts with compassion and colorblindness. With the exception of the openly racist commentators on the question “Why is there no looting in Japan?” that I discuss in Chapter Two, almost all of the authors of these texts exhibit what I take to be genuine concern about the well-being of Haitian and Japanese victims of disaster. Indeed, a desire to express this very concern is central to the construction of the identities of the individuals I describe above, whether they are hip-hop stars, evangelical Christians, or medical professionals. That this honest concern is intertwined with largely unconscious or unarticulated racism speaks to the ways in which racism in the United States is naturalized and sentimentalized as well as to the extent to which white people can craft images of themselves as benevolent and cosmopolitan by reacting to and for people of color. Being a good person in the twenty-first century United States requires an understanding of oneself as an individual that is not unlike the image the United States must project as a nation: caring, connected, and conscious and fully invested in equality. Their self-constructions, then, are also deeply enmeshed in the values of neoliberalism.

We may debate whether the policies employed by the United States government in Haiti after its earthquake helped Haitians, but there is no question that the policies it enacted protected white America by blocking Haitian immigration, promoting adoption of children (many of whom were not true orphans), and by exploiting exciting business



opportunities for American firms to redevelop Haiti's infrastructure. Yet the outpouring of compassionate rhetoric—and money—to Haiti, including in the President's *Newsweek* editorial, obscures these responses, ones that rightly may be accused of lacking in compassion. Japan's disaster required less financial and logistical intervention from the United States because of its comparatively stable economy and extensive disaster preparedness. However, the nuclear crisis at Fukushima afterwards presented a threat not only to the Japanese but to the world. Yet depictions of Japanese stoic resilience seemed to suggest a model for American behavior: to carry on, not complain, and not rely on government for assistance. Moreover, such a response minimized the need for active engagement with the questions of the nuclear age—questions common to the intimately connected histories of Japan and the United States. Furthermore, questions of nuclear regulation and safety are relevant not only in Japan but in the United States as well. In short, these responses encouraged the use of government, but only to the extent that it remained supportive of the status quo and in favor of Americans and their own desires. American compassion—and its use of government to enact that sentiment—requires a depoliticized context in which black or Asian people are expected to be silent and uncomplaining.

American popular responses to these disasters have situated, as Obama's *Newsweek* editorial suggests, the American people—their hearts—as central to disaster reconstruction. This formulation rhetorically separates the heart of the American people from the political realm, from government, and especially from acknowledgment of racial (but not “cultural”) inequalities. By painting individuals, families, and private organizations as the proper vessels for compassion—and by contrasting them with the

values of governments, their own and others’—the cultural productions that I have studied in this project suggest that the United States government has a limited role in care for disaster victims in Haiti and Japan, or elsewhere. The government is portrayed as cold and inefficient, whereas individuals are warm and caring. In October, 2013, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press reported that only 19% of Americans “trust the government in Washington to do what is right just about always or most of the time.”<sup>31</sup>

The reasons for American distrust of government are multiple, and enumerating them is beyond the scope of this project. However, this distrust in the government supports the values of neoliberalism, especially the ideal of limited government. Rhetorically separating government and sentiment has serious effects on what kinds of change are possible in a world where there are no sanctuaries from the effects of the free market. Relegating government to the role of supporting the free market is loss for vulnerable people—especially black people—everywhere. Yet doing so makes Americans feel good about themselves. As Obama claimed in his *Newsweek* piece, indeed, “That is who we are. That is what we do.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, “Trust in Government Nears Record Low, But Most Federal Agencies Are Viewed Favorably,” *Pew Research*, October 18, 2013, accessed January 6, 2015, <http://www.people-press.org/2013/10/18/trust-in-government-nears-record-low-but-most-federal-agencies-are-viewed-favorably/>.

<sup>32</sup> Obama, np.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **“WHY IS THERE NO LOOTING IN JAPAN?”: JUSTIFICATIONS FOR U.S. EMPIRE AFTER HURRICANE KATRINA**

Within three days of the earthquake and tsunami that hit the Tohoku region of Japan on March 11, 2011, broadcast media, newspapers, and online discussion boards on mainstream media sites as well as more niche political and social media sites addressed the question about which this chapter will focus: “Why is there no looting in Japan?” On March 14, the *Washington Times* noted, “So far...there is no looting reported from Japan” and also noted “substantial internet chatter about the subject.”<sup>1</sup> That same day, journalist Ed West of the British *Telegraph* asked “Why do some cultures react to disaster by reverting to everyone for himself, but others—especially the Japanese—display altruism even in adversity?”<sup>2</sup> On March 15, CNN’s Jack Cafferty posed the same question to readers of his “Cafferty File,” offering the comment “one heart-wrenching byproduct of disasters like this one has been missing in Japan, and that’s looting and lawlessness.”<sup>3</sup> By March 17, right-wing American political provocateur Glenn Beck

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<sup>1</sup> Jim Picht, “Where are Japanese Looters?,” *The Washington Times Communities*, March 14, 2011, accessed October 14, 2014, <http://communities.washingtontimes.com/neighborhood/stimulus/2011/mar/14/where-are-japanese-looters/>.

<sup>2</sup> Ed West, “Why Is There No Looting in Japan?,” *The Telegraph*, March 14, 2011, accessed October 14, 2014, <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/edwest/100079703/why-is-there-no-looting-in-japan/>.

<sup>3</sup> Jack Cafferty, “Why Is There No Looting in Japan?,” *CNN*, March 15, 2011, accessed December 18, 2014, <http://caffertyfile.blogs.cnn.com/2011/03/15/why-is-there-no-looting-in-japan/>.

admonished Americans to learn from Japanese behavior.<sup>4</sup> A variety of websites picked up and furthered these discussions, often citing these pieces and posing the same question to their readerships. On social media sites such as YouTube, users independently undertook debate of the same question: “why is there no looting in Japan?” By July of 2012, a Google search for the phrase “why no looting Japan” returned over three million results.

I call these conversations about looting after the Japanese disaster a “discussion” rather than a “debate” because dissenting views were so marginalized that the absence of Japanese looting was seldom questioned; rather, the discussion tended to offer conjecture about what explains the difference between Japanese behavior and the behavior of Haitian and black American disaster victims. Invariably, the discussion contrasted the absence of looting in Japan with looting and lawlessness in Haiti, which was still recovering from its own massive earthquake fourteen months earlier, and with the United States, where looting after 2005’s Hurricane Katrina remained fresh in memory. Prominent African-American blogger Sandra Rose noted the contrast immediately. “The media never tires of reporting on the looting, pillaging and rapes that continue to plague the Haitian people,” she wrote on March 14. Moreover, she noted, this discussion of Japan contrasts with “media coverage of the widespread looting in post-Katrina New Orleans” that was “shamefully biased.”<sup>5</sup> That looting—or the absence thereof—would be a topic of conversation during a staggeringly devastating triple disaster of earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear crisis speaks to the importance of law-and-order narratives as Americans compared and reflected on their own history with disaster, looting, and race.

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<sup>4</sup> Glenn Beck, “What America Can Learn from Japan,” *YouTube*, posted March 18, 2011, accessed December 18, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wb0mcGDwuf4>.

<sup>5</sup> Sandra Rose, “Why Is There No Looting in Japan?,” March 14, 2011, accessed October 14, 2014, <http://sandrарose.com/2011/03/why-is-there-no-looting-in-japan/>.

This interest in Japanese behavior after disaster stems in part from the United States' own tarnished reputation that resulted from events in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Britain's *Economist*, for instance, wrote in September of that year,

Since Hurricane Katrina, the world's view of America has changed. The disaster has exposed some shocking truths about the place: the bitterness of its sharp racial divide, the abandonment of the dispossessed, the weakness of critical infrastructure. But the most astonishing and most shaming revelation has been of its government's failure to bring succor to its people at their time of greatest need.<sup>6</sup>

The American Civil Liberties Union also noted the damage to the United States' international "reputation as a human rights leader." The organization's press release quotes its executive director, Anthony D. Romero: "There is no question that the administration's response to Katrina, added to its other abuses of power, has further diminished America's reputation as a beacon of freedom."<sup>7</sup> These and many other condemnations of racial injustice in the handling of Hurricane Katrina suggest that the United States' international reputation suffered as a result not just of government incompetence generally but also, more specifically, of racist neglect and abuse of its black citizens.

Thus popular discussions of the question of looting in Japan are a mode of self-reflection and analysis about the United States' comparative moral standing in the world. The assessment concludes that the United States is indeed compromised, falling short of its ideals. Yet the problem, most participants in this discussion suggest, is not the

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<sup>6</sup> "Hurricane Katrina: The Shaming of America," *The Economist*, September 8, 2005, accessed October 14, 2014, <http://www.economist.com/node/4370617>.

<sup>7</sup> "On Anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, ACLU Sees America's Reputation as a Human Rights Leader Diminished," *The American Civil Liberties Union*, August 29, 2006, accessed October 14, 2014, <https://www.aclu.org/human-rights/anniversary-hurricane-katrina-aclu-sees-americas-reputation-human-rights-leader-diminis>.

government's institutionalized racism; rather, black culture itself is to blame for its failure to live up to Japanese standards. As I will explain below, these "Japanese standards" actually represent what many consider to be *white American* standards that have been compromised, commentators suggest, in the process of granting black Americans full expression of their rights as citizens. In this analysis, an adaptation of the model minority myth, black culture not only fails the poor black residents of New Orleans but also explains a perceived decline in American world power. This discussion thereby redeems the failures of the state, explaining police and military interventions as necessary to protection of private property and "law and order" not only at home but also abroad, in places like Haiti, where reports of looting resonated with descriptions of New Orleans and where American corporations stood to profit from reconstruction efforts. Moreover, by appearing to praise Asian strength of character, these discussions provide plausible deniability of the racism inherent in these assessments of black and Japanese culture and in the failures to protect black lives in Haiti and New Orleans or anywhere around the world.

Plausible deniability of racism is essential to the functioning of the United States' world power. As scholars such as Mary L. Dudziak, Melani McAlister, Christina Klein, and Penny M. Von Eschen have demonstrated, the nation learned during the Cold War era that its power must appear anti-racist in the ideological battle against communism.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011); Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and US Interests in the Middle East Since 1945* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2005); Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2003); Penny M. Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz*

“If other nations, and particularly nonwhite peoples, were to have faith in democracy,” writes Dudziak, “the United States would need to reassure them that American democracy was not synonymous with white supremacy.”<sup>9</sup> A range of cultural productions, including film, musical productions, tourism, visual art, and consumer products, helped to forge this egalitarian image abroad, contributing to the defeat the Soviet Union.

The end of the Cold War, which left the United States the world’s sole superpower, did not, however, nullify the need for American justice to appear colorblind. As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have explained, globalization has produced a new form of empire, which, although it is not explicitly tied to any single nation, is “the political subject that effectively regulates...global exchanges, the sovereign power that governs the world.”<sup>10</sup> It is a “single logic of rule” based not in military strength alone but rather on “the capacity to present force as being in the service of right and peace.”<sup>11</sup> “Right and peace,” of course, must not involve racism because, as Howard Winant notes, a “tremendous hunger for social justice” remains “throughout the world.”<sup>12</sup>

However, the aspiration to colorblindness does not mean that race no longer matters. Winant insists that “[g]lobalization is a re-racialization of the world” and that “*globalization is a racialized social structure.*”<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Winant argues that, just as

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*Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Dudziak, 39.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001): xi.

<sup>11</sup> Hardt and Negri, 15.

<sup>12</sup> Howard Winant, *The New Politics of Race: Globalism, Difference, and Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004): 133.

<sup>13</sup> Winant, 131. Emphasis in original.

was true during the Cold War era about which Dudziak writes, the United States' domestic racial problems are threats to its power and "have the potential significantly to undermine the new imperialist project."<sup>14</sup> The United States draws on representations of its racial inclusiveness to promote its rightness and obscure its undemocratic coercions. Yet Hurricane Katrina rightly generated stark and profound questions about whether blackness was compatible with American citizenship. Although these questions, of course, were not new in American history, they vividly illustrated a contemporary manifestation of racial inequality that many Americans considered a thing of the past, and widespread media coverage carried this story to far reaches of the globe.

However, my interest in this chapter is not only about domestic racial ideology but rather about how this ideology intertwines with the neoliberal capitalism that is the economic foundation of American empire. Winant explains that empire in the era of globalization does not function in the same ways that it did in the era of European imperialism but rather through modes of economic control. In the twenty-first century,

postimperial powers do not explicitly monopolize exports or demand trade concessions as did their predecessors, for example. Rather than send their troops to dictate policy, break strikes, or enforce the superexploitation of labor, they use financial instruments: the threat to withhold credit if strikes are not broken, or perhaps if education and public health budgets are not cut. Using intermediaries...they control commerce, finance, labor practices, and social policy in a manner nearly as complete and every bit as onerous in the twenty-first century as British or Portuguese colonial policy in the nineteenth.<sup>15</sup>

Although there is no single "world-empire," to use Immanuel Wallerstein's term, that is coterminous with a single nation or represents a unified political order in the world,

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<sup>14</sup> Winant, 133.

<sup>15</sup> Winant, 134.



neoliberal capitalism is the single “world economy.”<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the state is often considered to be of diminished importance. For instance, Aihwa Ong explains that neoliberalism’s political logic prioritizes the market over the state and emphasizes competitive form of individualism.<sup>17</sup> Its prioritizing of the private sphere means that the role of governments—including that of the United States—is ultimately to support the “free market.” Yet, as Naomi Klein has argued vigorously, the free market is seldom as free as it seems; often, the role of the United States, the World Trade Organization, or the International Monetary Fund is to coerce the governments of weaker nations into policies that benefit the market more than the people.<sup>18</sup> The United States’ power thus rests not only in military and economic strength but also in the production of global cultural hegemony makes it the disproportionate beneficiary of the racialized world order that it supports.

Ong argues, “It is important to note that neoliberal reasoning is based on both economic (efficiency) and ethical (self-responsibility) claims”—a philosophy that manifests in discourses that in the United States emphasize individuals’ personal responsibility for market uncertainties.<sup>19</sup> Communication scholar Dana L. Cloud has called this mode of discourse “rhetorics of therapy.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, talking about an absence of looting in Japan is important because it suggests that the Japanese are displaying a

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<sup>16</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein, *World Systems Analysis: An Introduction* (Raleigh, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>17</sup> Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Raleigh, NC: Duke University Press, 2006): 11.

<sup>18</sup> Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007): 9-11.

<sup>19</sup> Ong, 11.

<sup>20</sup> Dana L. Cloud, *Control and Consolation in American Culture and Politics* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, 1998): xv.

therapeutically adaptive relationship toward their nation, the devastation of the earthquake and tsunami, and the anxieties of a silent nuclear disaster. By helping one another and working cooperatively to accept their fate, the Japanese are portrayed as making no particular demands of the state; rather, they manifest what is understood to be a cultural strength based in racial homogeneity. In this sense, the Japanese are portrayed as ideal citizens with an ideal—and limited—role for their government. These descriptions suggest as well that black victims in New Orleans expected too much of their government—that their expectation of help from the state was a sign of cultural and therapeutic weakness rather than the reasonable expectation of American citizens.

The contrasts drawn between Japanese behavior and between black behavior after disaster in New Orleans and in Haiti were based on depictions of both groups that were neither entirely or even mostly accurate. Yet these contrasts offer an opportunity for scholars to understand how Americans process racial and political meaning in relatively casual and unconsciously reflexive modes of and venues for conversation. Although journalists seem to have provoked this discussion, it took place largely independently in the comments on such stories and on independent platforms such as YouTube. Access to these discussions is limited only by access to an Internet connection. The relative openness of the Internet explains this discussion's value to understanding popular sentiment in a way that traditional venues for such assessments, such as newspaper editorials or opinion surveys, cannot. According to a 2013 Pew survey, 85% of American adults regularly use the internet; however, white Americans are more likely to have internet access in their homes than black Americans do; therefore, if anything, white

people, whose attitudes I examine in this chapter, are overrepresented online.<sup>21</sup>

Commenting on news stories has an open-ended format that allows the participants to speak in their own language rather than choose from specific options in a poll or survey. It illustrates openly the negotiation of questions central to American identity on both domestic and international fronts.

In short, the discussion of why no looting appeared to be happening in Japan is an excellent example of the ways in which the cultural logic of neoliberal capitalism filters through to even the most banal and seemingly innocent of conversations in culture. It illustrates that the logic of neoliberalism finds expression in everyday conversations, and that race is intimately intertwined with these ideas. Most participants in these discussions are unlikely to have considered themselves to be commenting on topics such as the financial instruments of empire or potential for neoliberal reconstruction projects. Rather, the participants in these discussions focus primarily on their understandings of race, a discourse that seems to offer a more immediate explanatory power, while remaining entirely embedded within—and supportive of—the broader logic of neoliberal capitalism in the era of globalization. These discussions illustrate *how*, as Winant contends, globalization has racialized the world, but they do not necessarily illustrate an understanding of the strategic value of those racial characterizations. This point underscores the importance of race to creating public sentiment for the policies and actions of both the state and the market in a world system defined by neoliberal capitalism.

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<sup>21</sup> Kathryn Zickuhr, “Who’s Not Online and Why,” *Pew Research Internet Project*, September, 2013, accessed December 17, 2014, <http://www.pewinternet.org/2013/09/25/whos-not-online-and-why/>.

In her discussion of the value of “cultural products such as films or novels” in understanding the United States’ foreign policy decisions in the Middle East, McAlister has suggested that they “contributed to thinking about both values and history in two ways”: first, by defining “an acceptable area for the exercise of American power,” and second, by “representing the Middle East as a stage for the production of American identities—national, racial, and religious.”<sup>22</sup> My discussion of the looting in Japan question attempts to do a similar service: to illustrate how a seemingly insignificant, even sometimes flippant, discussion among people who, journalists aside, hold no particular positions of power relative to creation of foreign policy, both reflects and generates a cultural logic that is deeply embedded not only in the discourse of race but also of nationalism, neoliberalism, and the state. It authorizes the use of power—corporate or military—in the service of controlling black people and promoting the free market. It demonstrates the ongoing renegotiation of what “we” means in the United States—what it can and cannot allow: namely, for poor, black people to fail to accept responsibility for their own vulnerability in this world system.

What is perhaps most stunning about the persistence of the question “why is there no looting in Japan?” is the *a priori* assumption that there was, in fact, no looting in Japan. CNN quoted Gregory Pflugfelder, director of the Donald Keene Center of Japanese Culture at Columbia University, who claimed, “Looting simply does not take place in Japan. I’m not even sure if there’s a word for it that is as clear in its implications as when we hear ‘looting.’” Yet at least two words in Japanese are close to the literal English definition of looting: *ryakudatsu* (“pillage; plunder; looting; robbery”) and

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<sup>22</sup> McAlister, 3.

*kajibadorobou* (literally, “thief at a fire”). The term *akisu* (“empty house”) also refers to a robbery that occurs in an empty house, which was common after Japanese disaster victims were forced to evacuate their homes.<sup>23</sup>

Although linguists discussing Pflugfelder’s claim suggest that he is wrong to claim no such word exists, in fact Pflugfelder is correct in one sense: that the word’s “implications” in the United States are different from those in Japan.<sup>24</sup> In the United States, this term is uniquely racial. One commenter on a CNN article about the term puts it plainly: “looting in America has one color, and it is blak [*sic*].” Commenter “Jack” likewise argues that looting does not occur among white Americans. He writes, “There was flooding in New England, and in the Dakotas. I seen [*sic*] everyone working together, helping each other. Not one instance of looting or violence. We only see that behavior in places like New Orleans and Oakland.” Although another commenter attempts to explain that looting “is not something that happens only in America,” she can point only to Haiti—that is, to another group of black people—as another example.<sup>25</sup> Criticizing this oversimplification in a *Slate* article, legal scholar Mark D. West summed up the tautology between race and criminal behavior: “Why don’t the Japanese loot? Because it’s not in their culture. How is that culture defined? An absence of looting.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Gregory Pflugfelder, quoted in Marnie Hunter, “Orderly Disaster Reaction in Line with Deep Cultural Roots,” *CNN*, March 12, 2011, accessed October 17, 2014, <http://news.blogs.cnn.com/2011/03/12/orderly-disaster-reaction-in-line-with-deep-cultural-roots/>; Mark Liberman, “No Word for Looting?,” *Language Log*, March 17, 2011, accessed December 17, 2014, <http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=3031>; “Japanese Slang,” *Language Realm*, accessed October 25, 2014, <http://www.languagerealm.com/japanese/japaneseslang.php>.

<sup>24</sup> Liberman, np.

<sup>25</sup> Comment on Hunter, np.

<sup>26</sup> Mark D. West, quoted in Christopher Beam, “Stop, Thief! Thank You,” *Slate*, March 16, 2011, accessed October 29, 2014,

This racist equation of looting with blackness made invisible to reporters and commentators alike the actual unlawful behaviors that occurred in Japan after the earthquake and tsunami—stories the Japanese media (and some Western, as well) were reporting. Reports surfaced that the Shinkin Bank had been robbed of the equivalent of a half million dollars.<sup>27</sup> The Kirin Brewery in Sendai and two stores in Ishinomaki were looted as well; cars were drained of their gasoline when gas was not available for sale.<sup>28</sup> An elementary school open to those in Hitachinaka city in Ibaraki prefecture who needed bathrooms and water was robbed of televisions from its classrooms.<sup>29</sup> Video posted three days after the storm showed warehouse workers in Sendai watching looters brazenly descending on the damaged building to haul away ramen noodles and liquor.<sup>30</sup> Scammers sought donations by phone, often presenting themselves as relatives who needed assistance, and others posed as bank employees and appeared at homes, making off with sensitive financial information.<sup>31</sup> Donation boxes were stolen around Japan, as well.<sup>32</sup>

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[http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/crime/2011/03/stop\\_thief\\_thank\\_you.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/crime/2011/03/stop_thief_thank_you.html).

<sup>27</sup> Shinoa Yuasa, “Japan Tsunami Hits Shinkin Bank; \$500,000 Gone from Cracked Vault,” *The Huffington Post*, March 22, 2011, accessed October 25, 2014, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/03/22/japan-tsunami-shinkin-bank-robbery\\_n\\_839152.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/03/22/japan-tsunami-shinkin-bank-robbery_n_839152.html).

<sup>28</sup> Eric Bellman and Miho Inada, “Looting Rears Its Head in Japan,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 23, 2011, accessed October 20, 2014, <http://online.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703410604576216293024644156>.

<sup>29</sup> “Hidosugiro. Hisai juumin shien de kaihou chuushougakkou de usugataterebi sandai tounan.” [“Too awful. 3 Flat Screen TVs Donated to Disaster Victims Stolen from School.”] *Sponichi Annex*, accessed October 14, 2014, <http://www.sponichi.co.jp/society/news/2011/03/29/kiji/K20110329000524660.html>

<sup>30</sup> “Warehouse Staff Interview about Robbery,” April 13, 2011, accessed October 25, 2014, <http://matome.naver.jp/odai/2130009361048371201>.

<sup>31</sup> Julian Ryall, “Japan Earthquake: Organised Crime Gangs Preying on Victims,” *The Telegraph*, March 23, 2011, accessed December 18, 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/japan/8399906/Japan-earthquake-organised-crime-gangs-preying-on-victims.html>.

Another problem was robbery of evacuated houses; in Sendai, 450 people who had been evacuated to a school formed a self-defense team to protect their homes after they had been robbed.<sup>33</sup> Theft was particularly brazen in the evacuated areas of Fukushima prefecture, where burglars risked radiation to break into empty homes and businesses. Theft in this area rose 40% from March to May of 2011, in comparison to statistics from the prior year, although crime overall was down, presumably because of the evacuation of its population.<sup>34</sup> In Miyagi prefecture, a volunteer at an evacuation center was attacked with a utility knife in an attempted rape, and other sexual assaults were also reported.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps the most shocking tale of theft comes from the city of Yamamoto, also in Miyagi prefecture, where thieves in 2013 stole from the site of a day care center that had been destroyed several *jizo* statues left there in memory of children who had died at the site.<sup>36</sup> YouTube user NatTurnersGhost has uploaded several videos offering screenshots of articles about looting in Japan and splicing together video footage as well, in an explicit

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<sup>32</sup> “Toyama Man Arrested for Stealing Earthquake Collection Box,” *Japan Today*, March 21, 2011, accessed October 21, 2014, <http://www.japantoday.com/category/crime/view/toyama-man-arrested-for-stealing-earthquake-collection-box>.

<sup>33</sup> “Sendai no hisaisha jitaku kara kome juu fukuro to sanman’en wo nusumare jikeidan wo kessei” [“Sendai Disaster Victims Form Vigilante Group After 10 Bags of Rice and 30,000 Yen is stolen from their Homes”], *Post Seven*, April 4, 2011, accessed October 25, 2014, [http://www.news-postseven.com/archives/20110404\\_16614.html](http://www.news-postseven.com/archives/20110404_16614.html).

<sup>34</sup> *Yomiuri Shimbun*, March 30, 2011, accessed June 10, 2012, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/national/news/20110330-OYT1T00527.htm>.

<sup>35</sup> “Female Quake Shelter Volunteer Injured in Attempted Rape,” *Japan Times*, July 4, 2011, accessed October 21, 2014, <http://www.japantoday.com/category/crime/view/female-quake-shelter-volunteer-injured-in-attempted-rape-in-miyagi>; Ryall, np.

<sup>36</sup> Casey Baseel, “Appalling String of Thefts Targets Religious Offerings in Tsunami-Damaged Town,” *Rocket News 24*, P September 5, 2013, accessed October 29, 2014, <http://en.rocketnews24.com/2013/09/05/appalling-string-of-thefts-targets-religious-offerings-in-tsunami-damaged-town/>.

attempt to undercut the argument that no looting had occurred in Japan.<sup>37</sup> Despite NatTurnersGhost's efforts and despite the fact that Japanese and even a few English-speaking newspapers reported multiple cases of looting and lawlessness in the aftermath of the disaster, the assumption that no looting occurred in Japan remained powerful in the popular imagination.

The first mainstream media posts about the purported lack of looting in Japan happened within days of the earthquake, although discussion in social media fora (bulletin boards, blogs, and YouTube videos) persisted for weeks and months afterward. That discussions of the question "why is there no looting in Japan?" began within days of the earthquake and tsunami, rather than in the later aftermath, suggests that readily available cultural frames for analyzing Japanese behavior shaped the coverage. Given the catastrophic extent of the damage throughout the Tohoku region, as well as the impending nuclear threat from the shutdown of the reactor in Fukushima, it perhaps should not be a surprise that the Japanese media coverage prioritized other storylines; nonetheless, these events were not secret.

That looting could appear to be missing—that articles could be written, television programs produced, or personal blogs and videos created about what was *not* happening in Japan, even in light of the cataclysmic events there—seems to suggest the weight of media reliance on preexisting frames of what is to be expected in natural disasters—that is, the media must be looking for looting because looting is the socially expected behavior common to disasters. Why else would they discuss what was not occurring? Indeed, in their essay on media coverage of Hurricane Katrina, Russell R. Dynes and

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<sup>37</sup> For a complete list of NatTurnersGhost's videos, please see: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=UUokOIok8H1D-DjaOxhvtUNw>.



Havidan Rodriguez have described a media inclination toward “common cultural assumptions (including myths) about what will happen” during a disaster, including “extensive damage, death, and injury; concern for the children, the ill, and the elderly; forecasting mental health trauma; the absence of authority; extensive looting; and the incompetence of government and the inevitability of social disorder.”<sup>38</sup> To apply Dynes’ and Rodriguez’s argument to this question, then, we would conclude that the media who framed this question are to be understood as *surprised* that looting is not occurring in Japan.

But the fact that the media either missed or ignored actual instances of looting in Japan reveals the disingenuousness of this surprise. The popular frame for interpreting the Japanese response to disaster was less about expectations of generic disaster behavior than it was about expectations for behavior based in “culture”—which, as Eduardo Bonilla-Silva demonstrates, is often a socially acceptable shorthand for race.<sup>39</sup> The search for the “culture” storyline clearly trumped the search for assumptions about “what will happen,” as Dynes and Rodriguez suggest is the norm. If it were the reverse, after all, the Western media would have found looting and reported on it. As it were, the actual instances of looting, however minimal their significance to the overall tragedy in the Tohoku region, were immaterial to the “culture” storyline the news media construed as representative of the disaster. Because the narrative they presented fit existing racial

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<sup>38</sup> Russell R. Dynes and Havidan Rodriguez, “Finding and Framing Katrina: The Social Construction of Disaster,” in David L. Brunsma, David Overfelt, and J. Steven Picou, editors, *The Sociology of Katrina: Perspectives on a Modern Catastrophe*, (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010): 26.

<sup>39</sup> Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and Racial Inequality in Contemporary America* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010): 28-29.

frames readily available in the wider public culture, it resonated with a broader public receptive to hearing and advancing that narrative.

Looting in Japan was invisible to commentators because of powerful cultural stereotypes about Asians that would nearly by definition preclude their engaging in such behavior, because, as I described above, looting is an activity understood to be performed by black people. Moreover, media and popular interpretations of Japanese behavior after the disasters employed the model minority myth, which exalts people of Asian descent for their supposedly superior intellect, discipline, work ethic, and moral values, comparing them favorably to other minority groups perceived to be deficient in those qualities. Although “model minority” is, in fact, a myth that obscures many inequalities between whites and Asians in terms of income and access to power while limiting the range of possible identities for people of Asian descent, it is remarkably tenacious. Frank Wu has noted “the imperviousness of the model minority myth against all efforts at debunking it.”<sup>40</sup>

Of course, in this case, the Japanese are not a “minority” within the United States adapting to and competing with other groups within the nation; they are a sovereign nation. Nonetheless, the language used to describe the Japanese is indistinguishable from the model minority language used to describe Asian Americans. This point illustrates the portability of racial stereotypes that suit domestic ideological needs across national lines and suggests that people of Asian descent within the United States are in no significant ways separable from Japanese-Americans, thereby conflating all Asian Americans into a single cultural category *and* suggesting that they always remain foreign rather than fully

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<sup>40</sup> Frank Wu, *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White* (New York: Basic Books, 2002): 40.

American. Thus this deployment of the model minority myth to the sovereign nation of Japan is a way of marginalizing Asian Americans from the body politic of their own nation and equates “real” Americanness with whiteness. It thus has the curious function of praising the Japanese while continuing to marginalize Asian Americans, thereby reinforcing white supremacy inside the United States.

Reports about the lack of looting in Japan suggest, even despite evidence to the contrary, just the tenacity that Wu describes. Historian Gregory Clancey, the Singapore-based author of *Earthquake Nation: The Cultural Politics of Japanese Seismicity, 1868-1935*, describes the openness with which this myth was applied, even outside the United States. He reports a recurring theme in the Southeast Asian television news programs on which he suddenly was being asked, after March, 2011, to appear to describe the ‘typical’ Japanese response to disaster. He contends,

One narrative that I was continually invited to contribute to could be called ‘the admirable stoicism of the Japanese in the face of natural disaster.’ My role as a historian, I was signaled, was to help viewers or listeners understand how long the history of earthquakes, disaster, and simply hardship had inured the Japanese people to sublime misfortune. One interviewer (who had an undergraduate degree in history) actually asked me to begin in the Tokugawa period and tell viewers how each successive period and its crises had made the Japanese more stoical. Another wanted me to explicitly contrast the behavior of the Japanese with that of other peoples who had faced similar crises and (supposedly) had not behaved so admirably (he mentioned Haitians and the citizens of New Orleans).

Clancey rightly recognizes that the clamoring for these sorts of narratives in the news media reveals “how ‘national character’ and moral tests have so often been adopted as framing devices for such crises.”<sup>41</sup> As Clancey’s experience demonstrates, the news

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<sup>41</sup> Gregory Clancey, “Disasters as Change Agents: Three Earthquakes and Three Japans,” *East Asian Science, Technology, and Society: An International Journal* 5, no. 3, 2011: 395.

media and social networking sites liberally but seemingly unconsciously employed the model minority stereotype, thus demonstrating the media's heavily reliance on racial frames to predetermine news coverage based in cultural stereotypes.

Virtually every online discussion of Japanese response to the disaster echoed these frames. CNN.com users responding to Cafferty's post offered that the Japanese avoided looting because they are "civilized," "more highly evolved," or have "a sense of personal responsibility and integrity;" because "they follow very strict laws;" or because they possess "great dignity," "discipline," "self-respect and respect for others," "honor," and "pride" (and especially "national pride"). Several commentators remarked upon Japan's "spiritual principles" or religion, even though Gallup polling ranks Japan as one of the six least religious nations in the world.<sup>42</sup> Ronald Takaki argues that the model minority myth means that Asian Americans find their diversity as individuals denied: "many feel forced to conform to the 'model minority' mold and want more freedom to be their individual selves."<sup>43</sup> CNN.com users also extended this perception to the Japanese. Many portrayed the Japanese as lacking individuality—sometimes derisively ("Bob in florida" [*sic*] wrote, "The Japanese are much better at being Corporate Authority soldiers than we are" [*sic*]) and sometimes with praise ("Bob Kobs" wrote, "because Japanese people at their very core...are not individualistic and self-interested").<sup>44</sup>

A minority of responses pointed to historical sufferings of the Japanese, from their experiences with past earthquakes to deprivations during war or famine, as

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<sup>42</sup> Comments on Cafferty, np; Brett Pelham and Zsolt Nyiri, "In More Religious Countries, Lower Suicide Rates," July 8, 2008, accessed October 17, 2014, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/108625/more-religious-countries-lower-suicide-rates.aspx>.

<sup>43</sup> Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans, Updated and Revised Edition* (New York: Little and Brown, 1998): 477.

<sup>44</sup> Comments on Cafferty, np.

explanations for the lack of looting. These histories selectively edit out memory of Japanese empire building and atrocity in China or Korea, for instance, or, even more surprisingly, its attack on Pearl Harbor in World War II—images of the Japanese that would certainly undermine the depiction of a disciplined, orderly, morally virtuous society celebrated in the model minority myth. Especially noteworthy is the lack, in both the CNN article and user comments on it, of alternative mythologies of the Japanese or of people of Asian descent in general. As Lee details in his *Orientals*, alternative mythologies for interpreting Asianness *do* in fact exist: “the pollutant, the coolie, the deviant, the yellow peril, the model minority, and the gook” all “portray the Oriental as an alien body and a threat to the American national family.”<sup>45</sup> In his *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*, John W. Dower also points out a number of frames applied to the Japanese after the war. For instance, he points to a paternalist assumption that the Japanese were “children to be guided toward maturity” and to a “perception of the Japanese as collectively neurotic, or in some way mentally and emotionally unstable.”<sup>46</sup>

What is particularly significant about the depictions of Japanese behavior in the popular media is not only that they elect the model minority stereotype over other available frames but also that the characteristics said to define the Japanese (pride, discipline, order, patriotism, and faith, for example) in this instance align with the very values that many Americans perceive as inherently *American*—and yet under attack from a stereotypical “black culture” and the liberal, welfare-state politics that seem to support

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<sup>45</sup> Robert G. Lee, *Orientals: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999): 8.

<sup>46</sup> John W. Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986): 303-304.

it and that neoliberal ideologues would eliminate. The nostalgia for these values emerges especially clearly in comparisons between the Japanese and poor black residents of New Orleans, who, as I will discuss below, are characterized as lacking the values for which the Japanese are praised. Thus this conversation frames white Americans as innocent victims of black disorder and chaos that has weakened the United States and that position the Japanese as stronger and better. In this discussion, then, it is not the Japanese who present the threat to the American family, but black Americans who do.

Glenn Beck's "What America Can Learn from Japan" program illustrates this association between American values and Japanese behavior most explicitly. He opens his discussion by noting "a strange case of musical chairs" in which "the axis of our earth is changing, and so are the Ally and Axis powers, literally and figuratively." Noting the United States' weak economy, military engagements in three Muslim countries, and faltering support for Israel, he argues that the United States is straying from its core values. "We as a people have to decide...who are we, and what can we control?," he exhorts his audience. Continuing, he emphasizes that in these uncertain times, the only thing that "we" can control is our own "reactions"—a clear gesture not only to the rhetoric of therapy but also toward culture itself, as well as to the demands of neoliberalism that individuals take responsibility for their own insecurities in the fluctuations and upheavals of the market. Then—amazingly, given Beck's trademark sanctimonious patriotism—he asks listeners to "behave like the Japanese," whose "incredible unity is inspiring" because "they're like the people we were on September 12." Summarizing succinctly this rhetorical transformation of Asians, who until the 1960s often have been depicted as the race most incompatible with assimilation, into in fact the

*quintessential* Americans—indeed, a “strange case of musical chairs”—he states of the Japanese, “They remind me of America; they remind me of who we’re supposed to be.” He laments, “it used to be called American exceptionalism.”<sup>47</sup>

His reading of the common Japanese exhortation *ganbatte*—to do one’s best or try one’s hardest—aligns with the conservative values Beck promotes. Because of the spirit of *ganbatte*, the Japanese, he says, “can overcome and take pride in it, recovering from military defeat or disaster.... They have a rich, rich history of overcoming, and they haven’t turned against each other yet.” Beck contrasts this language with “This kind of America dependent on a government and looks to a government to heal everything,” which “isn’t what founders wanted it to be.” Finally, Beck exhorts his viewers to “stand up for life, liberty, and equal justice for all—be like the Japanese.” Although Beck never explicitly contrasts blackness with Japanese/American values, his images of government dependency and national division clearly point to a stereotypical conservative depiction of black culture and to the liberal politics that support it as the root of American weakness. Moreover, the nostalgia for American values commonly associated with whiteness renders black Americans, like Asian Americans, outside the bounds of the *real* American identity. Thus, clearly, the question about looting in Japan was not just about Asian superiority; it was also about black inferiority, and this frame—of blacks as criminal, dependent, and anarchic—is what truly animates the question “why was there no looting in Japan?” These explanations, then, not only work to rationalize treatment of black Americans in New Orleans in 2005 but also point to black inferiority as a root cause of the decline in American economic and foreign policy strength.

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<sup>47</sup> Beck, np.

In Beck's iteration of the model minority myth, Japan replaces Asian Americans, and black Americans are replaced by an image of the United States as a multicultural nation. The internationalization of the model minority myth serves to suggest that black people are fully integrated into the concept of who "we" are as Americans, yet as New Orleans in 2005 demonstrated, that claim is specious as best. Beck, like most of the other online commenters, refuses to name blackness as its own point of comparison because the racism implicit in it must be denied. Therefore Beck can only include a critique of black people by critiquing the United States as a whole. "The United States" here simply means a place that tolerates demands for the full expression of black citizenship. This circumlocution is a rhetorical sleight of hand more than it is a genuine reworking of the model minority myth.

The model minority myth functions to discredit black claims of racism by pointing to the success of Asian minorities as evidence that racism no longer bars success in the United States. In his study of the model minority myth, Lee writes, "The elevation of Asian Americans to the position of model minority had less to do with the actual success of Asian Americans than to the perceived failure—or worse, refusal—of African Americans to assimilate"<sup>48</sup> into white values and culture. Yuko Kawai is among those who have also pointed out the ways in which stressing the virtues of Asian Americans serves to chastise other groups, particularly those of African descent, for failing to "live up" to Asian-American success.<sup>49</sup> Clancey's experience in being interviewed for news programming about the earthquake also reflects this assumption. He explains:

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<sup>48</sup> Lee, 145.

<sup>49</sup> Yuko Kawai, "Stereotyping Asian Americans: The Dialectic of the Model Minority and the Yellow Peril," *Howard Journal of Communications* 16, no. 2 (2005): 109-130.



I suspected that the impetus behind the desire on the part of some local journalists to contrast looting in Port-au-Prince or New Orleans with the calm formation of queues in Tokyo was to reactivate ‘Asian values,’ civilizational and even race-based narratives that have great purchase among certain viewers but are ahistorical, decontextualized, and hardly explanatory.<sup>50</sup>

In this context, it is easy to understand Manning Marable’s claim that the model minority myth is responsible for “fostering resentment, misunderstandings, and hostilities” between people of color, a process that Claire Kim calls “racial triangulation.”<sup>51</sup>

This racial triangulation and the divisions it creates, of course, protect white supremacy. YouTube user NatTurnersGhost—whose name pays homage to an African-American well known for his attempts to destroy white supremacy—demonstrates these divisions in his series of videos that document Japanese looting.<sup>52</sup> These videos not only include images of Japanese looting in 2011 but also evidence of Japanese atrocity in World War II to counter white claims that Japanese behavior is innately superior to that of African Americans. The videos leave unclear the user’s feeling toward the Japanese: is NatTurnersGhost arguing that the Japanese are simply regular humans, like people of all other nations, or is he or she specifically attempting to frame them as *more* barbarous than those of other nations and races? The intent is unclear, but commenters on this YouTube channel seem to understand it as a critique not so much of Japanese people but of the whiteness that creates divisions between minority populations—as does NatTurnersGhost’s choice of usernames. One respondent, a user called ShamelessNation, writes, “Wake up black people, this is the white man of yesterday. He hasn’t changed. He

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<sup>50</sup> Clancey, 396.

<sup>51</sup> Manning Marable, *Beyond Black and White: Transforming African-American Politics* (London: Verso, 1995): 198; Claire Kim, “The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans,” *Politics and Society* 27 (March 1999): 105-138.

<sup>52</sup> NatTurnersGhost, “Uploads from NatTurnersGhost,” *YouTube*, accessed December 18, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=UUokOIokK8H1D-DjaOxhvtUNw>.

only acts different.” Steinwaygirl2010 calls praise for the Japanese by white Americans “the usual ploy by you know who to make themselves look like angels.”<sup>53</sup> It is thus clear to these users that white supremacy animates this debate, but comments such as these that call out and challenge discourses of white supremacy are almost entirely absent from the mainstream news sites that discuss this question.

Although few, if any, media outlets framed the “why is there no looting in Japan?” question in explicitly anti-black terms, many commentators made the unstated connection explicit. Another widely viewed video, uploaded by 27mikemorrison, explicitly contrasts the devastation in Japan with that in Louisiana and Haiti after their disasters to depict blacks as savages.<sup>54</sup> It opens with a somber rendition of the Japanese national anthem, played over images of stoic Japanese survivors and then cuts to footage of New Orleans: first, to video of a black minister complaining that black men had tried to force themselves onto rescue helicopters, calling them “despicable” and “incorrigible.” In one video embedded in NatTurnerGhost’s footage but apparently no longer available separately online, an unidentified white man argues that it is easy to “predict” the kinds of “behavior” that characterize black urban culture and Japanese culture—a comment that illustrates surprising, if unwitting, candor about the process of evaluating disaster response.<sup>55</sup> “Predictions” *are* the story.

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<sup>53</sup> Comment on NatTurnersGhost, “Fukushima Japan Being Taken Over by (Super Looters) Risking Radiation to Commit Crime,” *YouTube*, July 10, 2011, accessed December 18, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aNZd8aIH8Yw>.

<sup>54</sup> 27mikemorrison, “Why No Looting in Japan after Tsunami and Earthquake 2011,” *YouTube*, March 11, 2011, accessed December 18, 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dp-dJ1k\\_DbI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dp-dJ1k_DbI).

<sup>55</sup> NatTurnersGhost, np.

What nearly all of these videos and comments neglect to challenge, however, is the assumption that looting and lawlessness *were*, in fact, widespread after the levees broke in New Orleans. In fact, although exaggerated rumors of looting and other anarchic behavior often emerge after natural disasters, after Hurricane Katrina, “the volume and persistence of such rumors...were unprecedented,” according to Dynes and Rodriguez. Worse, many of the reported rumors were not only exaggerated but indeed entirely untrue. Moreover, as Sommers et al point out, these inaccuracies and exaggerations were limited to coverage of black urban areas affected by the storm—and not to the white middle class communities in Louisiana and Mississippi that also suffered damage.<sup>56</sup>

That this unprecedented scale of distortion would occur in a majority black population should be no surprise because of the persistent equation of blackness and criminality, even outside disaster zones. In their study of white perceptions of blackness, Robert M. Entman and Andrew Rojecki contend that news media create “a face of Black disruption, of criminal victimizing and victimization, that compares unfavorably to whites.”<sup>57</sup> Indeed, two photographs printed by the Associated Press on August 30, 2005 illustrate the tautological relationship between blackness and criminality that renders survival behavior “looting” when performed by black people. In both photos, storm victims wade through the flood, carrying bags of goods they recovered from the storm waters. The one that depicts a black man is captioned: “A young man walks through chest deep flood water after looting a grocery store in New Orleans on Tuesday, August 30,

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<sup>56</sup> Samuel R. Somers, Evan P. Apfelbaum, Kristin N. Dukes, Negin Toosi, and Elsie J. Wang, “Race and Media Coverage of Hurricane Katrina: Analysis, Implications, and Future Research Questions,” *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy* 6, no. 1 (December 2006): 39-55.

<sup>57</sup> Robert M. Entmann and Andrew Rojecki, *The Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000): 209.

2005.” In the second, which features a white man and woman, the AP caption reads:

“Two residents wade through chest-deep water after finding bread and soda from a local grocery store.”<sup>58</sup> Although both photographers have denied any racist intent and were not responsible for captioning the photos this way, Cheryl I. Davis and Devon W. Carbado convincingly argue that preexisting racial frames that equate blackness with criminality were only made explicit in these captions; the interpretation by readers would likely have been the same without them.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, depictions of black criminality after Katrina encompassed far more than just looting. Brian Greening writes of the sensationalized crime reports out of the Superdome:

Following Katrina’s landfall in New Orleans, with the Superdome serving as a media-saturated microcosm of the city that spawned it, tuned-in world citizens viewed stories about roving murderous hordes, pedophiles raping infants, and makeshift morgues storing bodies by the hundreds in the Superdome’s sublevels. By using these shocking (and often aggrandized or falsified) tales of intrigue as an in-road for their abject positioning of the mostly black urban poor, journalists and willing subscribers allowed for blackness to be either repositioned or reified as a space where, without supervision, lawlessness prevailed.<sup>60</sup>

Furthermore, as Greening also notes, identical black and white behavior was interpreted through different racial frames: “Black people looted while white people salvaged; blacks were obdurate in their decision to remain in the city while whites were largely victims taken by surprise; blackness was temperamental and violent while whiteness was

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<sup>58</sup> Tania Ralli, “Who’s a Looter?: In Storm’s Aftermath, Pictures Kick Up a Different Kind of Tempest,” *New York Times*, September 5, 2005, accessed October 21, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/05/business/05caption.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/05/business/05caption.html?_r=0).

<sup>59</sup> Cheryl I. Harris and Devon W. Carbado. “Loot or Find: Fact or Frame?” in David Dante Troutt, editor, *After the Storm: Black Intellectuals Explore the Meaning of Hurricane Katrina* (New York: The New Press, 2006).

<sup>60</sup> Brian Greening, “Spectacular Disaster: The Louisiana Superdome and Subsumed Blackness in Post-Katrina New Orleans,” *Invisible Culture: An Electronic Journal for Visual Culture* (Issue 16: The Cultural Visualization of Hurricane Katrina), Spring, 2011, [https://www.rochester.edu/in\\_visible\\_culture/Issue\\_16/articles/greening/greening.html](https://www.rochester.edu/in_visible_culture/Issue_16/articles/greening/greening.html).

composed and unwavering.<sup>61</sup> Thus the same behavior that is called *looting* when black people do it is heroic or survivalist when white people do. Therefore, it is no stretch to say, as Pflugfelder dubiously suggests in his commentary on the Japanese language, that there is no word that means “looting” in Japanese in the sense that it is used in the United States. The term explicitly ties blackness and criminality in the United States.

When journalists or internet users, then, invite responses to the question “why is there no looting in Japan?,” they encourage a continued misremembering of the Katrina aftermath of one characterized by rampant criminality, even despite the public apologies of many journalists for repeating and reporting stories that were later proven mostly or entirely salacious.<sup>62</sup> This question and the discussions that result from it demonstrate that the actual facts of looting and crime after a natural disaster, whether in New Orleans or in Sendai, are less important to the story than the racial presumptions are. By rekindling the “black culture” explanation for the state’s failure to provide for its poor black citizens, the discussion of the looting question exonerates the state from responsibility for the mismanagement of the disaster in New Orleans. Indirectly, it also suggests that aid to Haiti may be wasted because of its similarities to black New Orleans and that aid to Japan is unnecessary because Japanese self-help eliminates the need for assistance from its own government or from the international community.

This diversion of critique of the state’s mismanagement of Katrina is particularly noteworthy because, as Michael Eric Dyson has argued, most journalists as well as

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<sup>61</sup> Greening, np.

<sup>62</sup> Steve Classen, “‘Reporters Gone Wild’: Reporters and Their Critics on Hurricane Katrina, Gender, Race, and Place,” *E-Media Studies* 2, no. 1, 2009, accessed October 29, 2014, <http://journals.dartmouth.edu/cgi-bin/WebObjects/Journals.woa/1/xmlpage/4/article/336>.

observers outside the Gulf Coast area did not spare criticism of the government response in early analysis. To most viewers of the early coverage, Dyson suggests, the storm was merely an “act of God” not targeted at, nor the fault of, any particular race.<sup>63</sup> Rather, “a more acceptable story was that black people in New Orleans suffered only because of bureaucratic inefficiencies in the wake of a natural disaster.” Dyson writes that, in chastising the government, viewers could “take special delight in lambasting the source of their suffering—a source that is safely external to us.” Yet although the Bush administration’s reputation did in fact suffer as a result of its handling of the disaster, criticism of the government actually supports the neoliberal philosophy that questions the value of “big government” and in this sense affirms a turn toward private solutions to crisis management. The form of government intervention for which journalists and other observers on who were first to the scene called—to protect the lives of poor people—does not jibe with the neoliberal view of the government’s role in the United States or elsewhere.

As the sensationalized reports of rampant predatory behavior by black people came to dominate the narrative of Katrina, the familiar frame of the black criminal allowed the state to perform a new role, one more welcome in the neoliberal world order: the exercise of military and police power to protect private property. The emphasis on black criminality not only explained the chaos; it also created fear in a way that government incompetence did not. To protect the “good” (read: white) citizens of the Gulf Coast, then, the state could prioritize threats to law and order rather than to black life. Their interventions—crude jails were built; the governor gave orders to “shoot to

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<sup>63</sup> Michael Eric Dyson, *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2005): 4.

kill;” white vigilantes roamed about unchecked; police shot unarmed black citizens (one of them mentally handicapped)—responded to white racism and fear in ways that continued to neglect those storm victims who most needed assistance.<sup>64</sup> This clear prioritizing of both whiteness and private property demonstrates the inextricable intertwining of white supremacy with neoliberalist capitalism in which the state’s role is to protect both. As Dylan Rodriguez writes,

Katrina reminds us that white America occupies a category of social existence that is without global parallel. It lives within a historical structure of life wherein it is capable of presuming entitlement to things like bodily integrity, communal (read: racial) security, and militarized state responsiveness in a manner that no other human category can allege to share in this moment.

Rodriguez argues that the state’s priority on white property over black lives was no accident but rather reflected “ritualized negligence and organized dysfunctioning of the American state.”<sup>65</sup> However, if we understand the role of the state in the world-economy of neoliberalism, this dysfunction is, of course, completely logical. Henry Giroux writes that New Orleans after Katrina illustrated a politics that “has embraced an emergent

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<sup>64</sup> Alan Zarembo, “New Orleans Gets a Makeshift Jail,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 7, 2005, accessed October 25, 2014, <http://articles.latimes.com/2005/sep/07/nation/na-jail7>; James Joyner, “Katrina: Governor Orders Troops to Shoot and Kill Looters,” *Outside the Beltway*, September 2, 2005, accessed October 25, 2014, [http://www.outsidethebeltway.com/la\\_governor\\_warns\\_troops\\_will\\_/](http://www.outsidethebeltway.com/la_governor_warns_troops_will_/); A.C. Thompson, “Post-Katrina, White Vigilantes Shot African-Americans With Impunity,” *ProPublica* December 19, 2008, accessed October 25, 2014, <http://www.propublica.org/article/post-katrina-white-vigilantes-shot-african-americans-with-impunity>; Campbell Robertson, “Officers Guilty of Shooting Six in New Orleans,” *New York Times* August 5, 2011, accessed October 26, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/06/us/06danziger.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/06/us/06danziger.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)

<sup>65</sup> Dylan Rodriguez, “The Meaning of Disaster Under the Dominance of White Life,” in South End Press Collective, editors, *What Lies Beneath: Katrina, Race, and the State of the Nation* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: South End Press, 2007): 137.

security state founded on cultural homogeneity.”<sup>66</sup> As Rodriguez eloquently articulates, this response is entirely consistent with the exercise of white supremacy at every level, allowing him to conclude that “Katrina...was good for (white) America.”<sup>67</sup> Indeed, white Americans continue to benefit from the notion of their own acts as heroic and law-abiding by contrast with the depiction of black Americans. But if Katrina was good for white Americans generally, it was even better for those who represented private-sector interests that stood to benefit from the damage wrought by the hurricane and subsequent flooding.

Indeed, Katrina was good for neoliberal capitalism. As Naomi Klein and others have pointed out, natural disasters provide a valuable moment for the implementation of what she has termed “the shock doctrine”: an approach to disaster management that relies on the chaos after a traumatic, destructive event such as a natural disaster, act of war, or instance of terrorism to implement preexisting ideologies that benefit private-sector corporations.<sup>68</sup> This brand of “disaster capitalism” promotes what Klein calls “orchestrated raids on the public sphere in the wake of catastrophic events, combined with the treatment of disasters as exciting market opportunities.” By equating blackness with disorder and with government dependency, then, the “why is there no looting in Japan?” discussions reinscribe the private sphere not only as white but also as the best locus for reconstruction efforts, just as it did in New Orleans after Katrina.<sup>69</sup> For

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<sup>66</sup> Henry Giroux, “Katrina and the Politics of Disposability,” *In These Times*, September 14, 2006, accessed October 21, 2014, <http://inthesetimes.com/article/2822>.

<sup>67</sup> Rodriguez, 135.

<sup>68</sup> Klein, *Shock Doctrine*, 6.

<sup>69</sup> Klein’s website lists an extensive collection of resources for reading about the application of the shock doctrine in New Orleans. See: <http://www.naomiklein.org/shock-doctrine/resources/disaster-capitalism-in-action/tags/hurricane%2Bkatrina>.



example, public schools, public housing, and public hospitals were privatized against the objection of many residents, some of whom were beaten and tasered when they protested.<sup>70</sup>

The “shock doctrine” has been particularly starkly applied in Haiti, after its 2010 earthquake. News coverage often suggested that Haitian “looters” acted even more barbarically than their New Orleans counterparts, wielding machetes and machine guns as they “rampaged” through the streets of Port-au-Prince, “on the brink of total anarchy.”<sup>71</sup> A CNN piece entitled “‘A Frenzy of Looting’ Seen in Haiti’s Capital” illustrates the persistence of the looting frame to this story. The article’s first seven paragraphs describe looting and chaos in Port-au-Prince. Buried further down in the story is a quote from Rear Admiral Mike Rogers, director of intelligence for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who seems to contradict the “frenzy” characterization described earlier in the piece: “Nothing suggests ‘widespread disorder’ and panic, Rogers, said, citing the well-publicized incidents of unrest as ‘isolated events.’”<sup>72</sup> Rather than use the space of this piece to report on this relative calm, however, CNN continues the story by noting instead unspecified “growing violence” and reminding readers that “[e]ven before the earthquake, robberies and home invasions organized by gangs were frequent in Haiti.”

The apparent contradiction between Rogers’ statement and the news agency’s is not

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<sup>70</sup> Naomi Klein, “The Shock Doctrine in Action in New Orleans,” *Huffington Post*, May 25, 2011, accessed November 16, 2014, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/naomi-klein/the-shock-doctrine-in-act\\_b\\_77886.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/naomi-klein/the-shock-doctrine-in-act_b_77886.html).

<sup>71</sup> Liz Hazelton, “Haiti Earthquake: Looters, Machete Gangs and Fights for Water as Aid STILL Struggles to Get Through,” *Daily Mail Online*, January 16, 2010, accessed October 19, 2014, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1243561/Haiti-earthquake-Furious-survivors-pile-corpses-road-blocks-demand-emergency-aid.html>.

<sup>72</sup> “‘A Frenzy of Looting’ Seen in Haiti’s Capital,” *CNN*, January 18, 2010, accessed October 31, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/americas/01/18/haiti.looting.earthquake/>.

noted. Instead, readers are invited to understand violent lawlessness in Haiti as an ongoing feature of Haitian culture, not a response to utterly apocalyptic devastation. Furthermore, extensive reporting on corruption and inefficacy of the Haitian government connects black chaos with governmental incompetence. A Fox News editorial, for instance, exhorted readers not to “subsidize Haitian corruption.”<sup>73</sup> In Haiti, too, then, the “culture” is interpreted as anarchic, corrupt, and violent in ways that leave it hardly worth the time and effort for the state to intervene, because, as Whiton suggests, it has no strategic importance to the United States.

While it may be true that Haiti has little strategic importance to the United States from a military perspective in the classic form of empire, it has significant importance to United States-based corporations. Accordingly, Whiton suggests that private interests ought to intervene in Haiti. Indeed, corporate interests scrambled for Haiti soon after the disaster, presenting themselves as healers for the nation. Within twenty-four hours of the earthquake in Haiti, an article in *The Street* listed “some companies that could potentially benefit: General Electric (GE), Caterpillar (CAT), Deere (DE), Fluor (FLR), Jacobs Engineering (JEC).”<sup>74</sup> Others called for “the expansion of Haiti’s sweatshop industry,” while the World Bank offered a positive spin on the potential for change after the earthquake.<sup>75</sup> Pamela Cox, vice president for Latin America and the Caribbean for the World Bank, was frank in her assessment that solutions for Haiti would not be

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<sup>73</sup> Christian Whiton, “Don’t Subsidize Haitian Corruption,” *Fox News*, January 19, 2010, accessed October 19, 2014, <http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2010/01/19/christian-whiton-haiti-obama-aid-corruption/>.

<sup>74</sup> Quoted in Isabel Macdonald, “‘New Haiti,’ Same Corporate Interests,” *The Nation*, January 29, 2010, accessed October 26, 2014, <http://www.thenation.com/article/new-haiti-same-corporate-interests#>.

<sup>75</sup> Macdonald, np.

democratic: “You’d have to talk to the private sector...in the sense that they’re the ones who would be putting their money in so they’d have the decision.”<sup>76</sup> As journalist Isabel Macdonald concludes,

For anyone familiar with Haiti’s experience of this sweatshop-based, pro-corporate development model over the years, it is clear that the road map the banks and ‘Friends’ are charting for the ‘new Haiti’ is not in the least bit new. And, for the Haitian people, who have always paid the price for these failed policies, it is nothing less than disastrous.<sup>77</sup>

With the Haitian recovery still in its infancy during the Japanese disaster, the “why is there no looting in Japan?” debate, with its focus on black disorder and criminality, contributes to a legitimizing of these kinds of interventions in Haiti as well as New Orleans. In both places, government is best suited to promoting corporate interests over and above the needs or desires of poor, black citizens who are not seen as trustworthy—or even as citizens.

The discussion of Japanese post-disaster behavior suggests to white Americans that it is *they* who are vulnerable—not, ultimately, the disaster victims in any of the affected regions. White Americans, it suggests, are vulnerable not only to the criminal violence of black people but also to the moral superiority of the Japanese. Beck’s lament that Japan “says a lot”—“not about them—about us” is a clear warning about the decline of the United States economic power and military might in the midst of a recession. Takaki has pointed out that the myth of the model minority finds especially receptive audiences in periods of American economic weakness, and the ongoing recession was certainly on the minds of Americans in early 2011. Takaki argues that praise for Asian

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<sup>76</sup> Quoted in Macdonald, np.

<sup>77</sup> Macdonald, np.

(American) values “has been used to explain ‘losing ground’” in the global economy.<sup>78</sup> It also offers a solution:

Our difficulties, we are sternly told, stem from our waywardness: Americans have strayed from Puritan ‘errand into the wilderness.’ They have abandoned the old American ‘habits of the heart.’ Praise for Asian-American success is America’s most recent jeremiad—a renewed commitment to make America number one again and a call for rededication to the bedrock values of hard work, thrift, and industry.

Because Beck frames calls for racial justice as divisive—corrosive of national unity—multiculturalism itself is a departure from traditionally American values and habits. What is wrong with the United States is not only the poor behavior of looters in New Orleans, then; it is tolerance for the fundamental disorder of black culture that truly threatens the American character and strength. Japanese power will, it is implied, only grow in comparison.

Yet, this depiction of Japanese culture as simultaneously a model for American behavior *and* a threat to American competitiveness stands in stark contrast with other interpretations of Japanese culture, especially from the 1980s and early 1990s, when Japan’s relative economic strength presented a greater competitive threat. In tomes such as Karel Van Wolferen’s 1988 *The Enigma of Japanese Power*, Japan represents capitalism perverted by a uniquely Japanese obsession with conformity and clear hierarchy—the very values for which Beck and other conservative commentators praise the country.<sup>79</sup> In this view, Japanese culture is essentialized, ancient, and dangerous—not, as Lee has argued, “the model minority...but a potential agent of disorder, the yellow

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<sup>78</sup> Takaki, 478-479.

<sup>79</sup> Karel van Wolferen, *The Enigma of Japanese Power: People and Politics in a Stateless Nation* (New York: Vintage, 1990).

peril.”<sup>80</sup> Van Wolferen’s grim depiction of the Japanese as orderly, hierarchical, and self-sacrificing differs little from Beck’s admirable depiction, nor from that of the majority of online respondents to the “why is there no looting in Japan?” question. The distinction is only whether these reported values—in both cases speciously considered definitive of Japaneseness—are worthy of emulation.

The “why is there no looting in Japan?” discussants conflate the “model minority” and “yellow peril” myths into one: “model” behavior is “perilous” because the United States cannot compete with it. The root explanation for this inability to compete globally is that heterogeneity damages the United States and that government supports the demands of minorities for full political representation and economic equality. Rather, government ought to work to restore law and order and to allow private enterprise to benefit from disaster. Moreover, doing so serves “right and peace” because it is not racist; it cannot be racist because it is pointing to white vulnerability rather than white supremacy.

As Lee effectively illustrates, Van Wolferen’s view aligns with that of Samuel Huntington’s influential 1989 “Clash of Civilizations” essay, in which, building on Francis Fukuyama’s assertion that history had culminated in the triumph of democratic capitalism, he argues that, after the collapse of communism, distinct “civilizations” will come into inevitable clash with one another. This predicted “clash of civilizations,” Huntington contends, represents the greatest threat to Western civilization.<sup>81</sup> He explicitly names Japan as its own civilization; it is, further, the only civilization coterminous with a

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<sup>80</sup> Lee, 206.

<sup>81</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1993, accessed October 26, 2014, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/48950/samuel-p-huntington/the-clash-of-civilizations>.

single nation, and he is quite clear that civilizations are essentialized and unchanging: “In the conflicts between civilizations,” he writes, “the question is ‘What are you?’ That is a given that cannot be changed.”

Yet despite the supposedly unchanging nature of civilizations, the United States is, in Huntington’s view, most threatened by its increasing heterogeneity. Huntington laments the “weakening of the European character of American society and culture through non-European immigration and multiculturalism” and fears that nonwhite group claims on American identity could create a domestic “clash” between whites and nonwhites—who, by their very exclusion from the category of “European” are rendered outside the scope of American civilization. Thus, Japan is superior by virtue not only of being Asian, but also of being monolithic—or, in Beck’s terms, “unified.” Japan is a threat on its own terms, although perhaps less so than it was twenty to thirty years earlier; however, it is also an illustration of the corrosive threat *inside* the United States: the black welfare state.

Online debates of the question “Why is there no looting in Japan?” advance Huntington’s claim in popular language, while embedding the question of civilization in the context of government dependency, entitlement, and personal responsibility. In the discussion entitled “Hey Japan...Got Looting?” on the Free Republic discussion board, a group devoted to “independent, grass roots conservatism,”<sup>82</sup> for instance, posters clearly make the case that the purported absence of looting in Japan is related to the absence of black people—and, importantly, their claims to rights protected by American citizenship, especially welfare and political representation. A user named “The Looking Spoon”

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<sup>82</sup> “Freerepublic.com Site Overview,” no date, accessed December 19, 2014, <http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/freerepublic.com>.

writes, “I’m willing to bet Japanese culture doesn’t suffer welfare queens gladly.”<sup>83</sup>

NWFLConservative also contrasts the Japanese with black Americans, answering that looting was not occurring

because Japan...is not infected with a sense of entitlement, generations old welfare mentality like this country. *This country does not owe you anything* [emphasis mine], regardless of what Jesse Jackass tells you. You get what you earn. Unless the poverty pimps, of course, tell you it’s not your fault and looting is not really stealing, stealing, since you are just getting what you are entitled to because your great great great great great grandfather MIGHT have been a slave.

These complaints about black looters attest to the fear that Huntington’s thesis describes, a fear that “black culture” is weakening American culture by demanding to reap the full benefits of American citizenship. Responses to NWFLConservative’s statement that “[m]illions of people in this country could learn a very hard, long overdue lesson from their response to this catastrophe” illustrates this point clearly. User Dick Bachert replies, in agreement: “Seems THEIR culture is stronger than ours.” Yet user “ladyjane” dissents: “The NOLA culture is not \*my\* culture. *It is not American culture* [emphasis mine]. It is amoral thug vulgarian culture.” Black Americans are not only outside American citizenship, then; they are outside of civilization.

Ladyjane’s statement reveals the logical conclusion of the discussions of the absence of looting in Japan, as well as its resolution. The United States is not only compromised by black “culture;” it is diametrically opposed to black citizenship. Americanness cannot be reconciled with blackness. And as her fellow discussants suggest, the role of government cannot be to represent or provide for black people but rather to protect the nation from them. This is the ultimate destination of the question

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<sup>83</sup>Jared H. McAndersen, “Hey Japan? Got Looting?,” March 14, 2011, accessed October 21, 2014, <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/bloggers/2688873/posts?page=56>.

“why is there no looting in Japan?” The discussion encourages readers to remember how black people compromised the nation rather than how the nation compromised black people’s lives. As Neil Steinberg, a commentator who pointed out that looting did indeed occur, noted with frustration in a *Chicago Sun-Times* editorial,

Last week, the Justice Department came out with a scathing report indicting the New Orleans police for a range of brutal behaviors. But we can’t worry about that report, no, because we’re too upset over the searing memory of liquor stores being ransacked five years ago. Why is that?<sup>84</sup>

The similarity of the rhetoric of the participants in these discussions to rhetoric of a former state department advisor like Huntington is clear evidence of the intertwined relationship between foreign policy and popular, public culture. Moreover, it is not only everyday citizens who produce these sentiments. For instance, on March 15, 2011, former World Bank economist William Easterly, who studies distribution of foreign aid, responded to the looting in Japan question on his personal blog and argued that “social solidarity” built on “trust” explains Japanese wealth.<sup>85</sup> He writes,

Economists have been saying for a while that trust is a good candidate to be a major determinant of development. Think of how much contract enforcement is critical to make trade and finance possible. Think how much easier contract enforcement is when nobody tries to cheat.

Easterly’s characterization of the Japanese as particularly trustworthy seems willfully ignorant, especially in light of the deep mistrust of the nuclear industry in Japan, especially after the disaster. Journalist Yuri Kageyama writes, “Behind Japan’s escalating nuclear crisis sits a scandal-ridden energy industry in a comfy relationship with

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<sup>84</sup> Neil Steinberg, “But There Was Looting in Japan,” *Chicago Sun Times*, No date, accessed October 21, 2014, [http://www.suntimes.com/news/steinberg/4421028-452/but-there-was-looting-in-japan.html#.VEahKIvF\\_fl](http://www.suntimes.com/news/steinberg/4421028-452/but-there-was-looting-in-japan.html#.VEahKIvF_fl).

<sup>85</sup> William Easterly, “Why No Looting in Japan?,” *Aid Watchers*, March 15, 2011, accessed October 29, 2014, <http://aidwatchers.com/2011/03/why-no-looting-in-japan/>.



government regulators often willing to overlook safety lapses.”<sup>86</sup> Kageyama explains that this lack of transparency “over Japan’s half-century reliance on nuclear power has strained its credibility with the public,” a distrust that only grew in 2011. Moreover, as Ginko Kobayashi explains, the disaster in Japan also compromised the credibility of the Japanese media in the minds of many citizens who were angered that news coverage did not expose fully the nuclear industry’s cover-ups.<sup>87</sup> Easterly’s simplistic analysis of “trust” plainly illustrates the significance of racial characterizations in terms of determining who will benefit in the neoliberal world order. Racial stereotypes originating in domestic American racial contexts become explanatory of world culture—even to *create* fictions about world culture—in ways that continue to disadvantage materially those in the poorest of places.

The intertwining of “common sense” about race between experts such as Easterly and the readers and commentators on blogs and news websites should concern us. The question “Why is there no looting in Japan?” is a question only rhetorically. It is not a surprise. As one dissenting reader wrote in to *The Atlantic*,

Overall, I think that anybody who sees a disaster like this and immediately wonders whether or not people are taking things from local stores either already has his mind made up as to ‘why’ or simply wants others to back them up so they don’t appear to be casting aspersions that they are too cowardly to openly cast.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Yuri Kageyama “Japan’s Nuclear Power Industry Has History of Scandals,” *Huffington Post*, March 17, 2011, accessed November 16, 2014, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/03/17/japan-nuclear-power-scandals\\_n\\_836970.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/03/17/japan-nuclear-power-scandals_n_836970.html).

<sup>87</sup> Ginko Kobayashi, “In Japan, A Wave of Media Distrust Post-Tsunami,” *PBS*, April 15, 2013, accessed December 17, 2014, <http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/2013/04/in-japan-a-wave-of-media-distrust-post-tsunami105/>.

<sup>88</sup> Comments on “Why No Looting in Japan?,” March 16, 2011, accessed October 29, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/daily-dish/archive/2011/03/why-no-looting-in-japan-ctd/174326/>.

Indeed, posing this question to readers is an invitation to think within a system of race and economic policy that allows for the United States' corporate interests to become themselves looters—in Haiti, in New Orleans, in their practice of disaster capitalism. They are taking what they do not need to survive from those who may not survive because of them. The fact that American domestic racial ideology is deployed to promote these interventions is perhaps the best evidence, even more than the corporate profit itself, of the particularly *American* character of neoliberal capitalism in an era of globalization. The United States admits neither to its racism nor its empire, but the two are inseparable from one another.

This chapter has illustrated the harsh racial logic that is used to justify the United States' global project. In the next chapter, in which I focus on high-profile efforts to raise money for earthquake relief in Haiti in 2010, I demonstrate that this logic—one that insists upon a colorblindness that ultimately serves whiteness and private-sector profit—underpins even responses that present themselves as completely divorced from the political or profit-making realm. Indeed, in each of the chapters that follow, I focus on popular responses that demonstrate compassion rather than hostility and sacrifice for poor and black people in Haiti and for Japanese tsunami victims in order to demonstrate that these responses, which might seem on their face to illustrate the opposite of the logic described here, actually reproduce these same ideologies.

In the following chapters, I shift attention from Japan to Haiti, as I explore the ways in which compassion toward black people can rightly be expressed in neoliberal ideology only when it is apolitical and ignorant of the differential treatment of people of color. And yet, in each of these chapters, this very attitude *is* a political stance, one that

serves to reinforce neoliberalism and that has profound consequences for Americans and the people they attempt to serve by helping their Haitian neighbors and accounting for the legacies of Hurricane Katrina.

## CHAPTER THREE

### HAITI'S HALO: COLORBLIND UNIVERSALISTS, HIP-HOP HUMANITARIANS, AND THE MEANINGS OF HAITI IN CELEBRITY FUNDRAISING APPEALS

If Chapter Two illustrated hostility toward black disaster victims, Chapter Three explores sentiments that seem diametrically opposed to those. Rather than frame black victims of the disaster in Haiti as undeserving of attention and care, the celebrity fundraising efforts I analyze in this chapter stress not only that Haitians are worthy of attention but also that U.S. Americans should consider themselves kin to the survivors. Yet, as I will explore in this chapter, heartwarming sentiments often contribute to the reinforcement of inequalities that have persisted throughout the history of the relationship between the United States and Haiti, for white and black U.S. Americans alike.

Two celebrities emerged as leaders in the fundraising campaigns that followed the earthquake in Haiti: white American actor George Clooney and Haitian-American rapper Wyclef Jean. Together with CNN's Anderson Cooper, the men organized the *Hope for Haiti Now* telethon, which aired just ten days after the disaster. Along with dozens of celebrity volunteers, both exhorted audiences far and near to donate to a common cause: relief efforts in Haiti. Both used the appeal of celebrity and the spectacle of television to

make their cases. Both clearly expressed and encouraged transnational networks of concern and care.

But *how* each man articulated a vision of transnational connection differed. Clooney, like many other celebrities that I will group together as the *colorblind universalists*, appealed to common bonds of humanity: “This is a tragedy that reaches across all borders, all boundaries, and demands our attention, our help, and our compassion as fellow human beings,” he implored the television audience.<sup>1</sup> In Clooney’s formulation, it is *because* we are all “fellow human beings” that this crisis demanded the audience’s concern; race is vaguely understood to be one of many “boundaries” irrelevant to this tragedy. By contrast, Wyclef Jean, who became the unofficial voice of Haiti in the United States after the crisis, represents the second group that I examine in this chapter: hip-hop artists, who identify with the Haitian people as family of a specifically African lineage. Hip-hop artists thus frame themselves and Haitians as members of a shared black diaspora. To this point, when Jean spoke, he foregrounded nation and race: “My name is Wyclef Jean, and I am Haitian. Better yet, we are not Haitians; we are Africans.” After Jean introduced himself in English, he switched to Kreyol to address Haitian listeners, emphasizing his—and their—proud Haitian identity over a common human identity. Jean’s transnationalism does not reject Clooney’s style of care and concern—indeed, the two men have teamed up for the same cause and event—but it does not pretend to the same universality. Although the claim “we are Africans” certainly articulates transnational bonds, it does not attempt to transcend race. It positions blackness as a source of strength, courage, and pride via a transnational, diasporic identity.

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<sup>1</sup> *Hope for Haiti Now*. Broadcast January 22, 2010 by MTV Networks. Directed by Joel Gallen.

In this chapter, I examine the three highest-profile popular charity relief efforts undertaken to help Haiti after its devastating earthquake: the *Hope for Haiti Now* telethon, Black Entertainment Television's (BET) *Saving OurSelves: Help for Haiti* telethon, and the celebrity remake of "We are the World," originally recorded in 1985 to raise funds to fight famine in Africa. These three productions shared several features: the cooperation of internationally famous celebrities, including Wyclef Jean; the nearly total exclusion of other Haitian artists; distribution to audiences around the world; and direct appeals to individuals to donate, placing the moral responsibility for humanitarian assistance on individuals rather than on governments or corporations. These productions invited potential donors to see themselves as common kin to the victims, thereby encouraging the perception of humanitarian work as intimate and personal. In these aspects, the styles that Clooney and Jean represent—colorblind universalism and hip hop, respectively—differ minimally.

Yet more meaningful differences distinguish the two, representing different positions for whiteness and blackness in the project of American empire in the twenty-first century. The colorblind universalists, who include some African-American celebrities, articulate bonds based in *universal* human experience, whereas hip-hop entertainers localize and particularize the tragedy, connecting themselves to a shared *black* experience rather than to a universal one.<sup>2</sup> Analyzing each, I argue that the two styles of humanitarian appeal that Clooney and Jean represent in fact reanimate longstanding but contradictory historical tropes on the meaning of Haiti in the United

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<sup>2</sup> In this essay, I focus on rap music solely as an embodiment of hip-hop culture, although the term itself is more broadly inclusive, encompassing street art and culture, dance, and DJing as well as rap music. See for instance: Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: Picador, 2005).

States. Hurricane Katrina, a more proximal event, both in time and distance, also haunts both responses. Placing both styles in their respective contexts reveals ways in which neoliberalism draws from old racial logic to enforce privatized, apolitical responses to disaster, even in rhetoric of resistance.

I compare and contrast several points of difference between the colorblind universalists and their peers in hip hop.<sup>3</sup> The colorblind style promotes a colorblind American exceptionalism by framing the United States as the figurative parent of the orphaned child, Haiti. In this view, donors are ennobled by their giving, and politics are stridently ignored. This style draws on classic tropes of empire, used during the United States occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934, and likewise ultimately, if indirectly, encourages a view of Haiti as childlike, untrustworthy, and unable to assist in its own recovery. Moreover, this vision helps to redeem the credibility of the United States, whose reputation for racial justice, as I discussed in Chapter Two, suffered after Hurricane Katrina, as a compassionate and anti-racist nation.

By contrast, hip-hop artists position themselves as lateral kin to the Haitian victims. They articulate a black diasporic identity that clearly connects suffering in Haiti to the suffering of fellow black citizens in New Orleans less than five years earlier. For hip-hop artists, the Haiti disaster, like Hurricane Katrina, is not just the consequence of nature but also of racial politics. These performers thus connect New Orleans to Haiti, reanimating a history of trans-Caribbean interrelation largely lost in histories organized

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<sup>3</sup> I do not divide performers mentioned in this chapter by race but rather by ideological affiliation. Therefore some African-American actors, such as Halle Berry and Samuel Jackson, are included in the “universalist” vision, as are some musicians, such as John Legend and Stevie Wonder, who are not primarily identified with hip hop. Likewise, white artists such as Robin Thicke, whose body of work falls within the hip-hop genre, are included as hip-hop artists.

around the nation-state. Moreover, keenly conscious of the ways in which Hurricane Katrina made “refugees” of black Americans, they portray Haiti as a site of redemption and inspiration for black people trampled upon by poverty, disaster, and racism. In this way, they reanimate an even older discourse about Haiti—a place where self-sufficient blacks overthrew the colonial order in the Haitian Revolution. By connecting New Orleans with Haiti, hip-hop artists break the bonds of the nation-state and look for redemption and self-sufficiency in the spirit of Toussaint L’Ouverture. They emulate a *négritude* that Haitians and their admirers in the United States have long cultivated in response to white supremacy. In pointing out this iteration of *négritude*, I heed Patricia Hill Collins’ call to scholars to pay attention to the “diverse ways in which African Americans deploy Black nationalism as a system of meaning, especially in constructing responses to the new racism.”<sup>4</sup> This black nationalism is necessarily transnational because black hip-hop artists understand that, as Katrina illustrated, their race disqualifies them from the full protections of American citizenship.

It is remarkable that these very different racial politics—colorblind universalism and hip hop—can inhabit the same stage, as they do in *Hope for Haiti Now* and in “We are the World.”<sup>5</sup> Thus I also argue that the mass media rely on the hip-hop perspective to grant legitimacy to its own politics of global saturation. As Clyde Woods writes in his article about New Orleans, “The legitimacy of the United States is dependent upon

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<sup>4</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism, & Feminism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006): 77.

<sup>5</sup> Black Entertainment Television’s *Saving OurSelves: Help for Haiti* included almost exclusively hip-hop performers.



multiethnic and multiracial cooperation at home and abroad.”<sup>6</sup> The disastrous mismanagement of Hurricane Katrina tarnished that image; thus the United States benefits from this proud display of American multiculturalism. Moreover, Haiti’s disaster helped to naturalize the role of technology and mass media in humanitarian assistance, furthering the idea that privately owned, corporate media contribute to the compassionate solution that government denies.

The colorblind universalist paradigm of the *Hope for Haiti Now* telethon collapsed all hierarchies between donors, victims, and even celebrity spokespeople. Instead, human feelings of love, hope, and unity prevailed. Its fundraising appeals worked by encouraging individuals to feel personally connected, overcoming the politics of division. In one such appeal, Samuel Jackson suggests that the very reason for donating is “so that we can all come together.”<sup>7</sup> Nowhere in the telethon does one hear mention of any political move: not a suggestion to write Congressional representatives, no appeals for Haitian debt forgiveness, no explanation of the colonial history of Haiti under France or the United States. Instead, “love” was the vague but vociferous exhortation. For example, the band Coldplay performs “A Message,” which offers no more clarity or critique than “my song is love, and I’ve got to get that message to you.” Stevie Wonder’s performance, a mash-up of “Time to Love” and “Bridge Over Troubled Water,” banishes political interpretations of the event, offering instead the line “We have time for racism; we have time for criticism; held bondage by our isms; when will there be a time for love?” Shakira’s cover of the Pretenders’ “I’ll Stand by You” improbably

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<sup>6</sup> Clyde Woods, “Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans?: Katrina, Trap Economics, and the Rebirth of the Blues.” *American Quarterly* 57, no. 4 (2005): 1005.

<sup>7</sup> *Hope for Haiti Now*.

suggests, as she sings in an implied address to the Haitian people, “I’m a lot like you.” Of course, these performers did not write these songs specifically for Haiti, but the choice of songs performed suggests an emphasis on unity achieved by erasure of difference. Furthermore, the appeal to private and personal giving based in individual feeling reinforces the cultural logic of neoliberalism.

Despite the professed similarities between celebrity performers, their audiences, and Haitian victims, the telethon relied overwhelmingly on the paternalistic theme of parent and orphaned child. The broadcast opens with a montage of images of crying children and Alicia Keys’ song “Send Me an Angel,” asking viewers, “Won’t you be somebody’s angel right now?” It introduces viewers twice to Manley, a little boy who lost his parents in a house collapse and who is now sleeping in a tent with his uncle, who is strangely ignored as a guardian of his nephew. As she asked for help for orphans, actress Halle Berry reminds viewers, “hundreds of thousands of children in Haiti are lost and looking for their parents” and are “without a soul to rescue them.” Shortly thereafter, in the only such instance of musical programming being interrupted by a journalistic interview, Anderson Cooper of CNN introduces the audience to Pierre Alexis, the director of an orphanage that expected to see a “surge of orphan children” after the disaster. Immediately after the interview, singer John Legend continues the emphasis on orphaned children with his performance of the wrenching African-American spiritual “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child.” Later, the program features Catherine Porter, a Haitian-American woman who had been working to adopt baby Amalia when the earthquake struck. Although they had been together in Port-au-Prince during the quake, Porter was not allowed to bring Amalia home with her to Florida because her

paperwork was incomplete. “I won’t lose hope in finding Amalia,” Porter announces—a sentiment that actress Julia Roberts later echoes as she shares the story of a Haitian woman named Daphne who was searching for her lost son. Roberts reminds viewers that “a mother’s love is a force to be reckoned with.” The telethon’s choice to feature the stories of both Catherine Porter and Daphne equates the bonds of natural and adoptive mothers to their children, a gesture likely to appeal to donors who think of themselves as metaphorical parents to Haitian children.

These clips, combined with multiple images of Haitian children looking stony-faced with shock, are so intertwined throughout the telethon that “Haitian” becomes nearly synonymous with “orphan”—or, at the least, with families that are broken and displaced. Elizabeth McAlister writes, “The images reduce the victims to faces with large, haunting eyes, the effect of which is to instantiate the relationship between the victim and the spectator.”<sup>8</sup> Thus the care that the viewers are encouraged to provide is in effect care for children by parents. One caller, a nurse and mother who speaks with Julia Roberts on the telephone, donates on behalf of her own sons, as she claims she is “thinking about the little kids who have lost their parents.”<sup>9</sup> Roberts encourages the feeling of connection, affirming to the caller that she is “part of” the efforts working to save these children and families.

Although a new section of “We are the World” takes the song in a different direction, as I will discuss below, the first two-thirds of the remake for Haiti, which

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<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth McAlister, “Soundscapes of Disaster and Humanitarianism: Survival Singing, Relief Telethons, and the Haiti Earthquake,” *Small Axe* 39 (2012): 31.

<sup>9</sup> *Hope for Haiti Now*.

faithfully follow the 1985 version, also draws on the rhetoric of family.<sup>10</sup> In that section, for instance, Mary J. Blige sings, “We are all a part of God’s great big family” and that “love is all we need.” Likewise, Miley Cyrus’ line—“send them your heart so they’ll know that someone cares”—emphasizes protective, loving feelings of a family. By contrast, as I will discuss below, BET’s *Saving OurSelves* telethon, which focused on hip-hop humanitarianism, avoided such language.

The overriding reliance on the figure of the orphaned child encourages viewers to relate as mothers and fathers, as protectors—a classic language of empire. In her history of the American occupation of Haiti between 1915 and 1934, Mary A. Renda describes paternalism as “the central discursive constructed that supported the US presence in Haiti....It was the cultural and ideological framework within which US imperialism in Haiti would be conceived and carried out.”<sup>11</sup> Indeed, as Renda deftly illustrates, this rhetoric not only helped to define Haiti but also the United States. As the United States’ figurative child, Haiti was both a part of and separate from its “parent.” Renda writes that Haiti was “inside the American empire, yet outside the American nation; outside the nation, yet increasingly central to national self-definition. This ambiguity sustained the hegemonic version of U.S. national identity as fundamentally white, fundamentally European American, even as the political reach of the U.S. government [expanded].”<sup>12</sup> The paternalism of the 2010 telethon differs from the old in its near complete absence of language of race in articulating moral responsibility for care of Haitian orphans. The

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<sup>10</sup> Artists for Haiti, “We are the World 25 for Haiti,” 2010, CD single and music download. Written by Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie.

<sup>11</sup> Mary A. Renda, *Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of US Imperialism, 1915-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001): 303.

<sup>12</sup> Renda, 305.

“white man’s burden” is not a viable framework in a supposedly post-racial society as it was during the occupation; rather, it is an *American* obligation to help their Haitian neighbors.<sup>13</sup> Although this move might seem to signal greater racial equality, the recycling of such patently colonialist rhetoric from an earlier era suggests rather more forcefully the rearticulation of normative Americanness with whiteness. Moreover, the emphasis on orphans recasts this trope without necessitating racial terms.

Appropriations of aid to Haiti reflected the paternalistic attitude that fundraising efforts championed. Haitians, like children, were not to be trusted with donated funds. Human rights activists Bill Quigley and Amber Ramanauskas contend that the relationship between the international community and the Haitian recipients “has not been based [on] a respectful partnership.”<sup>14</sup> The Associated Press reported, “Relief experts say it would be a mistake to send too much direct cash to the Haitian government which is in disarray and has a history of failure and corruption,” without, of course, acknowledging the centrality of the United States in creating that disarray.<sup>15</sup> In the early weeks of the disaster, Haitians received a small fraction of the funds that had been donated, whereas the military’s security and relief operations received at least a third of the donated funds. Quigley and Ramanauskas report,

It turns out that almost none of the money that the general public thought was going to Haiti actually went directly to Haiti. The international community chose to bypass the Haitian people, Haitian non-governmental organizations and the

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<sup>13</sup> Hans Schmidt, *The United States Occupation of Haiti, 1915-1934* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995): 17.

<sup>14</sup> Bill Quigley and Amber Ramanauskas, “Haiti: Seven Places Where Earthquake Money Did and Did Not Go,” January 3, 2012, accessed February 28, 2013, <https://www.commondreams.org/view/2012/01/03-2>.

<sup>15</sup> Associated Press, “Haiti Government Gets 1 Cent of Every US Aid Dollar,” *MSNBC*, January 27, 2010, accessed January 10, 2013, <http://www.msnbc.com/id/35103622/#.UO62j83fygR>.

government of Haiti. Funds were instead diverted to other governments, international NGOs, and private companies.

Rather than support Haiti directly, then, officials supported the institutions of empire that contributed to Haiti's instability throughout its history.

Journalist and long-time Haiti observer Amy Wilentz points out that the distrust of Haitian institutions was especially galling because of the failure of the United States and its own institutions to affect positive change in Haiti over many decades before the earthquake. She points in particular to a grant of \$350 million to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) for disaster relief in Haiti. She argues that

old Haiti hands...know that for decades, USAID...received similar large portions of Haiti's American foreign aid, and achieved very little: it did not bring democracy to Haiti, it did not fix Haiti's sick political class, nor did it help build 'civil society' (all of these among its aims); it did not reforest Haiti; it did not increase Haiti's agricultural output; it did not develop the Haitian school system; and one would even have a hard time arguing that it significantly relieved hunger in Haiti at any point.<sup>16</sup>

Instead, Wilentz argues, USAID's most noteworthy accomplishment in Haiti was that it "kept itself alive and functioning—more or less—in Port-au-Prince." Wilentz also sharply criticizes the humanitarian efforts of the Clinton Bush Haiti Fund, which by the end of 2010 had disbursed less than 20% of the funds it raised for Haitian relief, leaving the rest to other development projects that perpetuate longstanding United States goals for Haiti, ones that have never yet improved life for Haitians.<sup>17</sup> She acknowledges that discerning the wisest uses of these funds is difficult; however, doing so means that

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<sup>16</sup> Amy Wilentz, *Farewell, Fred Voodoo: A Letter from Haiti* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013): 133.

<sup>17</sup> Wilentz, 134.

you have to be organized, patient, clever, original, and thoughtful, and have a deep understanding of Haitian culture, none of which aid groups are famous for. Even old established ones like the Red Cross and USAID have very little idea what they should do in Haiti, much less relative newcomers like the Clinton-Bush fund.<sup>18</sup>

It is hard to miss the similarities between Wilentz's critique in these comments and the failures of the United States to impose its institutions on Haiti during the occupation that began nearly one hundred years earlier. Two decades of Marine occupation and another thirteen years of American financial control of Haiti achieved little that benefited the Haitian people. As Hans Schmidt exhaustively documents in his history of those years, the occupation implemented the ideals of Progressive-era management and organization, especially from 1922 to 1929. Nonetheless, despite massive bureaucratic infrastructure, modern technology, and extensive infrastructure projects in Haiti, "[r]acial and cultural antagonisms severely limited the effectiveness of progressive development programs" as white Marines, many of them Southerners, projected U.S. racial hierarchies onto the people of Haiti.<sup>19</sup> An attitude of paternalism undermined progress in both cases.

Although in 2010, suspicion of Haiti was not framed in explicitly racial terms—and indeed in the telethons, race was unmentioned—race was no less at its root. Even Wyclef Jean fell under extended scrutiny for allegations of mismanagement of his Yele Haiti organization.<sup>20</sup> News outlets covered allegations about Jean far more extensively than they did the allocation of funds by the US government or international organizations

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<sup>18</sup> Wilentz, 135.

<sup>19</sup> Hans Schmidt, *The United States Occupation of Haiti, 1915-1934* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1995): 16.

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, Deborah Sontag, "In Haiti Little Can Be Found of a Hip-Hop Artist's Charity," *New York Times*, October 12, 2012, accessed February 13, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/12/world/americas/quake-hit-haiti-gains-little-as-wyclef-jean-charity-spends-much.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/12/world/americas/quake-hit-haiti-gains-little-as-wyclef-jean-charity-spends-much.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).

like the Red Cross—as if it was to be expected that a Haitian-run organization would mismanage itself. By contrast, little media attention focused on the trustworthiness of Japanese aid recipients after the March, 2011, triple disaster in that nation. As I discussed in the last chapter, the Japanese were portrayed as orderly and honorable rather than corrupt or questionable, even though many Japanese challenged the media and the government about their bungling of the nuclear disaster. Nonetheless, by late 2012, with as many of 320,000 tsunami victims still homeless, Japanese officials used charitable funding for office renovations, protecting the whaling industry from the interventions of environmental activists, and subsidizing a contact lens factory.<sup>21</sup> Both Haiti and Japan were occupied by the United States in the twentieth century, and the Japanese were arguably a more recently hated historical enemy. Yet, as in my analysis of discourse around looting, the meanings of their respective races within the United States accounts for their differential treatment there.

Of course, neither celebrities nor their audiences directly manage allocation of the funds that they raise. Nonetheless, the colorblind universalists' appeals, based in love and likeness and claiming to transcend the political, obscure the deeply political uses of the funds. They argue for the charity of individuals, not government agencies that have failed time and again in Haiti. Celebrities—with the exception of those in hip-hop whom I describe below—work, willingly or not, to encourage donors to *feel* the crisis without thinking about political or racial differences. This orientation helps generate support for

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<sup>21</sup> “Waves of Anger: Japan Tsunami Victim Aid Spent on Whalers, Officials and Fighter Pilots,” October 31, 2012, accessed March 17, 2013, <http://rt.com/news/japan-tsunami-relief-fund-697/>.



the institutions of empire that consistently have denied Haitian agency and supported the needs of the United States.

Celebrity efforts such as those described above do not, of course, direct foreign policy, but they grant a moral authority to the actions of the United States as a nation by contributing to what Melani McAlister calls “a production of knowledge [that] occurs not through the conspiracy or conscious collaboration of individuals but through the internal logics of cultural practices.”<sup>22</sup> They, in short, facilitate an understanding of the United States as good and just and of Haiti as untrustworthy and childlike, all while denying the very racial terms that animate those characterizations. Moreover, they obscure the very urgency of those denials, especially after the damage that the racist neglect of black citizens in New Orleans has done to the international reputation of the United States, a nation that, as McAlister has proven thoroughly, has relied after 1945 on images of its own benevolent multiculturalism to exert power over the rest of the world.<sup>23</sup> Murali Balaji rightly argues that the “racialization of pity” in media spectacles such as these “is a colonial construction that has remained embedded in postcolonial discourse” and contends that the ongoing construction of the black victim and white savior means that “[o]thers are left to dwell in the subaltern, their identities marginalized and indistinguishable.”<sup>24</sup>

Yet although Balaji notes that “people of color were also among those to show pity to Haiti’s victims,” neither he nor other scholars have addressed adequately the ways

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<sup>22</sup> Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East Since 1945* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2005): 8.

<sup>23</sup> McAlister, 11.

<sup>24</sup> Murali Balaji, “Racializing Pity: The Haiti Earthquake and the Plight of ‘Others,’” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 28, no. 1 (2011): 51; Balaji, 66.

in which hip-hop artists have articulated an alternative interpretation of Haiti.<sup>25</sup> Although I agree with Balaji that “the not-so-subtle rhetoric of power and functionality continue to be shaped along a white-black binary,” he and other scholars have missed the important ways in which hip-hop performers, whose identity is fundamentally black and also diasporic, have not simply reproduced the same hierarchies that their white peers and most scholars have identified.

Indeed, hip-hop artists interpret the suffering in Haiti through the lens of blackness. One simple indication of this orientation was that the hip-hop community did not respond to the 2011 catastrophe in Japan in nearly the numbers that they did for Haiti. Few African-American artists—and even fewer hip-hop artists—participated in high-profile fundraising efforts after the Japanese disaster. For instance, *Songs for Japan*, which featured 38 artists, includes only six artists at least loosely affiliated with hip-hop.<sup>26</sup> Hip-hop artists by and large did not seem to make the same connections between the Japanese disaster and African-American experiences, recognizing the political, economic, and racial differences between Haiti and Japan. By contrast, Black Entertainment Television offered its own telethon for Haiti (as it had for New Orleans), almost entirely filled with hip-hop performers.

Hip hop understands Haiti as closer than Japan—geographically, racially, and spiritually. Thus these artists avoid nearly entirely the paternalistic tropes that their universalist peers employ. When hip-hop artists refer to Haitians as family, they tend mean the term literally or to use the lateral kinship term of “brothers and sisters” rather

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<sup>25</sup> Balaji, 52.

<sup>26</sup> These artists are the following: Ne Yo, Nicki Minaj, CeeLo Green, Eminem, Rihanna, and Beyoncé.

than draw on the “motherless child” imagery. This invocation of brotherhood and sisterhood articulates a shared diasporic identity more specific than only the shared human family toward which the colorblind universalists gesture. Whereas *Hope for Haiti Now*, which featured artists from a variety of backgrounds, used paternalistic language, *Saving OurSelves*, which primarily featured hip-hop artists, figured themselves as more literal family. In comments for the *Live Backstage at SOS Haiti* podcast, Pharrell Williams invites listeners to work for “our brothers and sisters down in Haiti.”<sup>27</sup> At the same event, Robin Thicke sends love not only to the victims in Haiti but also to “people around the world who have family in Haiti.” Ludacris urges listeners to donate by encouraging them to “think if it is was your family.” Busta Rhymes recounts the Haitian neighbors and babysitters who supported him when he was a child and remembers his Haitian-American friends and colleagues. Jason Derulo speaks of his own Haitian ancestry and mentions an uncle who experienced the earthquake. At the telethon, Damian Marley and Nas performed their song “Strong Will Continue,” from their album *Distant Relatives*, again invoking a diasporic identity by opening with the announcement that “[t]his one’s for the people. Distant relatives: that’s what we call ourselves, and that’s what we call you.”<sup>28</sup> Although the suggested relation is vague, it certainly avoids the parent/child trope that characterizes the *Hope for Haiti Now* production as well as the colonial history of the United States in Haiti. The Haitians, it suggests, are “strong,” rather than helpless children. Haitians will recover because, as the song’s lyrics suggest, “I know you have it in you.”

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<sup>27</sup> “Live Backstage at SOS Haiti,” *iTunes*, February 15, 2010, <https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/bet-sos-help-for-haiti/id356297093?mt=2>.

<sup>28</sup> *SOS Saving OurSelves: Help for Haiti*, aired February 5, 2010 by Black Entertainment Television, executive produced by Salli Frattini.

Hip-hop artists also reinvent “We are the World” by adding a rap section that undercuts the generic universality of the original song by specifically locating it in Haiti. Whereas the first two-thirds of the song reproduce the original lines of the 1985 version, a new section features rappers LL Cool J, will.i.am, Snoop Dogg, Busta Rhymes, and Swizz Beatz. At first, these artists seem to continue the vague “send them your love” rhetoric that characterizes the first half of the song, portraying the United States as “a magic carpet to stand on” for the victims with whom “we” are “united by love so strong.”<sup>29</sup> New verses performed by Kanye West and by will.i.am also reinforce the idea that it is the people themselves whose intervention is most critical, that it is the love and care of “everyday citizens” and of “you and I”—importantly, not of the government—that “can make the world win.” However, the new verses also particularize the tragedy to which they are responding by linking it up with others that have affected disproportionately minority populations. Whereas the original “We are the World” lyrics made no reference to the famine in Africa that it was meant to address, Jean’s part in the new song clearly claims this song for Haiti. The section opens with Jean singing “*nou se mand la; nou se timoun yo*”—Kreyol for “we are the world; we are the children”—as video footage of Haitian children mouthing the same words plays on the screen. Thus it is *Haitian* children who are “the children.” Jean closes the song by simply repeating, *a cappella*, the indigineous Taíno name for the island—“Ayiti”—again and again, clearly locating this song not as an expression of generic, sentimental colorblindness but rather as one that, without dismissing that sentiment, turns a moral geography into a political geography.

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<sup>29</sup> “We are the World.”

will.i.am claims for Haitians the “we” of the song’s title by calling out Haiti as the last in a succession of disasters that have required “us” to respond: “Like Katrina, Africa, Indonesia / and now Haiti needs us, they need us, they need us.” Indonesia seems to be included here as much for its slant rhyme with “need us,” especially because hip-hop artists were not significantly involved in disaster relief for that crisis. Nonetheless, all of these crises affected nonwhite populations.

It is important that these new verses are likewise the exclusive domain of black, male hip-hop artists. In the part of the song faithful to the 1985 version, performers represent a variety of racial, religious, and musical backgrounds; a few are Canadian. However, the rap section, the emotional climax of the new version, claims the song for Haiti. The meanings of the pronouns “we” and “us” shift suddenly but subtly from generic world citizens to more complicated and less stable ideas about blackness that seems to inhabit both sides of the nation-state: hip-hop artists present black US citizens as both “them” and “us.”

Intentionally ambiguous use of these pronouns reappears in several hip-hop performances for Haiti, most notably in the title of BET’s *Saving OurSelves: Help for Haiti* telethon. In addition to the play on the emergency term “SOS,” the title suggests the oneness of black America with Haiti via a shared “ourselves” that does not distinguish by nation, even if nearly the entire slate of performers are black United States citizens. With the exceptions of Justin Bieber (whose musical career was launched by hip-hop artist Usher), Robin Thicke (who, though white, performs extensively within the hip-hop genre), and Miami local Gloria Estefan, all of the artists were black—but not, Jean excluded, Haitian. This telethon is about black people, for black people. Unlike the *Hope*

for *Haiti Now* telethon, which was hosted from London, New York, and Los Angeles, *Saving OurSelves* was comparatively local. It took place in Miami, a city heavily connected to the Caribbean and home to many Haitian-Americans and Haitians living in the United States. Indeed, of the top twenty United States cities with the highest percentages of Haitian-born residents, eighteen of them are in Florida.<sup>30</sup> But as he opened the program, Jean located the program not just *near* Haiti or Haitian Americans but figuratively *in* Haiti: “I want to welcome y’all to Haiti,” he states.<sup>31</sup> In a very literal sense, even despite the fact that they were *not* in Haiti, the hip-hop community in the United States claimed Haiti as its own.

Hip hop has always been “a Diaspora transcending ethnic, linguistic, and geographic boundaries,” so in this sense it is not surprising that American hip-hop artists would connect to their Haitian peers.<sup>32</sup> However, to understand the meanings of Haiti to the hip-hop community requires an understanding of its response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005. In his piece on “conscious hip-hop,” Murray Forman writes that the devastation in New Orleans was “the most galvanizing event for many hip-hop identified youth in the U.S. over the past decade.”<sup>33</sup> Artists including Mos Def, Lil Wayne, Jay-Z, Papoose and Razah, Juvenile, Public Enemy, the Legendary KO, and Jay Electronica, as well as many artists local to New Orleans, produced new music addressing the disaster. Michael Eric

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<sup>30</sup> “Top 101 Cities with the Most Residents Born in Haiti (Population 500+),” *City Data*, accessed July 8, 2013, <http://www.city-data.com/top2/h136.html>.

<sup>31</sup> Jocelyn Vena, “Wyclef Jean Open’s BET’s ‘SOS Saving Ourselves: Help for Haiti’ Telethon,” *MTV*, February 5, 2010, accessed December 19, 2014, <http://www.mtv.com/news/1631439/wyclef-jean-opens-bets-sos-saving-ourselves-help-for-haiti-telethon/>.

<sup>32</sup> Carol M. Motley and Geraldine Rosa Henderson, “The Global Hip-Hop Diaspora: Understanding the Culture,” *Journal of Business Research* 61, no. 3, (2008): 243-253.

<sup>33</sup> Murray Forman, “Conscious Hip-Hop, Change, and the Obama Era,” *American Studies Journal* 54 (2010), [asjournal.org/179.html](http://asjournal.org/179.html), accessed July 8, 2013.

Dyson praises hip hop's response to the events in New Orleans, viewing it as a reminder that "they have been one of the few dependable sources of commentary on the black poor."<sup>34</sup> The website [hiphoparchive.org](http://hiphoparchive.org) offers a section called "Katrina Knows," which argues, "Katrina was a wake-up call to the Hip-hop generation ... Proudly, Hip-hop and the youth of the world did not hide. They got angry, felt ashamed and betrayed, and they cried and then organized [sic]."<sup>35</sup> Amanda Vignone writes, "After Katrina, [hip-hop artists'] lyrics became rougher and more cynical towards the hurricane relief, the role of federal government, as well as past socio-economic issues."<sup>36</sup>

One of the most high-profile criticisms of the government's handling of New Orleans came from rapper Kanye West, who announced during the NBC telethon for Katrina victims, "George Bush doesn't care about black people"<sup>37</sup>—a moment that Bush, apparently wounded by the comment, later referenced as the lowest point of his presidency.<sup>38</sup> Dyson, however, praised West for the remark:

Not only did West redeem the sometimes sorry state of a hip-hop world careening on the gaudy trinkets of his own success—booze, broads, and bling—but his gesture signaled a political courage on the part of the black blessed that is today all too rare. Many hip-hop artists were encouraged by West's words, affirming that he echoed the sentiments of less-known artists.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Michael Eric Dyson, *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster* (New York: Basic Books, 2005): 141.

<sup>35</sup> "Katrina Knows," accessed July 8, 2013, <http://hiphoparchive.org/prepare-yourself-katrina-knows>.

<sup>36</sup> Amanda Vignone, "Awareness of Disaster: Hurricane Katrina in the Voice of the Hip Hop Community," August 2006, accessed July 8, 2013, [iveknownrivers.org/read-2.0.php?id=165](http://iveknownrivers.org/read-2.0.php?id=165).

<sup>37</sup> *Concert for Hurricane Relief*. Broadcast September 2, 2005 by NBC Universal Television. Produced by Rick Kaplan.

<sup>38</sup> Bill Chappell, "Bush Says Kanye West's Attack Was Low Point of His Presidency; West Agrees," November 3, 2010, accessed February 8, 2014, <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2010/11/03/131052717/bush-says-kanye-west-s-attack-was-low-point-of-his-presidency>.

<sup>39</sup> Dyson, 155.

Rapper Jay-Z also defended West after his controversial comments at the telethon: “It was bad timing, but it was absolutely an honest emotion... We all felt like that. We didn’t feel like Katrina was a natural disaster. We felt like it was an attack on black people.”<sup>40</sup>

In her article on post-Katrina hip hop, Zenia Kish writes that for those in the hip-hop community, especially those outside New Orleans, “it wasn’t only residents of the disaster zone who were being victimized, but the African-American community more generally.”<sup>41</sup> Indeed, West’s telethon comment had begun with the statement “I hate the way they portray us in the media,”<sup>42</sup> clearly referencing black people in general, since West has no personal ties to New Orleans. In his autobiography, *Decoded*, Jay-Z articulates Kish’s point even more clearly. Recalling his disgust as he watched reports about Katrina on television, he writes, “It didn’t feel like Katrina was just a natural disaster that arbitrarily swept through a corner of the United States. Katrina felt like something that was happening to black people, specifically.”<sup>43</sup>

The hip-hop community took particular umbrage to Katrina victims being labeled “refugees” in their own nation. The term figured the poor and black as literally outside the bounds of American citizenship. For instance, Chuck D of Public Enemy raps, “Now I see we be the new faces of refugees, who ain’t even overseas.”<sup>44</sup> Papoose’s “Mother Nature” questions the term “refugees” as well: “They was forced outta their homes they

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<sup>40</sup> Jay-Z. Quoted in Gil Kaufman, “Jay-Z Defends Kanye West on ‘Howard Stern Show,’” *MTV News*, November 15, 2010, accessed July 11, 2013, <http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1652260/jay-z-defends-kanye-west-on-howard-stern-show.jhtml>.

<sup>41</sup> Zenia Kish, “‘My FEMA People’: Hip-Hop as Disaster Recovery in the Katrina Diaspora.” *American Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2009): 678.

<sup>42</sup> *Concert for Hurricane Relief*.

<sup>43</sup> Jay-Z, *Decoded* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2011): 219.

<sup>44</sup> Public Enemy, “Hell No (We Ain’t Alright),” 2005, *Rebirth of a Nation*. Written by Chuck D, produced by Public Enemy.



would never leave / So why the media keep calling 'em refugees?"<sup>45</sup> Jay-Z also points to the problem in his autobiography: "It wasn't just me. People saw that Katrina shit, heard the newscasters describing the victims as 'refugees' in their own country, waited in vain for the government to step in and rescue those people who were dying right in front of our eyes, and we took it personally."<sup>46</sup> Kish also documents the widespread outrage over the use of the term "refugee" among hip-hop artists and the corresponding xenophobic attitudes of white Southerners in communities that received black New Orleans residents after the storm.<sup>47</sup> Hurricane Katrina rendered the poor black of the United States stateless, literally excluded from the protections of citizenship. Thus it follows that hip-hop artists, identified with and angered by the feeling that their people had lost the protection of the nation-state, would draw parallels between the experiences of black Americans and black Haitians. In a sense, the black residents of New Orleans in 2005 and afterward *were* figurative Haitians—members of a third world, unprotected by government, fighting for survival.

As they felt that the nation-state failed black victims in New Orleans, abandonment by government is a major theme of post-Katrina hip hop. Many songs suggest that black people will need to care for themselves because the government—especially one headed by George W. Bush—will not do so. Indeed, despite relentless characterizations of the poor and black as overly dependent on government assistance, almost every post-Katrina hip-hop song emphasizes the necessity of self-reliance. "No governor, no help from the mayor," raps Lil Wayne in "Tie My Hands," "Just a steady

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<sup>45</sup> Papoose featuring Razah, "Mother Nature," 2006, *The Best of Papoose—The Mixtape*. MTR Records.

<sup>46</sup> Jay-Z, 220.

<sup>47</sup> Kish, 682-683.

beatin' heart and a wish and a prayer.”<sup>48</sup> In “When the Levees Broke (Katrina),” New Orleans native Jay Electronica raps about government callousness: “On the news I seen a family of a grandma and some kids / They tore down where she lived for sixty years and told her here goes / A voucher for some powdered milk and Kleenex for your tears / You seen them tents outside of city hall? That’s where they live / A trailer in the park or cardboard box under the bridge.”<sup>49</sup> The Legendary KO samples Kanye West’s “Gold Digger” but figures Bush himself as the gold digger who “ain’t messin’ with no broke niggas.”<sup>50</sup> Again in this song appears the theme of self-reliance in the face of governmental abandonment: “Hurricane came through, fucked us up round here / Government actin’ like it’s bad luck down here ... People lives on the line, you declining to help / Since you takin so much time we surviving ourself.” In “Get Ya Hustle On,” Juvenile complains “We livin’ like Haiti without no government.”<sup>51</sup> It is hard to imagine a clearer expression of the link between New Orleans and Haiti and both places’ abandonment by those in power.

These and other artists clearly understood that during the crisis—one that evoked the “third world” in the minds of many viewers—blackness trumped nationhood.<sup>52</sup> It is in this context that we can understand the connection between New Orleans and Haiti: they

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<sup>48</sup> Lil Wayne, “Tie My Hands,” 2008. *Tha Carter III*, Produced by Birdman and Ronald “Slim” Williams.

<sup>49</sup> Jay Electronica, “When the Levees Broke (Katrina),” 2009, *What the F\*ck is a Jay Electronica*, free download [www.myspace.com/jayelect](http://www.myspace.com/jayelect).

<sup>50</sup> Legendary KO, “George Bush Doesn’t Care about Black People,” 2005. Single, digital download. Written by Big Mon and Damien.

<sup>51</sup> Juvenile, “Get Ya Hustle On,” 2006, *Reality Check*. March 7, 2006. Produced by Cool and Dre, Donald XL Robertson, Scott Storch, Mannie Fresh, Lil Jon, Sinista.”

<sup>52</sup> Jeff Koinange, “Katrina: When New Orleans Went from Developed World to Third World,” *CNN*, August 30, 2006, accessed February 10, 2014, [http://www.cnn.com/2006/US/08/30/btsc.koinange/index.html?section=cnn\\_topstories](http://www.cnn.com/2006/US/08/30/btsc.koinange/index.html?section=cnn_topstories).

are both characterized as sites where black people, abandoned by government, must save themselves. The recycling of the title *Saving OurSelves*, first used for Katrina but now applied to Haiti, makes the connection explicit and suggests that in both cases, it will be up to black people to help themselves. In his comments at the BET Haiti telethon, Sean “Diddy” Combs, expresses pride that the effort “was put together by us, the recording artists you support every day.”<sup>53</sup> He continues, again emphasizing self-reliance, “We’re gonna take responsibility into our own hands.” In “Stranded: Haiti Mon Amour,” a new song produced for Haitian relief and performed at the *Hope for Haiti Now* telethon, Jay-Z raps, “We learned from the past, New Orleans was flooded / So we know we can’t just rely on the government / Under the rubble, here we go rumbling when / we gon catch a break?”<sup>54</sup>

In the context of shared abandonment, shared disappointment, and shared pain, hip-hop artists also begin to articulate a source of shared strength: their transnational black bonds with Haitians. “Stranded: Haiti Mon Amour” clearly articulates the shared struggle in French: “*Haïti va s’élever / Tu vas te relever / Nous nous élèverons / Ensemble Ensemble Ensemble*” (“Haiti will rise / you will rise / we will rise / together together together”). That these lines are conveyed in French is a significant marker of a transnational “we” that is not assumed to be solely within the United States. Moreover, both Jay-Z and his wife Beyoncé use reverential language in their tributes to Haiti. Jay-Z refers to Haitians as “my Port-Au Princes / my Haitian Gods and all of my Princesses,” while Beyoncé directly addresses the battered nation in a new version of her popular

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<sup>53</sup> “Live Backstage at SOS Haiti.”

<sup>54</sup> Jay-Z, Bono, The Edge, and Rihanna, “Stranded: Haiti Mon Amour,” 2010, *Hope for Haiti Now*. Written by Shawn Carter, David Evans, Paul Hewson; produced by Swizz Beatz and Declan Gaffney.

“Halo,” which figures Haitians as angels: “Haiti, I can see your halo; you’re everything we need and more.”<sup>55</sup> Here the shift from “everything I need” in the original version of the song to “everything we need” is of course partially the result of lyrical convenience, but it also suggests that “need” is mutual: the United States needs Haiti as much as Haiti needs the United States.

But what is it, exactly, that the United States, or African Americans, need from Haiti? McAlister reads Beyoncé’s performance as a suggestion that “Haiti becomes an angel or saint, and the Haitian people are sanctified through their innocent suffering. Givers to Haiti relief, in turn, are redeemed through sacrifice for Haiti.”<sup>56</sup> While I agree that this reading works for the colorblind universalist performers and audiences, McAlister misses the different ways in which Haiti serves as a point of reference for hip-hop artists and fans, especially after Hurricane Katrina. Hip-hop artists’ response to the Haitian earthquake clearly understands it as a part of a broader black struggle most recently illustrated in New Orleans. Thus Beyoncé’s line may have a different meaning for different audiences.

By drawing parallels between the two locations, these performers also reanimate a much older shared regional identity connected by blackness. For example, in his condolence note to the Katrina victims, exiled former Haitian president Jean-Bertrand Aristide also spoke of “the historic ties between Haiti and Louisiana.”<sup>57</sup> Although Aristide notes that “suffering transcends nationality, color, religion, and class,” he also

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<sup>55</sup> *Hope for Haiti Now*.

<sup>56</sup> Elizabeth McAlister, 33.

<sup>57</sup> Jean-Bertrand Aristide, “President of Haiti sends his condolences to New Orleans.” September 3, 2005, accessed January 16, 2014, [http://haitiaaction.net/News/JBA/9\\_3\\_5.html](http://haitiaaction.net/News/JBA/9_3_5.html).

points out the similarity between the victims of Katrina and his own people who “have faced similar waters that swept away lives and engulfed tiny boats overloaded with people fleeing the political repression” following the United States-backed *coup d’etat* that removed him from power the prior year. Here Aristide deftly expresses sympathy for Katrina victims and criticism for the state that ostracizes its black citizens.

Many scholars are also working to resituate New Orleans as a part of a transnational Caribbean sphere connected by politics, race, economics, and ecology.

Kirsten Silva Gruesz has situated New Orleans in the broader Gulf of Mexico, writing:

To isolate New Orleans as different and exceptional by refusing to see its linkages to the transnational Gulf of Mexico allows us to disavow the relation between the prosperity of the US and the abject poverty of Latin America in general. Like the fragile ecological systems along the Gulf littoral, this lost historical context demands restoration to better understand the relationship between one ‘South’ and another.<sup>58</sup>

Rebecca J. Scott has encouraged a “Caribbean perspective on Louisiana” that begins with the Haitian Revolution that began in 1791 and carries through *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896.<sup>59</sup> During the Haitian Revolution, refugees fled to New Orleans and other port cities in great numbers, becoming a key source of information about the conflict in Saint Domingue.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, many scholars have noted that the Louisiana Purchase would not have been possible without the Haitian Revolution, as Napoleon was cash-strapped from fighting that war and thus willing to sacrifice Louisiana for cash.

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<sup>58</sup> Kirsten Silva Gruesz, “The Gulf of Mexico System and the ‘Latinness’ of New Orleans.” *American Literary History* 18, no. 3 (2006): 491.

<sup>59</sup> Rebecca J. Scott, “The Atlantic World and the Road to ‘Plessy v. Ferguson,’” *The Journal of American History* 94, no. 3 (2007): 726.

<sup>60</sup> Ashli White, *Encountering Revolution: Haiti and the Making of the Early Republic* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010): 2.; Scott, 727.

For decades, the Haitian Revolution haunted not only New Orleans but in fact the entire United States by serving as an example of a successful slave revolt and a free black state. The imagined menace of Haiti continued well past the revolutionary period. Matthew J. Clavin argues that, even as the Civil War approached, Haiti “survived in American memory as a symbol of all that was wrong with abolition and right both about slavery and the white supremacist ideology that helped embed the institution deeply in the republic’s foundation.”<sup>61</sup> Clavin explains that the threat of a Haitian-style revolution inside the United States never passed completely until the end of the war, after which “the national forgetting of the Haitian Revolution began apace.”<sup>62</sup> Yet even after the war, Haitian culture was understood as raced and degenerate. As Anna Brickhouse has shown, tropes of media coverage of the hurricane aftermath in New Orleans in 2005 closely mirrored those used to describe Haiti in 1866, the year of a disastrous fire that destroyed half of Port-au-Prince. Brickhouse calls the language of Katrina a “direct rhetorical inheritance from a more general US discourse on Haiti” in the nineteenth century, which also employed tropes of looting and barbarism in Haiti.<sup>63</sup> During the United States’ occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934, white Marines imposed U.S.-based racial hierarchies on Haitians, very often unable to view Haitian people as anything more than “niggers,” dramatically undermining their own aims in the nation. In short, the United

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<sup>61</sup> Matthew J. Clavin, *Toussaint Louverture and the American Civil War: The Promise and Peril of a Second Haitian Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010): 19.

<sup>62</sup> Clavin, 184.

<sup>63</sup> Anna Brickhouse, “‘L’Ouragan de Flammes’ (‘The Hurricane of Flames’): New Orleans and Transamerican Catastrophe, 1866/2005” *American Quarterly* 59, no. 4 (2007): 1099.

States has a long history of blurring the lines between black Americans and Haitians. Just as importantly, black Americans have a long history of connection with Haitians.

Hip hop has, then, in the public sphere, reconnected the metaphoric “Souths” that Silva describes. As these artists linked Haiti with New Orleans, they began to fill what Clavin calls “a void where the Haitian Revolution once resided” in American memory after the close of the Civil War.<sup>64</sup> After the 2010 earthquake, Haiti again became a commentary on the limitations and possibilities of full citizenship for black people in the United States—on the one hand, both relegated to “third-world” style suffering and neglect. Haiti *is* black New Orleans: a space where black people, abandoned by the United States government, exist outside the protection of citizenship. In this sense, Haiti in 2010 is little different from New Orleans in 2005—or at almost any other point in their shared history of white supremacy and colonization.

But for hip-hop artists, Haiti is also something more than a site of suffering and oppression. It is also a place of angels, princesses, princes, saints; it is a place of redemption. These redemptive characterizations also reanimate historical meanings of Haiti in black thought in the United States. Just as the Haitian Revolution served as a powerful warning to slaveholders in the United States, it served as powerful inspiration to people of African descent. Bruce Dain contends that until the 1820s, “African-Americans initially desired to see Haiti, not just the St. Domingue revolt, as an example of black achievement.”<sup>65</sup> Clavin argues that although to whites the Haitian Revolution was a

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<sup>64</sup> Clavin, 184.

<sup>65</sup> Bruce Dain, “Haiti and Egypt in Early Black Racial Discourse in the US,” *Slavery and Abolition* 14 (1993): 139-161.

negative example of what damage abolition could wreak, it also provided offered an inspiring and heroic tale of black victory over white supremacy.<sup>66</sup>

No figure was more central to these positive characterizations of the Haitian Revolution than Toussaint L'Ouverture. WEB DuBois writes:

The role which the great Negro Toussaint, called L'Ouverture, played in the history of the United States has seldom been fully appreciated. Representing the age of revolution in America, he rose to leadership through a bloody terror, which contrived a Negro "problem" for the Western hemisphere, intensified and defined the anti-slavery movement, became one of the causes, and probably the prime one, which led Napoleon to sell Louisiana for a song; and, finally, through the interworking of all these effects, rendered more certain the final prohibition of the slave-trade by the United States in 1807.<sup>67</sup>

DuBois characterizes L'Ouverture as a subversive whose power extended not only to his countrymen in Haiti but also throughout the United States and indeed the world. In the midst of great suffering, L'Ouverture stands for black redemption. L'Ouverture appears throughout African-American literature and thought as a symbol of resistance to white supremacy.

For instance, Ntozake Shange's 1975 "choreopoem" *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* expresses reverence toward L'Ouverture: "TOUSSAINT waz a blk man a negro like my mama say / who refused to be a slave / & he spoke french / & didnt low no white man to tell him nothin."<sup>68</sup> Shange's "Toussaint" is the portrait of inspiring resistance to white supremacy, inspiration not only to Haitians but also in black residents of St. Louis. She paints L'Ouverture as a kind of

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<sup>66</sup> Clavin, 19.

<sup>67</sup> WEB DuBois, *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1904): 70.

<sup>68</sup> Ntozake Shange, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* (New York: Scribner, 2010): 40.



spiritual guide who “walked all down thru north st. louis,” where the two would talk by the river and daydreamed about a trip to Haiti via the Mississippi River to New Orleans.<sup>69</sup> Still in St. Louis, the narrator meets a boy named “Toussaint Jones,” and she informs the boy “i am on my way to see / TOUSSAINT L’OUVERTURE in HAITI / are ya any kin to him / he dont take no stuff from no white folks & they gotta country all they own & there aint no slaves.” It is Jones who challenges the speaker to understand that L’Ouverture’s spirit also lives in her own country: “I am TOUSSAINT JONES & I’m right heah lookin at ya / & I don’t take no stuff from no white folks.” Although she resists at first, the speaker “realized / TOUSSAINT JONES waznt too different / from TOUSSAINT L’OUVERTURE / cept the ol one waz in hait / & this one wid me speakin english & eatin apples.”<sup>70</sup> She concludes: “toussaint jones waz awright wit me / no tellin what all spirits we cd move / down by the river.” Thus the Haitian Toussaint imbues his American namesake with the qualities of imaginative resistance and power.

The central Haitian figure in the celebrity fundraising efforts for Haitian earthquake relief also models himself as a modern-day incarnation of Toussaint L’Ouverture. Just two months to the day before the 2010 earthquake, Wyclef Jean himself released his seventh album, *Toussaint St. Jean: From the Hut, to the Projects, to the Mansion*, in which he adopts an “alter ego” based on L’Ouverture.<sup>71</sup> The proximity of this work to his disaster relief efforts clearly suggests that Haitian history, especially in the form of the redemptive black leader, informed Jean’s efforts to help his homeland. In his autobiography, Jean writes, “L’Ouverture organized thousands of slaves in the area

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<sup>69</sup> Shange, 42-43.

<sup>70</sup> Shange, 44.

<sup>71</sup> Wyclef Jean, *Toussaint St. John: From the Hut, to the Projects, to the Mansion*, 2009. Produced by DJ Drama and Wyclef Jean.

into a guerilla army that rebelled against the French colonial rulers. This was the first step toward the emancipation of the nation.”<sup>72</sup> Jean creates a portrait of a fearless, violent, but redemptive “revolutionary black bondman,” to use Clavin’s term for one of the most common depictions of L’Ouverture in nineteenth-century abolitionist thought.<sup>73</sup> Jean proudly writes, “Haiti was the first black republic in the world and having that heritage in my blood has allowed me to become a successful artist and entrepreneur in the United States and in the rest of the world.”<sup>74</sup> Thus when he opens the *Hope for Haiti Now* telethon by announcing, “We are Haitians. We are Africans,” he draws on the sources of pride and resilience rooted in blackness. Being Haitian is being strong, being revolutionary, and surviving. These ideas are reflected in the “prince and princess” language that other hip-hop artists also use. As Shange and DuBois illustrate, however, the power of L’Ouverture is not limited to the Haitian or Haitian-American people but also is relevant to all black Americans interested in fighting white supremacy. In fact, Chris Rock’s 2014 film *Top Five*, a film that explores issues in black media culture, including hip hop, features himself as a black comedian attempting to make serious art by creating a film about L’Ouverture.<sup>75</sup>

Toussaint L’Ouverture is the central hero of a version of *négritude* that, as G.R. Coulthard has shown, grew out of defiant response to the racism that permeated the American occupation of Haiti in the first half of the twentieth century:

in Haiti is to be found the first awareness, the first *prise de conscience*, of the Negro in the white world, and it is the unbroken continuity of the theme in Haitian

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<sup>72</sup> Wyclef Jean, *Purpose: An Immigrant’s Story* (New York: It Books, 2012): 5.

<sup>73</sup> Clavin, 27.

<sup>74</sup> Jean, *Purpose*, 231.

<sup>75</sup> Chris Rock, *Top Five*. Directed by Chris Rock. IAC Films and Jax Media, 2014.

literature that forces the conclusion that to a very large extent, historically, the concept of *négritude* grew out of the Haitian situation.<sup>76</sup>

Schmidt also writes that Haitian novels written during the American occupation “expressed sentiments of international black solidarity against white oppression.”<sup>77</sup> Thus although, as Dain has shown, African Americans have at times, especially beginning in the 1820s, turned away from affiliation with Haiti because of the persistent portrayals of that country as barbaric, corrupt, or poor, after the 2010 earthquake, Haiti once again became a viable source of transnational black pride and inspiration. This fact is especially remarkable because of the near total devastation wrought by the earthquake; it would hardly seem the obvious moment that black Americans would look to Haitians for guidance. Yet the crucial context is the exercise of white supremacy common to various historical moments that have promoted such solidarity: the oppression of the French during the Revolution, the American occupation in the early twentieth century, and the transformation of poor black United States citizens into metaphoric Haitians in New Orleans in 2005. Just as Haitians have done throughout their history, black Americans look toward the spirit of L’Ouverture and his contemporaries.

The emphasis on self-reliance in hip-hop fundraising efforts also reverberates with Haitian history. Laurent Dubois explains Haitian resistance to foreign influence as a function of their priority of self-determination. He writes, “Despite all its tragedy, Haiti’s past shows the remarkable, steadfast, and ongoing struggle of a people to craft an alternative to the existence that others wanted to impose on them,” rejecting “social and

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<sup>76</sup> G. R. Coulthard, “The French West Indian Background of ‘Négritude,’” *Caribbean Quarterly* VI, No. 3 (1961), 128-36.

<sup>77</sup> Schmidt, 151.

political institutions designed to achieve profits and economic growth, choosing to maintain their autonomy instead.”<sup>78</sup> In their disgust with the government, hip-hop artists also prioritize autonomy, self-determination, and distrust of the institutions that have failed them not only in Haiti but also in the United States. Kish’s study of the “hustler” figure in post-Katrina hip hop also demonstrates that the self-sufficient black man was an important trope in response to that disaster.<sup>79</sup>

My purpose in drawing these comparisons between hip hop in 2010 and Haitian history is not to argue that all the performers in these relief efforts necessarily consciously understood the dynamics of Haitian history, although Jean—the common bond between and moral center of each effort—very intentionally draws from Haitian history and concepts of *négritude*. It is also likely that many of the other artists, especially those who grew up in and among communities of Haitians in the United States, are at least peripherally aware of the proud history of Haiti. Rather, I mean to point to the ways in which the circumstances of white supremacy and exposure by black Americans and Haitians to what Giorgio Agamben calls “bare life” in the context of disaster organically have reconstituted tropes that have persisted throughout Haitian and American history since the Revolutionary period.<sup>80</sup> For hip-hop artists, Haiti, even in its desperate situation, opens a space for a transnational black critique of the exercise of United States’ empire—in and outside its physical borders and reconnects New Orleans to Haiti. By drawing parallels between the two places, hip hop creates a space for solidarity that might speak

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<sup>78</sup> Laurent Dubois, *Haiti: The Aftershocks of History* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2012): 11.

<sup>79</sup> Kish, 686.

<sup>80</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2005).

back to white supremacy. These artists are leaders of what scholars Bakari Kitwana and Patricia Hill Collins as well as hip-hop patriarch Russell Simmons have called the “hip-hop generation,” the first generation of black Americans to grow up after segregation and the decline of Black Power.<sup>81</sup> They work and perform in the supposedly post-racial Obama era. Yet hip hop draws conclusions about race and nation similar to those of their predecessors in the Black Power movement, in the Civil Rights movement, and in the abolitionist movement. Blues scholar Clyde Woods, calling Katrina “a blues moment,” argues that the tragedy in New Orleans “‘learnt’ the blues to the hip-hop generation.”<sup>82</sup> Haiti demonstrates that the hip-hop generation has been able to apply that learning to a new disaster in another place, much as their peers in jazz and gospel have done in other venues and in prior generations.

Despite hip hop’s subversive, black diasporic articulation of African Americans’ bonds with Haiti, the critique of empire that these performances offer is surprisingly flaccid in context. By 2010, the year of the Haiti disaster, George W. Bush—widely vilified in post-Katrina hip hop—was a year out of office, and the new president, Barack Obama, was a black man. It follows, then, that the anti-government rhetoric around Haiti is more muted and ambivalent, its critique less racially pointed. “The government” or “the nation” cannot be simply understood as white in the Obama age. Writing exuberantly after Obama’s election, Simmons goes so far as to say that Obama’s win “is

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<sup>81</sup> Bakari Kitwana, *The Hip-Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture*. New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2003; Collins; Russell Simmons, “The Vision of the Hip-Hop Generation,” *Huffington Post*, November 5, 2008, accessed February 21, 2014, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/russell-simmons/russell-simmons-post-elec\\_b\\_141441.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/russell-simmons/russell-simmons-post-elec_b_141441.html).

<sup>82</sup> Woods, 1005.

a clear reflection of hip-hop politics.”<sup>83</sup> This context makes the delivery of a forceful critique more difficult, lest it be construed as disrespectful to the new president whom they supported. Indeed, Jay-Z claims to be close enough to Obama that he exchanges text messages with the president about sports and politics.<sup>84</sup>

But perhaps most important to understanding the limitations of the hip-hop critique in celebrity fundraising efforts is the centrality of the media themselves to the neoliberal project of the twenty-first century. In an era when “empire” no longer necessarily means military occupation, the ubiquity of the mass media points toward a version of empire that understands its *terra firma* not only as colonial terrain but also as the landscape of airwaves, radiowaves, and Internet. By saturating these sources of information not only in Haiti and the United States but indeed around the globe, the mass media extend the hegemony of the United States by portraying the nation as just, colorblind, and compassionate and by suggesting that their own technologies are a part of the solution for victims in Haiti and elsewhere.

Indeed, the scope of these events was truly global. The *Hope for Haiti Now* telethon reached a wide audience both on television and online. Hosted from London, New York, and Los Angeles, the telethon “aired commercial-free on every major network and cable channel” and even aired on Chinese MTV.<sup>85</sup> A staggering eighty-three million people in the United States alone—and more abroad—watched it on television, and even more streamed it online or on mobile devices. It raised approximately 61 million dollars

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<sup>83</sup> Simmons, np.

<sup>84</sup> David Jackson, “Jay-Z: Yes, I Text With Obama,” July 7, 2013, accessed February 21, 2014, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/theoval/2013/07/11/obama-jay-z-texting-radio-interview/2509283/>.

<sup>85</sup> Melani McAlister, 27.

in donations.<sup>86</sup> Many of these donations were made via text message, a new strategy that made giving as simple as texting the word “Haiti” to a widely publicized number. The subsequent live album of the concert, which was released only digitally, sold 171,000 copies online in two days alone and debuted at number one on the *Billboard 200*. It was the first digital album to claim that status in Billboard’s history.<sup>87</sup> BET’s *Saving OurSelves: Help for Haiti* telethon aired not only on BET but also on MTV, VH1, and Centric and streamed live online. Despite being poorly reviewed by music critics, “We are the World” performed strongly in the charts not only in the United States, where it reached #2, but also in several European countries and in Australia and New Zealand. It was downloaded 267,000 times within the first three days of its release.<sup>88</sup>

Despite its successes, Haitian voices other than Jean’s were peripheral at best. The vast reach of these charity efforts and the technologies that supported them, the complete ability to saturate media not only in the United States but around the globe, featuring celebrity voices speaking for the victims, illustrates an important dynamic of American empire: the depth and reach of media, the disproportionate ability of American voices to be heard while those for whom they speak exert little or no influence in representing their own plight. As Elizabeth McAlister points out in her reading of the *Hope for Haiti Now*

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<sup>86</sup> Gil Kaufman and MTV News staff, “‘Hope for Haiti Now’ Draws 83 Million Viewers in US,” *MTV News*, January 25, 2010, accessed March 18, 2013, <http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1630468/hope-haiti-now-draws-83-million-viewers-us.jhtml>.

<sup>87</sup> Keith Caufield, “‘Hope for Haiti’ Album Debuts at No. 1 on Billboard 200,” *Billboard*, January 27, 2010, accessed March 18, 2013, <http://www.billboard.com/articles/news/959595/hope-for-haiti-album-debuts-at-no-1-on-billboard-200>.

<sup>88</sup> “On the Charts: Sade’s ‘Soldier’ Sets Tally Ablaze; ‘We are the World’ tops 260,000 Downloads,” *Pop & Hiss: The LA Times Music Blog*, February 17, 2010, accessed June 7, 2013, [http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/music\\_blog/2010/02/on-the-charts-sade.html](http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/music_blog/2010/02/on-the-charts-sade.html).

telethon, the voices of celebrity performers stand in almost entirely for the voice of Haitian victims. Indeed, only two people of Haitian descent, Emmeline Michel and Wyclef Jean, perform in the telethon, despite a rich musical tradition in that country. Although she does not include the *Saving OurSelves* telethon in her analysis, McAlister's comments apply equally to the list of performers in that telethon, despite a vibrant hip-hop scene in Haiti. Hip-hop artists represent themselves as closer to the Haitian victims, as members of a common diaspora, as "distant relatives," in the words of Nas and Damian Marley, but nonetheless, it is they rather than their Haitian 'relatives' who speak.

Also excluded from fundraising efforts for Haiti were more stridently political rappers who critique not only the government but also the very media that revel in such events. For instance, in "Hell No (We Ain't Alright)," its song about Hurricane Katrina, Public Enemy criticizes the government that "looks for a war to win," complains that "this Son of a Bush nation is like, hatin on Haiti and settin up assassinations," calls out "racism in the news, still one-sided views," and mocks "them TV stars, drivin big rim cars" while the "streets keep floodin."<sup>89</sup> It is not hard to understand why sentiments like these are not included in mass media feel-good efforts. In addition to being critical of the vehicles by which fundraising efforts are distributed—the media themselves—messages such as those in "Hell No (We Ain't Alright)" could not easily be reconciled with the universalist messages of American compassion and concern represented by George Clooney or Julia Roberts. Artists such as Jean and Jay-Z can voice a critique of government or a pride in Haiti, but it must not go so far as to distract from the universalist messages of unity and care or the media that deliver those messages.

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<sup>89</sup> Public Enemy, "Hell No (We Ain't Alright)," *Rebirth of a Nation*, Guerilla Funk, 2005.



Indeed, the universalist message relies on the inclusion of black artists whose interpretations speak more directly to black audiences and who give them credibility by sharing the same stage. Since the mid-twentieth century's global turn toward decolonization, the United States has needed to present itself as an alternative to the colonial powers of the past. The nation relies on an image of itself as multicultural family, where race and racism are, if present at all, only remnants of a system that has been thoroughly rejected in contemporary times.<sup>90</sup> Its imperial hegemonic power depends upon its ability to mask deeply rooted and institutionalized racism. The credibility of these fundraising efforts on a global scale requires the participation of a visible black contingent, for much the same reasons that the State Department sent black jazz musicians around the globe during the Cold War era. As Penny von Eschen has argued in *Satchmo Blows Up the World*, black musicians were often the most effective ambassadors for the United States *when* they expressed criticism of their home nation.<sup>91</sup> Likewise, the presence of hip-hop artists in fundraising for Haiti imbues these cultural productions with credibility necessary to their construction of the United States as a multiracial, compassionate, colorblind family. There is room for difference; the corporate world, of which the mass media are an integral part, has a long history of incorporating difference and dissent to maximize profits.<sup>92</sup> There is not, however, room for too much difference—not for voices that critique the media themselves, not for voices of Haitians representing themselves.

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<sup>90</sup> Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>91</sup> Penny Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004).

<sup>92</sup> See, for instance, Naomi Klein, *No Logo* (New York: Picador, 2002).

Ultimately, celebrity fundraising efforts for Haiti do not as much reflect the presence of a colorblind society in the United States as they attempt to create the image of a colorblind society for export to the rest of the world. By portraying the United States as exceptionally compassionate and inclusive and by suggesting that their own instruments of technology work to repair a broken world, these media productions manufacture justification for U.S. interventions of all sorts, not only by selling an image of the nation abroad but also to its own citizens. Yet as important as it is to pay attention to how those messages are sold, we cannot neglect the voices within the United States—in this case, black-identified artists in the hip-hop community—that offer a shadow critique allowed to exist alongside the dominant message. Scholars of race often speak about the ways in which white politicians use “code words” to talk about race without talking about race, whether through the negative image of the (rhetorically black) “welfare queen” or the positive image of the (rhetorically white) “taxpayer.” But we must also pay attention to the code words, images, and allusions that minority groups use to speak both to the universalists among them and more specifically to their own communities. In the telethons I discuss here as well as in the remake of “We are the World,” black voices are speaking in ways that articulate an important critique to those who are listening for it, who understand the history, who know what “Katrina knows.” If Haiti has a “halo,” as Beyoncé suggests, it is not just because it is the orphan made holy by its suffering and needing to be rescued by a beneficent parent nation but also because it is—or can be—an inspiration for a new generation of black resistance and redemption in the face of a white supremacy that would render them stateless.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### COMPETING SOVEREIGNTIES: ENCHANTED INTERNATIONALISM AND THE EVANGELICAL ORPHAN CARE MOVEMENT IN POST-EARTHQUAKE HAITI

The orphan rhetoric that pervaded telethons to support Haitian earthquake relief in 2010 was more than an evocative call to donate to disaster relief funds. Many families within the United States responded with the desire to adopt orphans into their own homes, and those who already had been in the process of adopting children from Haiti faced both new fears and new hopes for completing their adoptions. CNN and other news outlets covered widely their fears for their children and their joy at their homecomings. Although would-be adoptive parents hailed from many backgrounds within the United States, evangelical Christians, especially those involved with what has come to be known as the evangelical adoption movement, or the orphan care movement, were particularly prominent in efforts to place Haitian children in American adoptive families, both before and after the earthquake.

Journalist Kathryn Joyce explains,

After the Haiti earthquake, the evangelical adoption movement sprang into action. Next to longstanding religious relief orphanages, upstart evangelical missions appeared. Some flung themselves into adversarial activism, decrying international aid organizations like UNICEF for obstructing the speedy adoption of Haitian children.<sup>1</sup>

Applications for adoptions from Haiti to Bethany Christian Services, the largest Christian adoption agency in the United States, in January 2010 alone exceeded the number

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<sup>1</sup> Kathryn Joyce, "The Evangelical Adoption Crusade," *The Nation*, May 9, 2011, accessed March 1, 2014, <http://www.thenation.com/article/160096/adoption-commandment>.

received throughout the prior year.<sup>2</sup> One missionary working in Haiti remarked, “We have so many people offering to adopt a child; we have more people offering than we have kids.”<sup>3</sup>

Almost immediately, however, good intentions in the evangelical community met harsh criticism after the arrest of missionary Laura Silsby and her associates from the New Life Children’s Refuge, based in Meridian, Idaho. To summarize briefly, Silsby and her assistant, Charisa Coulter, founded the New Life Children’s Refuge in 2009, describing itself as “a non-profit Christian ministry dedicated to rescuing, loving and caring for orphaned, abandoned and impoverished Haitian and Dominican children, demonstrating God’s love and helping each child find healing, hope, joy and new life in Christ.”<sup>4</sup> The organization’s mission statement pledges to “strive to also equip each child with a solid education and vocational skills as well as opportunities for adoption into a loving Christian family.” After the earthquake, Silsby, Coulter, and eight other missionaries quickly assembled a team and flew to Haiti, where they attempted to remove 33 Haitian children—of whom all had living parents—across the border into the Dominican Republic, where the group planned establish an orphanage that would participate in international adoption to the United States. Arrested on January 29 at the border between the two nations, the missionaries were charged on February 4 with kidnapping. Eight missionaries were held until February 17; Coulter was released March

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<sup>2</sup> Kathryn Joyce, *The Child Catchers: Rescue, Trafficking, and the New Gospel of Adoption* (New York: Public Affairs, 2013): 2.

<sup>3</sup> Timothy Wolfer, *Adopting Haiti*, Film, directed by Timothy Wolfer, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> New Life Children’s Refuge, “Haitian Orphan Rescue Mission,” accessed January 6, 2015, [http://www.esbctwinfalls.com/clientimages/24453/pdf/files/haiti/nlcrhaitianorphanrescue\\_mission.pdf](http://www.esbctwinfalls.com/clientimages/24453/pdf/files/haiti/nlcrhaitianorphanrescue_mission.pdf).

8. Silsby, meanwhile, was imprisoned until May 17, the date on which she was found guilty of a lesser charge—“arranging irregular travel”—and sentenced to time already served.

International media thoroughly covered Silsby’s case, but the story was of special interest to those in evangelical Christian circles. In December, 2010, the Religion Newswriters Association ranked the “Top Ten Religion Stories of 2010;” the Silsby case ranked #2.<sup>5</sup> In May, 2010, *Christianity Today* ran an article entitled “Idaho’s Impact,” which expressed fears that Silsby’s case might result in further restrictions on adoptions not only in Haiti but around the world.<sup>6</sup> Although the movement’s leaders largely distanced themselves from Silsby, they recognized, too, that her motives and rhetoric aligned with those of their movement, even if they criticized the execution. For example, Jedd Medefind, president of the Christian Alliance for Orphans, contends that Silsby’s was

a vision spurred by compassion and a desire to do good. Yet it was begun with little planning or preparation. Neither Silsby nor the team possessed more than a cursory knowledge of local culture and language or best practices in emergency relief. In the words of Proverbs, it was zeal without knowledge. The result, predictably, was disastrous.<sup>7</sup>

That the project was a disaster was nearly, if not entirely, unanimous.

However, commentators seemed to agree unanimously that Silsby’s mission and its disastrous consequences were typically *American*, whether they praised or condemned

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<sup>5</sup> Religion Newswriters Association, “2010 Religion Stories of the Year,” December 15, 2010, accessed March 21, 2014, <http://www.rna.org/news/54861/2010-Religion-Stories-of-the-Year.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> Steve Holt, “Idaho’s Impact,” *Christianity Today* 54, no. 5, (2010): 14.

<sup>7</sup> Jedd Medefind, *Becoming Home: Adoption, Foster Care, and Mentoring—Living Out God’s Heart for Orphans* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2013): 55.

her project. In the Facebook page created to support Silsby and Coulter during their imprisonment in Haiti, supporter Tina Phelan exhorts “powerful American, Christian leadership” to “[r]ise up” and “intervene.”<sup>8</sup> Becky Cross Wright, another poster, chastises Haitians for what she perceives as cruel treatment of the missionaries, toward whom they should be grateful: “NEVER bite the hand that feeds you. Maybe this is a saying they have never heard before...”<sup>9</sup> But other evangelicals eschewed this support and insistence on American power. Baptist minister Fritz Gutwein claims that Silsby represented an aggressive nationalism common to some evangelicals. He charges that the missionaries

were duped by the peculiar strain of American evangelicalism that seems to think the United States is God’s chosen country and that seeks conversions by any and all means, including adoption. This strain of American evangelicalism has duped many churchgoers into thinking the lifestyle enjoyed by middle-class Americans is the ideal. If someone, or some country, has a lifestyle that is not up to our economic standards, they are somehow in need of our lifestyle and our culture.<sup>10</sup>

Outside evangelical circles, criticism of Silsby also tended to associate evangelical Christianity with American arrogance. British newspaper *The Guardian* referred to as “a strong note of American superiority” in the American evangelical world.<sup>11</sup> The newspaper’s article on the Silsby case quotes Baptist Studies scholar David Key, explaining that “Anyone under 40 years of age will have spent their entire life in the

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<sup>8</sup> Tina Phelan. March 21, 2010. Rejoicing that Laura Silsby AND Charisa Coulter are home! Facebook group post, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/314881424267/>.

<sup>9</sup> Becky Cross Wright. February 19, 2010. Rejoicing that Laura Silsby AND Charisa Coulter are home! Facebook group post, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/314881424267/>.

<sup>10</sup> Fritz Gutwein, “Prosecuting Missionaries Good for Haiti, Families, Church,” February 5, 2010, accessed March 21, 2014, <http://www.abpnews.com/opinion/commentaries/item/4816-prosecuting-missionaries-good-for-haiti-families-church#.UyNqJ1FdWyk>.

<sup>11</sup> Ed Pilkington and Inigo Gilmore, “Haiti earthquake: In God’s Name,” *The Guardian*, February 12, 2010, accessed March 21, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2010/feb/13/us-baptists-haiti-earthquake-case>.

America First model of evangelism.”<sup>12</sup> Journalist Anna North writes,

Silsby’s conviction that she and her group were God’s agents in Haiti, and that they could ignore not only Haitian law but the families of Haitian children, speaks to the kind of imperialism that has lately given international adoption a bad name....The American missionaries seem to have assumed that they knew how to care for Haitian children better than the Haitian government or even their own families.<sup>13</sup>

One commentator on North’s article concurs, “I hate it so much when Americans try to impose Their Way [sic] over the laws of the actual jurisdictions they are in, and then people want to wonder why everyone hates us.”

These equations of evangelical zeal and American superiority reflect a long history of their pairing in transnational adoptions, especially during the height of the Cold War, when adoptions from Korea were one mode of ideological battle against communism and the Soviet Union. However, as I argue below, the evangelical adoption movement in the past decade is mischaracterized as one deeply concerned with exerting American power in the world. Moreover, the Haitian earthquake and its aftermath, including scandals such as Silsby’s, have pushed its evolution even further away from an America-first attitude, not only in Haiti but also around the world and inside the United States. Rather, as I argue below, the movement is motivated by an impulse that attempts to deny rather than support the nation-state and to marginalize the role of government in creating solutions for vulnerable children and their families around the world.

Melani McAlister argues that transnationalism should “include studies of the logic

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<sup>12</sup> David Key, quoted in Ed Pilkington and Inigo Gilmore, np.

<sup>13</sup> Anna North, “Charity Gone Wrong: Missionaries Under Fire For Taking Haitian Children,” *Jezebel*, February 2, 2010, accessed March 21, 2014, <http://jezebel.com/5462201/charity-gone-wrong-missionaries-under-fire-for-taking-haitian-children>.

of empire: examinations of how nationally based actors have constructed nationalist and imperialist—or anti-imperialist—imaginaries.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the movement’s imagination—its heart—is key to my study. The “logic of empire” that underlies the movement and its manifestations in post-earthquake Haiti is not only—or even primarily—about transforming the world into a version of the United States or idealizing the American middle class. It is more fundamentally about *being* changed by the world, as individuals, as a church, and as a nation. It seeks to change the materialism and racism it views as rampant in the United States while also helping vulnerable children in poor nations. As was true with the telethon organizers I discussed in Chapter Three, this stance rejects government and institutions as modes of healing—indeed, it figures the government as the opposite of the family—and instead looks to the character of its people for redemption. In this important sense, groups as divergent as white evangelical Christians and black hip-hop artists, who seem on the surface to share little cultural ground inside the United States, are quite similar in their transnational orientations.

Yet in this case, redemption is not just for the poor and vulnerable, but also for Christians in the United States as well. The goal of adoption from Haiti is not only the addition of a child to a family but in fact a deeper spiritual feeling—a fantasy, an optimism, about a restored world order in Christ for which many evangelicals keenly long. It is a feeling that promises to redeem individuals, their church, and their wayward nation under God as much or more than it promises to redeem the other, the child. It is a version of what McAlister calls “enchanted internationalism” —a “distinctive ethical-political construct” that “combines an imperialist-style imaginary with something else—a

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<sup>14</sup> Melani McAlister, “What is Your Heart For?: Affect and Internationalism in the Evangelical Public Sphere.” *American Literary History* 20 (2008): 887.



sense of genuine religious community and even global solidarity.”<sup>15</sup>

By working toward improvement of the self, of the church, of the United States, as well as of individual “fatherless” souls, the orphan care movement provides a powerful affective model that resolves longstanding tensions between those within the church who prioritize evangelism and those calling for broader social engagement. It provides a model for a Christian way of life that might dissolve asymmetries of power without engaging in “social gospel” work targeted at the contexts that gave rise to those asymmetries, a politics that would violate the church’s priority on evangelism. This approach, in line with neoliberal values that Cloud describes as “rhetorics of therapy,” prioritizes the role of families over institutions of government as caretakers of children.

The principles of this new movement are specific and widely reiterated by authors central to the movement. The best known is Moore’s *Adopted for Life: The Priority of Adoption for Christian Families and Churches* (2009). But others, including Dan Cruver’s *Reclaiming Adoption* (2010), Tony Merida and Rick Morton’s *Orphanology* (2011), Daniel J. Bennett’s *A Passion for the Fatherless: Developing a God-Centered Ministry to Orphans* (2011), Lawrence E. Bergeron’s *Journey to the Fatherless: Preparing for the Journey of Adoption, Orphan Care, Foster Care and Humanitarian Relief for Vulnerable Children* (2012), Johnny Carr’s *Orphan Justice: How to Care for Orphans Beyond Adopting* (2013), Jedd Medefind’s *Becoming Home: Adoption, Foster Care, and Mentoring—Living Out God’s Heart for Orphans* (2013), and Morton’s *KnowOrphans: Mobilizing the Church for Global Orphanology* (2014) have continued

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<sup>15</sup> McAlister, “What is Your Heart For?,” 873.

the development of what is sometimes called orphan theology or adoption theology.<sup>16</sup>

They commonly refer to J.I. Packer's *Knowing God*, one of the most influential books in evangelical Christianity, for their central metaphor. In that book, Packer writes, "What is a Christian? The question can be answered in many ways, but the richest answer I know is that a Christian is one who has God as Father."<sup>17</sup> But "the gift of sonship" is reserved only for those who have been born again. "It is not a natural but an *adoptive* sonship," Packer explains.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, claims Packer, "Our understanding of Christianity cannot be better than our grasp of adoption."<sup>19</sup> In this view, then, adoption is central to what it means to be a Christian.

Although evangelical Christians have long been involved in adoption as missionary work, partly as an alternative to abortion and partly in a Cold War crusade against communism, this new adoption movement differentiates itself from previous generations because it frames adoption as a central form of worship. Joyce, by far the most prolific writer on this topic outside evangelical communities, explains that interest in adoption "is guided by several main convictions: that adoption mirrors Christian

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<sup>16</sup> Russell Moore, *Adopted for Life: The Priority of Adoption for Christian Families and Churches* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2009); Dan Cruver, editor, *Reclaiming Adoption: Missional Living through the Rediscovery of Abba Father* (No City: Cruciform Press: 2011); Tony Merida and Rick Morton, *Orphanology: Awakening to Gospel-Centered Adoption and Orphan Care* (Birmingham, Alabama: New Hope Publishers, 2011); Daniel J. Bennett, *A Passion for the Fatherless: Developing a God-Centered Ministry to Orphans* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 2011); Lawrence E. Bergeron, *Journey to the Fatherless: Preparing for the Journey of Adoption, Orphan Care, Foster Care and Humanitarian Relief for Vulnerable Children* (Bloomington, Indiana: Westbow Press, 2012); Johnny Carr, *Orphan Justice: How to Care for Orphans Beyond Adoption* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2013); Medefind; Rick Morton, *KnowOrphans: Mobilizing the Church for Global Orphanology* (Birmingham, Alabama: New Hope Publishers, 2014).

<sup>17</sup> J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, 1973): 205.

<sup>18</sup> Packer, 206.

<sup>19</sup> Packer, 201-202.

salvation; that it is an essential part of antiabortion politics; and that it constitutes a means of fulfilling the Great Commission—the biblical mandate, found most notably in Matthew 28:16-20, that Christians spread the gospel.”<sup>20</sup> Amongst adherents, perhaps the most oft-cited scripture is James 1:27 (English Standard Version), which reads “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.”<sup>21</sup>

Renewed attention to James 1:27 has motivated a variety of religious groups to work together to promote adoption in their congregations. In 2007, Focus on the Family held its first adoption summit; the next year, it inaugurated the “Wait No More” program, aimed at finding parents for children and at developing support for adoptive families among Christian communities. Since 2008, evangelical churches around the country have held “Orphan Sunday” events, and megachurches such as Rick Warren’s Saddleback Church have promoted conferences and retreats on the topic. Warren brought adoption into the presidential race as he interviewed presidential candidate John McCain, himself the parent of a child adopted from Bangladesh, referencing “148 million orphans in the world growing up without parents.”<sup>22</sup> In June, 2009, the Southern Baptist Convention unanimously endorsed a resolution authored by Moore to recommend that adherents of the faith consider adoption and to reflect on “our adoption in Christ and our common burden for the orphans of the world.”<sup>23</sup> In 2009, *Christianity Today* labeled adoption

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<sup>20</sup> Joyce, *The Child Catchers*, 39.

<sup>21</sup> James 1:27 (English Standard Version).

<sup>22</sup> Rick Warren, *Saddleback Presidential Candidates Forum* (Lake Forest, California, 2008).

<sup>23</sup> Southern Baptist Convention. “On Adoption and Orphan Care,” Louisville, Kentucky, Southern Baptist Convention, 2009, <http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/1194/on-adoption-and-orphan-care>.

number six of the top ten theology-related stories of the year.<sup>24</sup> The magazine also featured Moore's adoption story on its cover in July 2010 and has covered adoption and orphan care in many other stories. A 2013 Barna Group study revealed that practicing Christians were more than twice as likely to adopt children than other groups.<sup>25</sup> Online, blogs and websites proliferate, connecting adoptive parents to one another and to those who support them emotionally and financially. These examples are just a sampling of the many venues through which evangelicals have promoted adoption in the last decade. A 2010 *Christianity Today* headline put it plainly: "Adoption is Everywhere."<sup>26</sup>

This attention to adoption reflects a longstanding interest in global evangelistic missions that scholars of transnational adoption have understood primarily as attempts to change and convert the children not only to Christianity but also to an American way of life.<sup>27</sup> Laura Briggs explains that from the 1930s to the 1970s "evangelical anti-Communism became powerfully wed to conservative international politics," to an extent that interest in transnational adoption "far outstripp[ed] its significance as a practice affecting actual children and families."<sup>28</sup> The most prominent of these efforts in the 1950s was led by Bertha and Henry Holt, the evangelical Christian founders of the influential Holt adoption agency, which remains active today. The Holts "narrated a public story that

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<sup>24</sup> Collin Hansen, "My Top Ten Theology Stories of 2009," *Christianity Today*, December 28, 2009, accessed January 2, 2015, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2009/decemberweb-only/153-11.0.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Barna Group, "Five Things You Need to Know about Adoption," *Barna Group*, November 5, 2013, accessed March 21, 2014, <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/family-kids/643-5-things-you-need-to-know-about-adoption#.UxY2yuddWtG>.

<sup>26</sup> Ted Olsen, "Adoption is Everywhere," *Christianity Today* 54, no. 7 (2010).

<sup>27</sup> See, for instance, Susie Woo, "*A New American Comes 'Home': Race, Nation, and the Immigration of Korean War Adoptees, 'GI Babies,' and Brides* (PhD dissertation, Yale University, 2008).

<sup>28</sup> Laura Briggs, *Somebody's Children: The Politics of Transnational and Transracial Adoption* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012):152; Briggs, 158.

equated the salvation of orphans with Christian family values and patriotic citizenship in the Cold War era” by arranging adoption of Korean War orphans to the United States.<sup>29</sup>

Scholars writing about the contemporary movement have not distinguished these adoption theologians from the Cold War era evangelical adopters. Writing about adoptions today, Sandra Patton-Imani contends, “This salvation narrative has continued to frame public understandings of transnational adoption to the United States from Korea, as well as locations around the globe.”<sup>30</sup> Although Patton-Imani does not call out by name the evangelical adoption movement, her critique of the language of transnational adoption draws directly from the language of the movement (for instance, the terms “orphan Sunday” and “the fatherless” are common in the orphan care movement). Historian Arissa Oh likewise reads the contemporary adoption movement as a continuation of Cold War-style “Christian Americanism”: “a diluted form of Christianity with values identified as particularly American.”<sup>31</sup>

Although there is no question that transnational adoption today is a legacy of the Cold War, its values and priorities have shifted. The Holts did not view their mission in the same terms that the new evangelical orphan care movement views its mission. Bertha Holt’s memoir nowhere mentions James 1:27. Rather, she opens her *The Seed from the East* with a recounting of the story of viewing an anti-Communist propaganda film

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<sup>29</sup> Sandra Patton-Imani, “Orphan Sunday: Narratives of Salvation in Transnational Adoption,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 51, no. 4 (2012): 294.

<sup>30</sup> Patton-Imani, 294-295.

<sup>31</sup> Arissa H. Oh, “The Historical Roots of the Evangelical Adoption Boom,” *The Historical Society: A Blog Devoted to History for the Academy and Beyond*, October 11, 2013, accessed March 21, 2014, [http://histsociety.blogspot.com/2013/10/the-historical-roots-of-evangelical\\_11.html](http://histsociety.blogspot.com/2013/10/the-historical-roots-of-evangelical_11.html).

shown in Oregon by World Vision International founder Bob Pierce.<sup>32</sup> The film stresses the persecution of Christians under Communism and urges American Christians to care for Korean orphans as a result of their persecution. Although the Holts draw strongly on their faith, they do not frame their mission as an act of worship itself as today's movement does. The expression of their Christianity is also one of geopolitical significance, a strong expression of anti-Communism. To that end, the couple received an award for "a meritorious contribution toward achieving a more democratic America" from the Portland Chapter of the American Veterans' Committee, which the couple accepted on behalf of God.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, they clearly support the American government, which Holt calls "the greatest government on earth."<sup>34</sup> The contemporary orphan care movement, by contrast, takes a much less optimistic view of the United States and its government.

As Briggs notes, adoption has grown more privatized every decade since the 1950s, when the Holts were most influential. Whereas the children removed via airlifts from Cuba, Vietnam, and Korea were refugees, an "intrinsically political" category, since the 1980s, "the State Department increasingly made visa available to 'orphans'—defined as children whose parents had died, abandoned, or relinquished them—from countries it negotiated arrangements with," which may or may not have been Communist.<sup>35</sup> This increasingly privatized form of adoption allowed for the increasing influence of Protestant churches. Briggs calls "evangelical churches...crucial, privatized middle-men

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<sup>32</sup> Bertha Holt, *The Seed from the East* (New York: Oxford Press, 1956): 1.

<sup>33</sup> Holt, 226-227.

<sup>34</sup> Holt, 79.

<sup>35</sup> Briggs, 161.

in organizing adoptions” who saw “the federal government as simply a visa provider.”<sup>36</sup> This divergence is significant to understanding the way that the evangelical adoption community understands its relationship to adoption today.

The growing distance between the United States government and the private institutions that promoted its anti-Communist goals separated even further after the end of the Cold War. With the goal of defeating Communism no longer relevant to transnational adoption, the emotional sentiment about Christian charity nonetheless remained—and grew in new directions. Now, the ideological goal of missionaries involved in adoption shifted from one of geopolitical significance to one of intensely private significance—worship and family—that also matter deeply to domestic politics.

Although the orphan care movement works in many nations around the world, Haiti was a site of particular focus for worship via adoption even before the devastation of the 2010 earthquake. The website of For His Glory Outreach, a Christian adoption ministry, notes, “Mission work in Haiti faces enemy onslaught as this is a country that is yearly dedicated to Satan in a contractual form. There are voodoo practices and worship of the dark.”<sup>37</sup> Evangelical leader Pat Robertson, in fact, popularized the idea that the earthquake in Haiti was punishment for Haiti’s “pact with the devil”—reference to the story of Bois Caiman, the location of a 1791 voodoo ceremony among revolting slaves that is thought to have inaugurated the Haitian Revolution.<sup>38</sup> As scholar Elizabeth McAlister has documented, some evangelicals in the past twenty years have revised this

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<sup>36</sup> Briggs, 151.

<sup>37</sup> For His Glory Outreach, “The Reality: Port-au-Prince, Haiti,” no date, accessed January 7, 2015, <http://www.forhisgloryoutreach.org/haiti.htm>.

<sup>38</sup> CNN, “Pat Robertson says Haiti paying for ‘Pact to the Devil,’ January 13, 2010, accessed January 7, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2010/US/01/13/haiti.pat.robertson/>.

story into one of a “blood pact with Satan” that renders Haiti especially vulnerable to demonic influence and therefore the site of intense “spiritual mapping” efforts to rid Haiti of this possession. As a result, writes McAlister, “Haiti becomes a nation held in captivity, and Satan becomes the colonial power who must be overthrown.”<sup>39</sup> Importantly, however, it is not the United States that must overthrow this power, but rather Christians working in the name of God.

Corrigan Clay, an American evangelical Christian who lives in Port-au-Prince with his family—two of whom are Haitian adoptees—gives several reasons that the nation is of particular interest to Christians. Echoing Melani McAlister’s “enchanted internationalism,” he characterizes Haiti as a much “more spiritually open place” than the United States is; it is a place that Clay finds more receptive to conversations about God and the supernatural in everyday life.<sup>40</sup> Clay suggests that racial and economic motivations also drive evangelistic interest in Haiti. Haiti’s poverty is of special interest because it stands in such stark contrast to the excessive materialism of the United States. In a blog post in which he interprets the meaning of James 1:27, Clay stresses the notion that excessive materialism undermines religion; therefore, Haiti’s status as the poorest nation in the Western hemisphere has long made it an appealing place to shed oneself of the trappings of wealth.<sup>41</sup>

Clay, who has been active in efforts to reform adoption practices, contends that

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<sup>39</sup> Elizabeth McAlister, “From Slave Revolt to a Blood Pact with Satan: The Evangelical Rewriting of Haitian History,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 41, no. 2 (2012): 187-215, <http://wescholar.wesleyan.edu/div2facpubs/113..>

<sup>40</sup> Corrigan Clay, interview with the author, June 5, 2014.

<sup>41</sup> Corrigan Clay, “What in the Kosmos Does This Have to do with James 1:27?,” *The Apparent Project Blog*, June 2, 2013, accessed January 2, 2015, <http://apparentproject.blogspot.com/2013/06/what-in-kosmos-does-this-have-to-do.html>.



adoption in Haiti has long been corrupt and chaotic and often violated the rights of biological parents who made deals with orphanage staff across language barriers.<sup>42</sup> That few biological parents spoke English and few orphanage directors spoke Kreyol was of special concern because Haitian ideas of the meaning of adoption vary considerably from those common amongst Americans. Legal scholar Paige Tackett writes, “Many children live in orphanages, but this term has a different connotation in Haiti than it does in the United States. Using ‘orphanages’ as boarding schools or childcare centers is commonplace.”<sup>43</sup> Moreover, in Haiti, many children with living parents perform work as indentured servants called *restaveks*. In many cases, Haitian parents, accustomed to a system in which poor children are “borrowed” by other families, did not realize that they were signing away their legal rights to their children. As Tackett notes, “The Haitian government has a notoriously lax legal structure for protecting its children, which makes the country vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation both from within and worldwide.” Indeed, Clay contends that most adoptions in Haiti, even before the earthquake, involved some degree of corruption. Marie-Therese Labossiere Thomas describes the adoption scene in Haiti:

It is a self-regulating system where potential clients pay home study fees either to the very agencies who assess their readiness for adoptive parenthood, or to those that they recommend; it is a world of interconnected advocacy groups, foundations, domestic and international agencies, local orphanages, with legions of social workers, staff, lawyers, notaries, facilitators, and intermediaries of all sorts. The industry’s political clout at the highest levels of state and national

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<sup>42</sup> Clay, interview.

<sup>43</sup> Paige Tackett, “I Get By With a Little Help from My Friends: Why Global Cooperation is Necessary to Minimize Child Abduction and Trafficking in the Wake of Natural Disaster,” *UMKC Law Review* 79, no. 4 (2011): 1029.

governments allowed for a disregard of Haitian and international law.<sup>44</sup> These reasons for evangelistic interest in Haiti are important to understanding the orientation of the movement overall: its combination of spiritual enchantment, its poverty, and its legal laxness made it a place where the goals of the movement could be enacted easily without much interference from the state.

The earthquake changed the movement, in the short and long term. At first, it allowed for even more laxity in standards. “Haiti was the wild west of orphan care,” states Clay, “and the earthquake made it the wilder west.”<sup>45</sup> The earthquake exposed the disarray in the Haitian adoption process as scores of waiting parents already in the adoption pipeline suddenly had their stories broadcast on national television, many of them hoping that the disaster might expedite their already slow adoption processes. One advocate, apparently ignoring the consequences for children’s first families, noted on CNN, “These children never would have made it to their new parents so quickly if not for this earthquake. A silver lining from this immense tragedy.”<sup>46</sup> Thomas notes,

as the world overwhelmingly responded to the earthquake in Haiti, and the media covered the plight of white parents sharing their anguish about the fate of Haitian sons or daughters that they had often met only in pictures, an outpouring of sympathy for the ‘orphans’ generated countless offers of adoption from the general public.<sup>47</sup>

Thomas points out that a variety of Christian adoption-related groups “sought assistance from various sources, including government officials” to facilitate their work—this despite the movement’s aversion to government as a solution to social problems.

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<sup>44</sup> Marie-Therese Labossiere Thomas, “The Big Business of Haitian Adoption,” *Alter Presse*, posted March 15, 2010, accessed January 3, 2015, <http://www.alterpresse.org/spip.php?article9376#.VKi8zGTF-nQ>.

<sup>45</sup> Clay, interview.

<sup>46</sup> *Rescued: The Children of Haiti*, television special, CNN, January 10, 2011.

<sup>47</sup> Thomas, np.

The Obama administration granted humanitarian parole for those children who had already been in the adoption pipeline, matched before the earthquake with waiting families in the United States. A variety of organizations and ministries associated with adoption were allowed to land private planes in Haiti to airlift Haitian children for adoption to the United States. Christian organizations such as For His Glory Adoption Outreach, Chinese Children Adoption International, and others were allowed to land private planes in Port-au-Prince shortly after the disaster, sometimes diverting flights from arguably more urgently needed groups such as Medecins sans Frontieres and the Red Cross. Evangelical adoption groups thus were able to use the government to circumvent normal governmental procedures in both nations.

This collaboration was possible in part because of the movement's savvy appeals to the media. CNN's Soledad O'Brien worked closely with Christian organizations in Haiti after the disaster. Her documentary, *Rescued*, built on the video footage filmed by Jonathan Olinger, a Christian filmmaker who had been documenting the story of the Lighthouse orphanage since 2004.<sup>48</sup> O'Brien also covered stories from other Christian orphanages around Haiti. Although O'Brien discusses the drawbacks of international adoption, her coverage is largely sympathetic to the missionaries.

A prevailing theme of her writing about these groups is the power of the individual to do good in a world where government—whether Haitian or American—fails. In her memoir, her sentiments about government recall those expressed during the Katrina disaster in New Orleans:

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<sup>48</sup> Soledad O'Brien, "'Rescued': A Story that Called to Me," *CNN*, May 6, 2010, accessed January 3, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/americas/05/06/rescued.orphans.haiti/>.

No one expected the government to step up to the plate in a country like Haiti. Practically speaking, there is no government. We had low expectations that the U.S. government would rally for this island when they had not rallied for their own [after Hurricane Katrina]. That leaves us with the power of one, the generosity and spunk of individuals who just take it upon themselves to come help the people they can in whatever way they can. This is the story I want to tell.<sup>49</sup>

Indeed, this is the kind of story that helped to facilitate the disregard for international policy and law in the aftermath of the earthquake. It is a story that encourages people to feel and renders the government irrelevant at best, an obstacle at worst.

The most widely covered of these efforts illustrates this point. Pennsylvania's democratic governor Ed Rendell flew to Haiti to facilitate the removal of 54 children from the Bresma orphanage, run by evangelical Christian sisters Jamie and Ali McMurtrie, originally from Ben Avon, Pennsylvania. The McMurtries, whom the *New York Times* describes as "young and telegenic," took to social media outlets to publicize their story and caught the attention of Rendell and others across the United States.<sup>50</sup> Of the children in their care, 42 already had American families waiting for them upon their arrival in the United States. However, a dozen of the children, whom the sisters refused to leave behind, "were not in the process of being adopted, might not all even be orphans and are living in a juvenile care center [in Pittsburgh] while authorities determine whether they have relatives in Haiti who are able to take care of them," the *New York Times* reported on February 23, 2010. It was because of Rendell's connections—to Rahm Emanuel, Huma M. Abedin, Hillary Rodham Clinton, Arlen Specter, Bob Casey, and

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<sup>49</sup> Soledad O'Brien, *The Next Big Story: My Journey through the Land of Possibilities* (New York: Penguin, 2011): 275.

<sup>50</sup> Ginger Thompson, "Questions Surface After Haitian Airlift," *New York Times* February 23, 2010.  
[http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/24/world/americas/24orphans.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/24/world/americas/24orphans.html?_r=0).

Denis McDonough—that the sisters were able to persuade him and thus the Obama administration to grant humanitarian parole to all the children, even those who would not normally have been authorized to leave the country for adoption, in violation of both Haitian and American policy. The *Times* reported:

Senior Obama administration officials acknowledged in interviews that the lines of authority were fuzzy in Haiti on the day of the rescue mission, Jan. 18. And they said that American officials concerned about the well-being of the children had allowed Mr. Rendell to remove them from Haiti even though they had not received clear authorization to travel by the Haitian government and were not in the process of being adopted by American families, as required by a United States humanitarian parole policy announced the day Mr. Rendell landed in Haiti.<sup>51</sup>

Thus one of the most celebrated efforts on behalf of orphans in Haiti after the earthquake also operated on principles that violated the policies of both countries. In this sense, the Bresma orphanage effort differs only in official sanction from the efforts of Silsby and her crew who attempted to illegally remove Haitian children to the Dominican Republic.

In her critique of international adoption, Briggs convincingly argues, “we need to see that [adoption’s] practices do not resolve neatly into categories of coercive and innocent, good and bad.”<sup>52</sup> Rendell’s case, in which he clearly facilitated disregard for international law and was as a result celebrated for his efforts—even amongst his political opponents—illustrates this tendency. Briggs points out that whereas Silsby and her crew were widely condemned as “child stealers,” Rendell and the McMurtries were widely hailed as “child rescuers,” even though both groups disregarded established international policies and removed children who were not legal orphans from their rightful parents, adding to the trauma of the earthquake for both the children and likely for their first parents, who may well have been seeking reunion with them after the

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<sup>51</sup> Thompson, np.

<sup>52</sup> Briggs, 4.

disaster. The McMurtries were named Pittsburgh's citizens of the year, and Rendell enjoyed a wave of political good will in the aftermath. Silsby was often framed as the exception to the rule, yet Joyce argues that "Silsby wasn't the renegade bad apple that adoption advocates sought to portray her as."<sup>53</sup> Indeed, the case of Rendell and the McMurtries also illustrates the "disregard for the law" that Joyce claims typified the Silsby case and "[o]ther orphan-rescue missions happening simultaneous to the [Silsby] scandal."

Similar attitudes also pervade the documentary film *Adopting Haiti*, which features the work of American adoptive parents Greg and Tawnya Constantino, a Utah-based doctor and lawyer, respectively, who also serve on the board of For His Glory Adoption Outreach, a "Christian non-profit...ministry" that "seeks to care for the orphans and fulfill the Great Commission by offering the good news of the Gospel to those individuals with whom we come into contact."<sup>54</sup> The couple's team in Haiti after the earthquake fights to qualify 80 children of Maison des Enfants de Dieu, whom Tawnya Constantino calls "our kids," for humanitarian parole and removal from Haiti via airlift. O'Brien covers the story, which repeatedly airs on CNN, and the group eventually gets its children into the airlift. In an opinion piece published on CNN.com, the filmmaker, Timothy Wolfer, contrasts the work of the Constantinos with that of Silsby and her group. "Unfortunately," he writes, "'Haitian orphans' evokes images of the Idaho Baptist missionaries accused of trying to take children with living parents off the streets of Port-au-Prince. This embarrassment overshadowed the legal adoption of hundreds of Haitian

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<sup>53</sup> Joyce, *The Child Catchers*, 24.

<sup>54</sup> Wolfer, *Adopting Haiti*; For His Glory Outreach, "Our Mission," accessed January 5, 2015, <http://www.forhisgloryoutreach.org/our-mission.htm>.

children under emergency provisions implemented by the U.S. government.”<sup>55</sup> Yet, as the Rendell case illustrates, the fact of the United States government’s involvement does not necessarily ensure its legality.

Rather, the airlift cases illustrate the power of traditional and social media outlets to persuade their viewers—and their viewers’ elected officials—to act in ways that are mutually beneficial to the movement and to the elected representatives who helped them, while, of course, also providing compelling entertainment. The earthquake provided an opportunity for the clout of the evangelical movement in Haiti to influence American government and to reach a wider, and especially sympathetic, audience. It was the orphan care movement’s most visible and high-profile moment in any country. Rendell and the Obama administration, along with other politicians such as Mary Landrieu and Bill Frist, who also worked on behalf of adoptive families, thus provided an important official authorization for the disregard of law surrounding adoptions that was already characteristic of the movement before the earthquake.

In *Adopting Haiti* and in the Silsby case, the rhetoric consistently frames a Christian god as a sovereign higher than the policies of any state or government. Constantino repeatedly takes the children in her care to create “mayhem” at the United States embassy, despite being told to keep the children away from the embassy because it was unnecessary to bring the children and would slow critical work being done there. O’Brien’s memoir recounts the story of Constantino’s trips to the embassy in a hot and overcrowded bus full of unrestrained young children, whom medics feared she was

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<sup>55</sup> Timothy Wolfer, “A Haiti Adoption; A New Chance in the US,” *CNN*, January 13, 2011, accessed April 3, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2011/opinion/01/12/wolfer.haiti.adoption/>.

endangering.<sup>56</sup> Yet Constantino insists on her mission, referring to God's ultimate authority: "I went in really believing God would move on behalf of the children," she remarks.<sup>57</sup> Later she rests assured that "the Lord will provide" for the children's parole despite the embassy's indifference. It is not only American authority but also Haitian authority that these missionaries see as impeding God's will. In her essay about her experiences in a Haitian prison, Silsby suggests that Haitian government officials who interfered with her plans to transport children to the Dominican Republic were influenced by the devil. Recounting an interaction with a Haitian social services official, Silsby recalls, "She said with a very evil smile, 'I know you came here to do good, but I've got you now.'"<sup>58</sup> Her assistant, Coulter, also testified: "our hope is not in government and in officials. It is in God."<sup>59</sup>

It is important to note, then, that the movement's partnership with media and government officials to advance its causes in a moment of crisis was not the same thing as a belief in American (or Haitian) authority and power as a nation-state but rather a belief in the power of individuals to circumvent the state, especially via the media, to affect action in line with their personal beliefs rather than the geopolitical needs of the nation. These "child rescuers" drew on their privilege as American citizens and as Christians, but their motivation was theological rather than nationalistic.

As a powerful voting bloc, evangelicals in the movement (and their secular allies)

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<sup>56</sup> O'Brien, 276.

<sup>57</sup> Wolfer, *Adopting Haiti*.

<sup>58</sup> Laura Silsby, "First Person (Laura Silsby): Trusting God's Sovereignty, from a Haitian Jail," *Baptist Press*, May 17, 2011, accessed March 13, 2014, [www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?id=35318](http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?id=35318).

<sup>59</sup> Charisa Coulter, quoted in "Celebrating Laura Silsby," *The Daily Bastardette*, April 26, 2010, accessed January 3, 2015, <http://www.dailybastardette.com/celebrating-laura-silsby/>.



provided politicians with an opportunity to please constituents and demonstrate compassion toward Haitians, without encouraging other Haitians to immigrate—a much more politically risky stance. Indeed, Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano warned against a mass exodus of Haitians to the United States: “At this moment of tragedy in Haiti it is tempting for people suffering in the aftermath of the earthquake to seek refuge elsewhere. But attempting to leave Haiti now will only bring more hardship to the Haitian people and nation.”<sup>60</sup> Two bills designed to “temporarily expand the V nonimmigrant visa category to include Haitians whose petition for a family-sponsored immigrant visa was approved on or before January 12, 2010” were both referred to committee and not enacted.<sup>61</sup> Thus American official hospitality to orphans masked its inhospitality to other suffering Haitian people, even those with families already living inside the United States. Yet its airlift provided a safe expression of humanitarian compassion by allowing the immigration of children who, by and large, would have become American citizens whether or not an earthquake struck their home country. In short, evangelicals working in the movement were politically savvy to the workings of domestic politics and used it to their advantage.

Rendell’s rhetoric painted himself as a hero in his very insistence that government was the problem and he was the exception. A January 22, 2010 *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* article about Rendell’s involvement in the airlift describes him as “a governor who likes to cut red tape.”<sup>62</sup> In it, Rendell brags that he “just didn’t care” about violating official

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<sup>60</sup> US Department of Homeland Security, “Statement from Secretary Janet Napolitano,” press release, January 15, 2010.

<sup>61</sup> S.2998 H.E.L.P. Act, 111<sup>th</sup> Congress, Second Session, February 4, 2010.

<sup>62</sup> Tom Infield, “Rendell’s Political Clout Comes in Handy,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, January 20, 2010, accessed January 3, 2015, <http://www.post->

policies on behalf of the children. Notably, the article adds, “Pennsylvania’s Republican Party, usually ready to snipe at Mr. Rendell, was muted yesterday.” The *New York Times* reported in February, “More than a month later, Governor Rendell is enjoying a reprieve from months of negative news coverage, the local church that sponsors the American women’s work with orphans is reportedly receiving record donations and 42 of the orphans are in the care of American families who had applied to adopt them.”<sup>63</sup>

The airlift made for good domestic politics because the American people share with evangelicals in this movement a distaste for government, its interference with politics of the compassionate heart. By and large, as I showed in Chapter Three, they see the government as an obstacle to care rather than the vehicle for it. Briggs characterizes “saving orphans by adopting them” as “the early twenty-first century’s act of charity par excellence in an era of shrinking government and expanding faith in individual virtue that eschewed a previous generation’s confidence in development policy.”<sup>64</sup> The adoption landscape in Haiti after the earthquake illustrates this perspective in abundance.

Circumventing official procedure not only victimized Haitian children and their parents but also preyed upon American families who sought to adopt. Given the officially sanctioned chaos in transnational adoption from Haiti immediately after the earthquake, it is not surprising that unethical practitioners would see an opportunity to profit from the Haitian disaster. Indeed, another important scandal—one that received no media attention outside a blog and Facebook group created by families in the United States—was the case of Heather Elyse, an American evangelical Christian who established the Giving Hope

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[gazette.com/news/state/2010/01/20/Rendell-s-political-clout-comes-in-hand/stories/201001200324](http://gazette.com/news/state/2010/01/20/Rendell-s-political-clout-comes-in-hand/stories/201001200324).

<sup>63</sup> Thompson, np.

<sup>64</sup> Briggs, 1.

Rescue Mission in Haiti shortly after the earthquake along with her partner Tim Rowe.<sup>65</sup> On her website, Elyse describes Giving Hope Rescue Mission's belief "that Christians are called to stand and act as representatives of Christ on this earth—giving, rescuing, and advocating for the vulnerable, weak, and voiceless."<sup>66</sup> Elyse and her seven American adopted children moved to Haiti months after the earthquake and, seemingly conscious of criticism of the unethical adoption practices in the weeks immediately after the earthquake, presented her new organization as a model of ethical adoption practices. She quickly convinced many families that she could effectively and inexpensively process their adoptions while maintaining Christian values.

By 2013, however, a number of families began to notice gross irregularities in their adoption processes: dramatically inflated costs, seemingly intentional delays, unexplained removal of their children from the orphanage to other sites, and eventually the realization that many of the children promised for adoption were not in fact orphans. In late 2013, these families banded together to form a website that highlights questions and concerns about Giving Hope Rescue Mission and associations affiliated with it. The website reads,

The link between these families is that we each met Heather Elyse as the founder of Giving Hope Rescue Mission. She told us that she does adoptions differently, more ethically, and that we could trust her with our hearts and our adoptions. She took thousands of dollars—from some of us through her organization, for projects that were never reported on in Haiti, for several non-profits she started that have not produced financial reports and directly to her home address from families that were told they had to pay or their adoption would not be done.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Elyse is also known as Heather Savage, Heather Sitton, and Heather Sauter.

<sup>66</sup> Heather Elyse, "Giving Hope Haiti," accessed April 3, 2014, <http://www.heatherelyse.com/#!/video/c1knn>.

<sup>67</sup> "Unraveling Heather Elyse." *Former Clients of Voice of the Orphan (VOTO) and Giving Hope Rescue Mission (GHRM): A Unified Appeal for Change*, May 1, 2014,

The families charge Elyse with lying on multiple fronts. One family took her to court in Haiti on charges of kidnapping, falsification of documents, bribery, and fraud. Her former employee, Shasta Grimes, has also spoken publicly against her. Elyse and her family fled Haiti at the end of 2013 and now live in Indiana, where she has been charged with child neglect of her own adopted children.

Those who know Elyse are careful to note that Elyse is not representative of the orphan care movement as a whole, but it is easy to see how the “wild west” environment during the airlift and the Silsby case would invite dishonest adoption practitioners who recognize a burgeoning market for their services.<sup>68</sup> Clay contends that Elyse illustrates the opportunism that took place in the “wilder west” of Haitian adoption after the earthquake, allowing for exploitation not only of Haitian children and their birth families but also of well-meaning Christian adoptive families, many of whom lost thousands of dollars and suffered a great deal of personal anguish. One family on the website states, “Heather knew that the vulnerable children in her care were adoptive families’ weaknesses; she manipulated our love and concern for the children and she preyed upon our faith.”<sup>69</sup> The circumstances surrounding each of these interventions in Haiti after the earthquake—the Silsby scandal, the Elyse scandal, and the airlifts—differ in significant ways. But together they all reflect an opportunism that resulted from a disregard for the rules of the state, both Haitian and American—a disregard largely motivated by the idea

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accessed January 3, 2015,  
[http://speakoutaboutgivinghoperescuemission.blogspot.com/2014\\_05\\_01\\_archive.html](http://speakoutaboutgivinghoperescuemission.blogspot.com/2014_05_01_archive.html).

<sup>68</sup> Clay, interview.

<sup>69</sup> “The W Family Shares Their Experience,” *Former Clients of the Voice of the Orphan (VOTO) and Giving Hope Rescue Mission (GHRM): A Unified Appeal for Change*, April 10, 2014, accessed June 24, 2014.

<http://speakoutaboutgivinghoperescuemission.blogspot.com/2014/04/the-w-family-shares-their-experience.html>

that God's laws trump those of any nation.

This theme, however, was already central in the orphan care movement before the earthquake—and not just in Haiti. These ideas are woven throughout the adoption theology literature written before and soon after the earthquake. Although Moore's book counsels adoptive parents to be honest on their home studies and other paperwork, he also contends: "Christians can debate whether or not lying is permissible in certain instances to save a life. I don't think the Hebrew midwives sinned when they saved the babies from Pharaoh by telling him that the Jewish women were too quick in giving birth for their babies to be caught."<sup>70</sup> Although Moore assures his readers that such life-and-death situations will not occur in the process of a normal adoption application, one easily can see how the devastation of the Haitian earthquake and the surety in the rightness of the mission might have justified lying in some cases to "save children." *Orphanology* argues that it is not social workers but "Jesus Christ alone" who "had all the right qualifications to save us and make us children of God."<sup>71</sup> Therefore, the book's authors contend, although families may need to work with the "frightening...state policies and regulations,"<sup>72</sup> ultimately "Scripture teaches that orphan care is the responsibility of the church and not the state."<sup>73</sup> Bergeron, in a later text, offers a reading of Psalm 10:16 and points out that it reads:

The Lord *is* King and the nations *will* perish. That is a statement of praise for it recognizes who God is, His power and of His majesty. He will remain in control long after everything we cling to is gone. He will reign long after every U.S. President has passed, every dictator has been forgotten and every country has been absorbed into the sea. His promised land will not be held captive by those

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<sup>70</sup> Moore, 134.

<sup>71</sup> Merida and Morton, 35.

<sup>72</sup> Merida and Morton, 135.

<sup>73</sup> Merida and Morton, 105.

who dismiss His glory.<sup>74</sup>

The orphan care movement created a mindset prior to the earthquake that undermines the sanctity of the legal barriers put in place to control and regulate adoption.

Moreover, orphan care literature, especially those pieces published before the earthquake, refers ubiquitously to “spiritual warfare,” which presents any impediments to adoption—including the structures of the state, from social workers to visa processors—as the work of the devil, much as Silsby suggested. Bennett encourages his readers to have a “battlefield perspective of the spiritual struggle you have been forced to engage in.”<sup>75</sup> *Orphanology*’s authors remind readers that Satan “does not want us to spread the gospel or to redeem the orphan....Satan seems to have a strategy, and he’s a master at using it.”<sup>76</sup> Moore writes, “The universe is at war, and some babies and children are on the line. The old serpent is coiled right now, his tongue flicking, watching for infants and children he can consume.”<sup>77</sup>

In the context of this warfare language, it is easy to understand how orphan care advocates such as the McMurtries, Constantino, Elyse, and Silsby might disregard secular authority in the name of allegiance to a higher, most sovereign power. Elyse, for instance, often employed the language of spiritual warfare in her defense. One of her clients claims that she repeatedly referred to herself as “persecuted” and “burned at the stake” when families for whom she worked questioned her practices, and when skeptical families began to doubt her, she would often question their faith in God (and sometimes, the client

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<sup>74</sup> Bergeron, 11. Emphasis in original.

<sup>75</sup> Bennett, 119.

<sup>76</sup> Merida and Morton, 161-162.

<sup>77</sup> Moore, 66.

alleges, punish the families by delaying or denying their adoptions).<sup>78</sup> In his critique of the theology of the orphan care movement, David M. Smolin explains that the evangelical embrace of adoption advances the view that adoption is an absolute good “by proclaiming that adoption is fundamental to the ultimate good of the gospel and of salvation.”<sup>79</sup> Therefore, he argues, “a strong propensity to treat any criticism of adoption as evil” has emerged. The rhetoric of spiritual warfare figures fighting the government as a battle between good and evil.

The earthquake provided a crisis of sufficiently monumental scope to legitimize that rhetoric in the eyes of the United States government that authorized the airlift of orphans. However, the awkward embrace between evangelicals and the United States government is opportunistic; it draws from American power as citizens but does not exist to promote American power as a nation-state. Instead, it reflects the power of evangelicals—who have a long history of engagement with the media and politics—on domestic politics to shape the practices of the United States to their own aims, for the orphan care movement’s stance toward the United States is hardly one of zealous nationalism.

Despite drawing extensively on their privilege as citizens of the United States, most adherents of the orphan care movement believe that they are using this privilege to advance the relative privilege of others, even when they often have large blind spots in how their work might actually disenfranchise those they seek to assist. In his discussion

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<sup>78</sup> Anonymous, interview with the author, June 24, 2014.

<sup>79</sup> David M. Smolin, “Of Orphans and Adoption, Parents and the Poor, Exploitation and Rescue: A Scriptural and Theological Critique of the Evangelical Christian Adoption and Orphan Care Movement,” *Regent Journal of International Law* 8, no 2 (2012): 312.

of the term “white man’s burden,” Clay argues that the concept “shouldn’t be something we disparage.”<sup>80</sup> Rather than characterizing blackness as inferior or whiteness as superior, Clay frames whiteness as an unearned privilege that compels white Christians to remedy disparities. In Clay’s view, white skin and American citizenship does not make those in the movement blind to racism but rather affords them a pragmatic access to tools to remedy racism. And they find much to remedy, in and outside the United States, even in and outside of their own homes. Proponents of evangelical adoption are by and large patriotic but are often quite critical of the United States, and they frame transnational adoption as an ameliorating force for what ails the nation. In criticizing the nation, they criticize themselves.

These positions are explicitly stated and directly contradict the idea that evangelicals are simply jingoistic. Moore has argued that churches should not display the American flag in their sanctuaries.<sup>81</sup> Morton writes that, although he is a patriotic American, “as Christians we are citizens of the Kingdom of God first and foremost. Being an American is subordinate to that citizenship.”<sup>82</sup> Asked about whether God favors the United States, Morton replies, “I have heard that all my life growing up in evangelicalism. There is just one problem with it. The Bible doesn’t support a notion like that at all.” The idea that “America is a Christian nation,” Clay contends, has “never been true.”<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Clay, interview.

<sup>81</sup> Russell Moore, “Should a Church Display the American Flag?,” *Moore to the Point* July 3, 2014, accessed August 1, 2014, <http://www.russellmoore.com/2014/07/03/should-a-church-display-the-american-flag-2/>.

<sup>82</sup> Rick Morton, e-mail message to the author, April 20, 2014.

<sup>83</sup> Clay, interview.



This desire to remake the church, the nation, and the self through engagement with foreign orphans is a kind of enchanted internationalism, to use McAlister's term for the longing of US-based evangelicals to create "genuine religious community and even global solidarity" with people in the global South.<sup>84</sup> McAlister explains that the feeling is "a matter of quiet awe, joyful embrace, and presumptive affiliation" that is "not only or exactly an ideology, not only or exactly an emotion, but a combination of these"—indeed, "an orientation, a stance toward others and an expectation for the self."<sup>85</sup> She writes that "many US evangelicals idealize global South believers as being 'closer' to that longed-for numinous faith"—one that adoption theology authors see as compromised in the United States by racism and materialism.<sup>86</sup> The adoption movement repeatedly suggests that the United States is lacking in dimensions of real unity, divided by race and class in ways that are shameful—indeed, sinful. The movement, then, seeks to purify its own adherents through a process of affiliation with nations such as Haiti. It seeks to suffer with the poor rather than to eliminate the root causes of poverty. That it draws on asymmetrical power—its own privilege—to seek that communion is undeniable and yet does not undermine the earnestness with which the longing is felt.

Bennett's writing on ethnic diversity and adoption illustrates well the optimism inherent in enchanted internationalism in the evangelical adoption world. Bennett explains the reason that ethnic diversity is a laudable goal:

Missions and orphan care ministries should both result in ethnically diverse worship of God. A day is coming when prejudice, racism, ethnocentrism, and all

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<sup>84</sup> Melani McAlister, "What is Your Heart For?," 873.

<sup>85</sup> Melani McAlister, "What is Your Heart For?," 878.

<sup>86</sup> Melani McAlister, "What is Your Heart For?," 883.

other race-related sins are coming to an end, and the church will experience perfect unity as we submit ourselves completely to our head Jesus Christ.<sup>87</sup>

In Bennett's articulation, racial difference is shallow and will be replaced by a "common citizenship due to our rebirth" in Christ.<sup>88</sup> For Bennett and others, the transnational, transracial adoptive family models "the unity that Christ calls us to have."<sup>89</sup> One can hear the longing for a truly postracial, postnational unity that is nowhere near a geopolitical reality, as the suffering that the movement seeks to alleviate abroad clearly illustrates. "As we bring children into our homes from different ethnic backgrounds, our earthly family begins to resemble the eternal family of which we are a part," continues Bennett, clearly articulating what McAlister calls the "imagined pleasures...of borderlessness" that typifies enchanted internationalism.<sup>90</sup> The fantasy of the borderless family that lives in accordance with God's principles redefines the "good life" in ways that are deeply felt but (in the cases of transracial adoption, at least) also highly visible and embodied, humbly lived and yet divinely sanctioned. It is tangible and symbolic. It "effectively identifies the invisible realm with the visible work of Christians."<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Bennett, 93.

<sup>88</sup> Bennett, 94

<sup>89</sup> Bennett, 95.

<sup>90</sup> Melani McAlister, "The Global Conscience of American Evangelicalism: Internationalism and Social Concern in the 1970s and Beyond," lecture, Saint Louis University, April 8, 2014. This view is, of course, nonetheless deeply problematic, because as Joyce points out, it involves the church "addressing its own racism most prominently not by talking to black adults, who may have endured the effects of the church's institutional bias, or by making its congregations more appealing to people of color but instead by adopting children from other races and cultures." In this sense, the church encourages the formation of a new kind of person of color, through whom racial reconciliation can be formed—but ultimately as shaped by white people.

<sup>91</sup> Steven Wedgworth, "The Child Catchers: Rescue, Trafficking, and the New Gospel of Adoption," *The Calvinist International*, July 8, 2013, accessed June 25, 2014, <http://calvinistinternational.com/2013/07/08/the-child-catchers-rescue-trafficking-and-the-new-gospel-of-adoption/>.

Enchanted internationalism allows the adoption movement to experience this fantastic optimism without engaging in social or political reforms of the world. Indeed, in all the texts I analyze in this chapter, none speaks in any depth of the specific historical, social, economic, or political contexts in which children become orphaned. They may decry social sins such as premarital sex, drug or alcohol abuse or lament the spread of HIV/AIDS and human trafficking, but they do not engage in any debate as to why these behaviors might leave one population more vulnerable than the next.

Tellingly, Medefind lists orphans as the “most vulnerable” group of people in the world; he does not use racial, national, religious, or other typical markers of group identity to characterize the precariousness of life.<sup>92</sup> “Orphan” becomes a group unbounded by any traditional markers of identity politics. Accordingly, then, as Joyce points out, the adoption movement often “[leaps] from one country to the next,” so that “advocates lobby hard for the needs of children from a specific country, only to move swiftly to another nation when the hurdles of adopting from the first are too large.”<sup>93</sup> Thus the movement is profoundly mobile and adaptable but shallow in its knowledge of and engagement with the contexts in which children in any particular country become orphaned. In his sympathetic but critical analysis of evangelical adoption, Steven Wedgworth points out that its “theology greatly limits the socio-political imagination of its practitioners, keeping them from seeing alternative and perhaps more comprehensive

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<sup>92</sup> Jedd Medefind, quoted in Shane Morris, “Forget Not the Orphans,” *Break Point This Week*, October 31, 2014, <http://www.breakpoint.org/features-columns/discourse/entry/15/26335>.

<sup>93</sup> Joyce, *The Child Catchers*, 29.

options for caring for orphans and widows, as well as the impoverished across the globe.”<sup>94</sup>

Despite its enchanted internationalism, the movement continues to face social and geopolitical realities, such as the Silsby case and the criticism that resulted from it, that impinge upon its vision of pure and borderless unity that represents the kingdom of God. This core conflict is key to understanding the assumptions of the movement as it entered Haiti after the earthquake and to interpreting the changes that have come about as the movement has responded to these conflicts. Evangelicals in the orphan care movement are like others who, in the language of globalization, view borderlessness as liberating, but they have found that, as they face criticism for their handling of the earthquake, in their attempts to cross borders, the nation-state still matters. Race and culture still matter. Identity matters.

The movement has been responding to this growing understanding in its most recent publications. In his 2014 *KnowOrphans*, a follow-up to his earlier text, *Orphanology*, Morton reads Paul’s letter to the church in Colossians 3:11 to summarize this conflict:

Paul told the church that racial and ethnic differences are tertiary to matters of unity in the gospel. Is he saying that matters of race or culture aren’t real or significant? Goodness no! What he is saying is that racial and ethnic differences pale in comparison to the unity and reconciliation that we have in light of the reconciliation we have in Jesus. Should we acknowledge and respect differences of race and ethnicity? Yes, to some degree. Should those differences be of first importance in life? No, we enjoy a bond of brotherhood and sisterhood in Christ that is much closer and more significant.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Wedgeworth, np.

<sup>95</sup> Morton, *KnowOrphans*, 127.

As much as the movement seeks a radically egalitarian vision in which nations, wealth, and race do not separate humanity, enacting this vision on earth is only possible because of the privileges of nation, race, wealth, and religion granted to white American Christians. Nonetheless, Morton acknowledges that Americans have disproportionate power in the world yet disavows the notion that this fact means that God favors the United States.<sup>96</sup> Indeed, he emphasizes the need for the movement to empower local leaders to implement their own solutions and notes that efforts that have failed to engage local populations in this way have fallen short of expectations. As the movement found illustrated most starkly in Haiti but also in many other nations and fields where they operated, boundaries and borders do matter, even when, in their view, they *shouldn't* matter.

Adjusting to this reality has been one of the most important shifts in post-earthquake literature on the orphan care movement generally and efforts inside Haiti specifically. The publication of Joyce's *Child Catchers*, which opens with a recounting of the Silsby case, was by far the most prominent criticism of the movement. The book received attention in high-profile newspapers and magazines such as *The New York Times*, *The Nation*, and *Mother Jones* in particular compelled many evangelicals to respond. But scores of other articles about Silsby and the airlifts also appeared. Adoptee rights organizations online criticized the exploitation of the earthquake as a means of procuring more adoptable children.<sup>97</sup> Academics also contributed to a growing body of

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<sup>96</sup> Morton, e-mail message to the author, April 20, 2014.

<sup>97</sup> See, for example, Adoptees of Color Roundtable, "Haiti Statement," January 26, 2010, accessed March 12, 2015, <https://afaad.wordpress.com/2010/01/26/haiti-statement-by-adoptees-of-color-roundtable/>.

literature critical of transnational adoption.<sup>98</sup> Most importantly, orphan care advocates began their own conversations about the need for reform. Joyce concedes that although she has received a great deal of anger for her criticisms of the movement, she has also been pleasantly “surprised” by the thoughtful responses of many inside the movement.<sup>99</sup>

Morton writes that the movement has recently entered its adolescence, having learned from criticisms and experiences in the adoption field. As he responds to specific criticisms, it becomes clear that he is increasingly allowing space to accommodate borders—governments, racial differences, language barriers, religious differences—that are part of the real world, even as they ideally, at least in the movement’s perspective, ought not to exist in God’s. For instance, responding to the critique that the church is adopting children of color “as some sort of misguided plan for dealing with racism and racial reconciliation,” Morton acknowledges that “matters of race or culture” are both “real” and “significant” and that the church must therefore “chart a course that acknowledges that racial and cultural differences have some place in orphan and adoption ministry” even if “they are not nearly the first consideration for us.”<sup>100</sup> Morton here clearly understands a distinction between an evangelical view of the world in which “race and culture are of little importance to God” and the views of critics of the movement who “do not share our Lord, His gospel, or its transformative power.”

There are, then, differences between people of different religions, races, and ethnicities, Morton admits, in the real world. That *there should not be* is a biblical view,

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<sup>98</sup> See, for example, Shani M. King, “Owning Laura Silsby’s Shame: How the Haitian Child Trafficking Scheme Embodies the Western Disregard for the Integrity of Poor Families,” *Harvard Human Rights Journal* 25, no. 1 (2012), <http://scholarship.law.ufl.edu/facultypub/282>.

<sup>99</sup> Kathryn Joyce, interview with the author, April 21, 2014.

<sup>100</sup> Morton, e-mail message to the author, April 20, 2014.

one deeply held by evangelicals in the adoption movement. This passage reflects the optimism of a movement that has tried to live as if its god's reality were also the sociopolitical reality on Earth and has found that it is impossible to do so. In a tone markedly different from that of writers only a half decade earlier on the topic of sovereignty and governments, Morton notes respectfully, "Each nation you could potentially adopt from is a distinct, sovereign entity with a unique set of laws and process for adoptions by foreign nationals."<sup>101</sup> This change in tone is one that Morton considers plainly a part of "growing up."<sup>102</sup>

With this evolution come new focuses in the orphan care movement. Perhaps the most prevalent is the theme of "family preservation"—the idea that children should not become orphans only because of poverty. Jamie and Ali McMurtrie, the sisters who drove the Bresma orphanage airlift in concert with Ed Rendell, now run an organization called Haitian Families First, which "nurtures and empowers families in despair through emotional, social, and financial support, ensuring children remain with their biological families and out of unnecessary institutions."<sup>103</sup> Clay's Apparent Project sees its work in family preservation as primarily economic: by providing jobs for Haitian parents, the organization is "finding creative ways for Haitians to be self-employed so that they can take care of their own children with dignity and joy."<sup>104</sup> Bethany Christian Services' website states, "Bethany Global is committed to quality social services in Haiti that focus

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<sup>101</sup> Morton, *KnowOrphans*, 135.

<sup>102</sup> Morton, *KnowOrphans*, 19.

<sup>103</sup> Haitian Families First, no date, accessed January 3, 2015, <http://www.haitianfamiliesfirst.org/>.

<sup>104</sup> The Apparent Project, no date, accessed March 12, 2015, [www.apparentproject.org](http://www.apparentproject.org).

on Family Preservation and Alternative Family-based Care.”<sup>105</sup> The Christian Alliance for Orphans website includes an extensive list of organizations working toward family preservation around the world.<sup>106</sup> The movement increasingly also speaks about the importance of supporting local leaders in Haiti and other countries—including birth parents—to work on behalf of children. Many of the families who accuse Heather Elyse of adoption fraud are also working to ensure ethical adoption practices in the future. Other American families who never completed their adoptions are sponsoring the educations of the children in Haiti whom they had hoped to welcome into their families. Furthermore, the movement is increasingly focused on foster care, combatting HIV/AIDS and sexual trafficking (two crises that threaten stable family life), and keeping children out of institutions.

In her piece “How Shall We Care for Haiti’s Orphans?,” journalist Emily Brennan quotes several Haiti-based missionaries who have moved away from the orphanage model as a way of helping children.<sup>107</sup> For instance, Megan Boudreaux opened a Christian school in Haiti in 2011. “I believe that if a child could be raised by their mom, then they should be raised by their mom or dad or family,” she states. “It awakened me even more to the entitlement that Americans have when they come here.... Instead of trying to pull out random kids and give them a better education, why not work here in the country and change the education here?” Likewise, Brad Johnson of Mission of Hope

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<sup>105</sup> Bethany Global, no date, accessed January 3, 2015, <http://www.bethanyglobal.org/country/haiti>.

<sup>106</sup> *Christian Alliance for Orphans*, “Family Preservation,” no date, accessed January 3, 2015, <http://www.christianalliancefororphans.org/ministry-focus/family-preservation/>.

<sup>107</sup> Emily Brennan, “How Shall We Care for Haiti’s Orphans?,” *Religion and Politics*, January 8, 2013, accessed March 31, 2014, <http://religionandpolitics.org/2013/01/08/how-shall-we-care-for-haitis-orphans/>.



Haiti runs an orphanage that does not process international adoptions. He comments, “Everything we do is about empowering the Haitian people to lead their nation. That’s why we focus on education.” Brennan remarks that in her reporting from Haiti she “heard several times” from “evangelical Christian organizations” an “attempt to keep children within their culture and community.” Scott Vair’s World Orphans organization “started partnerships between American and Haitian churches. Instead of funding orphanages, the American counterparts give \$900 per month to Haitian churches to be divvied up among 20 families to cover the costs of their children’s schooling, lunches, and medical care.”

The earthquake in Haiti seemed, for a short while, to provide a kind of enchanted internationalist lens through which Christian values of the adoption movement could be manifested. It was an opportunity to draw closer to Christ by mobilizing existing beliefs in a field of sudden urgency. It offered a moment when the earthly and celestial worlds might mirror one another through Christian responses explicitly mandated in James 1:27. Adherents such as Tawnya Constantino and Laura Silsby apparently believed that they were doing work in this vein. Yet the resulting criticism and horror as parents learned that the children they hoped to adopt were not actually orphans revealed the limits of this enchantment, as the realities of racial, cultural, religious, linguistic, and legal barriers revealed the movement’s own situatedness in geopolitics. These experiences rattled the fantasy of the adoptive family as ultimate symbol of God’s kingdom. It revealed, in fact, that the relationship *was* a fantasy—or, at least, that it was a fantasy in the lived world rather than in God’s kingdom.

Yet embrace of new alternatives has not shaken the movement’s fundamental orientation toward government. New emphases on social issues that break families apart

threaten to push the movement in a direction that makes some evangelicals uncomfortable because it smacks of the “social gospel,” the idea that the church ought to address social problems of the contemporary world. Many evangelicals are troubled by the notion of prioritizing concerns of the world this way over those of their god. As a result, evangelical churches within the United States have tended for most of the twentieth century to view evangelism itself as the cure to social problems.

Indeed, writers of these adoption theology texts are careful to point out that they do not view their work as social gospel work; evangelism and worship are their priorities. Carr writes that, although he had softened some since, when he was younger, he was “especially contemptuous toward anyone who had fallen prey to the liberal ‘social gospel,’ the trend in Christian circles where people were passionate about meeting people’s physical and emotional needs while neglecting to share the gospel.”<sup>108</sup> Merida and Morton criticize “some Christians...[who] think of orphan ministry as ‘the social gospel,’ that is, the abandoning of evangelism in order to do social ministries for those in need.”<sup>109</sup> Bennett criticizes a view of evangelicalism that “shifts the focus of the church from proclaiming Christ to fighting social ills.”<sup>110</sup> Therefore Bennett frames adoption and orphan care as “worship, not social activism.” Yet adoption is a way to show care for the world, they argue, and in this sense, adoption theology is also powerful because it resolves a conflict within the evangelical church since the 1970s between those who prioritize evangelism alone and those who work urge a greater attention to social

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<sup>108</sup> Carr, 7.

<sup>109</sup> Merida and Morton, 59.

<sup>110</sup> Bennett, 40.

concerns.<sup>111</sup> As Clay notes, distinction between these camps is blurring more and more. He remarks upon a “new fire and intention,” especially among younger evangelicals, to do service on behalf of orphans as a matter of faithful adherence to scripture.<sup>112</sup>

The new emphasis on orphan care outside the adoption paradigm—through focus on family preservation, foster care, or issues that break up families—strains the adoptive sonship metaphor that is central to its theology. Rather than rely exclusively on the adoptive sonship metaphor, then, Johnny Carr, author of *Orphan Justice; How to Care for Orphans Beyond Adopting*, repeatedly contrasts *family* with *institutions* and stridently argues that “God made the family for children.”<sup>113</sup> He therefore prioritizes family reunification over the ongoing construction of orphanages, which “simply aren’t enough to nurture children as God intended.”<sup>114</sup> Carr exhorts Christians not to place their needs for worship over the real, material needs of existing families in poor nations.

The emphasis that Carr places on families as opposed to institutions represents a realignment of the orphan care movement. Without displacing the role of adoption, it also understands “family” not just as the white, American, evangelical family. It prioritizes the rights of poor men and women around the globe to parent their own children whenever possible. In Carr’s text, orphan care means that advocates fight HIV/AIDS, human trafficking (and the sex industry that often supports it, near and far), poverty, and racism.

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<sup>111</sup> For a detailed history of this rift, see David King, “The New Internationalists: World Vision and the Revival of American Evangelical Humanitarianism, 1950-2010,” *Religions* 3 (2012): 922-949.

<sup>112</sup> Clay, interview.

<sup>113</sup> Carr, 63.

<sup>114</sup> Carr, 66.

The flexibility on this theological tenet—the move from the adoptive sonship metaphor to a more generalized form of caring for orphans—is no small shift. Rick Warren has claimed that adoption should be the “first, second, and last” priority of churches, and it is difficult to make the “adoptive sonship” metaphor cleave as meaningfully to foster care, family preservation, or fighting HIV/AIDS.<sup>115</sup> Yet the movement is undoubtedly moving in this “bigger tent” direction, as Joyce also notes.<sup>116</sup> While not the only relevant factors, the earthquake in Haiti, the scramble to complete adoptions on the quick in its aftermath, and the arrest of Silsby’s group were critical moments of maturation for the movement that pushed them toward these new orientation and alignment with the world in need.

Within the movement, engagement with the world largely remains, however, not a matter of strategic, institutional, governmental, or political change but rather a matter of the heart. Clay is an exception; he notes that his goal is to influence policy about how workers in the adoption field in Haiti are trained to provide care for orphans—for instance, by requiring knowledge about transracial relationships and the psychology of attachment and effects of institutional care. He lauds many of the new adoption policies instituted in 2012 by Haitis Institut du Bien-Etre Sociale et de Recherches (IBESR), which have begun to regulate orphanages and limit the number of adoptable children to those living within state-authorized orphanages. Yet Clay notes that many in the movement are less enthusiastic about these specific reforms and stricter control by

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<sup>115</sup> Rick Warren, quoted in Frank Ligetvoet, “Is Adoption Good? Rick Warren Meets Kim Kardashian,” *The Huffington Post*, November 24, 2014, accessed January 3, 2015, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/frank-ligetvoet/is-adoption-good-rick-war\\_b\\_5877852.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/frank-ligetvoet/is-adoption-good-rick-war_b_5877852.html).

<sup>116</sup> Joyce, interview.

Haitian authorities.<sup>117</sup> This resistance aligns clearly with a distrust of government, which is so often figured in opposition to the family (“clearly the state and the government were not created to be parents,” said one mother<sup>118</sup>). Rather, evangelicals in the orphan care movement are seeking to change *themselves*.

The greatest emphasis on need for reform in the orphan care movement generally focuses not on policy such as has been developing in Haiti, but on changes of their own perspectives. Even Carr, who is perhaps the most progressive of the orphan care writers, frames his call for attention to racism, HIV/AIDS, and abortion issues as fundamentally questions of the heart. Carr writes movingly of adopting an African-American son after growing up in a culture in which he and others casually used the term “nigger.” Confronting his own racism was not only a necessity for Carr in order to raise his Chinese and African-American children; it was also a matter of ridding himself of “part of our sin nature.”<sup>119</sup> Discrediting colorblindness, Carr calls for white families to network with people of color and for white churches to partner with churches of color in meaningful exchange—a point missing in many earlier texts.

Despite this emphasis on attending to racism, he emphasizes, “It’s not only the government, pop culture, or gangs that need to change—it’s me and you. Confronting the racism in our own hearts is the first step to truly loving our neighbor and accepting orphans who don’t look or act just like us.”<sup>120</sup> Carr’s attitude here reflects what Joyce calls “a gift for self-reflection and self-criticism” among many evangelicals.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Clay, interview.

<sup>118</sup> Anonymous, interview with the author, June 26, 2014.

<sup>119</sup> Carr, 133.

<sup>120</sup> Carr, 143.

<sup>121</sup> Joyce, interview.

Nonetheless, it is one that denies the need to focus on government or politics; it is about changing individual hearts. There is no basis here for action in the political or institutional spheres, no understanding of the ways in which racism might operate “without racists,” to use Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s phrase.<sup>122</sup>

Similarly, Carr’s discussion of HIV/AIDS relates largely to the importance of removing the stigma associated with homosexuality from the disease. In his discussion of poverty, Carr calls for a change of attitude, as well: Christians need to stop calling the poor lazy or undeserving. He writes,

Poverty is not a social justice issue for governments to figure out. It is an invitation for each one of us to reach out in humble gratitude for how God has rescued us, not forgetting our own poverty and desperate need for Him. If we truly want to break the cycle of poverty and hopelessness, we must start with our own hearts.<sup>123</sup>

Although Carr offers suggestions for working with organizations that help the poor and sick, his primary orientation remains outside the realm of political, governmental, or institutional. Social justice remains a matter of the heart. Christians need to *feel*, not necessarily to make political social change. Indeed, it is ultimately within that most felt of spaces, the family, that social problems are resolved—thus the continued attractiveness of orphan theology to the evangelical world. That Carr repeatedly frames the family as the opposite of the institution underscores the importance of the private, affective way in which the heart—not the political—must be, in the evangelical view, responsible for the good of the world. Moreover, because the state continues to be framed as the opposite of the family, legal and political interventions are

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<sup>122</sup> Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006).

<sup>123</sup> Carr, 105.

not seen as the primary solutions necessary to make effective change—that is, unless they serve to facilitate the needs of families.

In this transformation of the movement, one of the most surprising facts is that it is willing to expand its core theological metaphor, adoptive sonship. Yet it is not willing to shift on the idea that institutions of government are always secondary to the place of the private family—that indeed, God sanctions the family over the government and that the government is often in the way of real progress. In this way, the movement’s least flexible notion—its apparently most unwavering assertion—differs little from the secular world of charitable fundraising that I describe in Chapter Three. Just as in telethon appeals, the appeal to the individual heart over the governmental infrastructure is of paramount importance, even more so than the key metaphor of adoption that has been at the center of its very theology.

A careful analysis of the orphan care movement’s evolution in Haiti demonstrates the ways in which the dismissal of government from the role of protecting vulnerable lives is reproduced in a movement that understands itself as operating without political or economic motive. The movement feels for and attempts to help those whom they perceive as most vulnerable, yet this very mode of intervention is itself a manifestation of neoliberal values, which are inseparable from heartfelt sentiment that goes so far as to welcome poor children into their families as kin. As the movement’s focus on reforming the United States and the church illustrates, ideas about the primacy of the heart, familial connections, and apolitical solutions are applicable not only to Haiti but also at home.

The orphan care movement expresses a set of values that appear to reject material wealth, one of the values of a capitalist society. Yet this emphasis on the heart allows for

no systemic critique that might distribute that wealth more equitably around the globe, maintaining families that are severed by poverty or its effects. By placing adoption at the very center of worship, the movement created circumstances for rampant abuse, conditions that the sentiment about family often obscured. As the movement shifted on its core theological tenet to work in ways that prioritized maintaining children's first families, it nonetheless did not shift its focus on the heart. In moving toward a greater focus on disciplining the role of the state, the movement recommits to the value of private solutions with minimal government interference, a stance that contributes to the inequalities between the United States and Haiti that it seeks to redress. In this sense, its internationalism continues to enchant that which oppresses: the neoliberal values that allow capitalist wealth to flourish and vulnerable families to suffer.

Although evangelical Christians often face harsh criticism for their America-first attitudes, the dominant attitude of the orphan care movement is not attempting to put the United States ahead of other nations—in fact, the intent is quite the opposite. It is not only the enchantment with foreign children and problems that propels this movement; it is also their *disenchantment* with the United States and its government as modes of solution. And while they have been able to critique and make changes to their own enchantment with the notion of a borderless, Christ-like kingdom on earth, they have not been able to become, by and large, convinced of any use for the United States government beyond its role as rubber stamp to its initiatives. In this sense, evangelicals are not much different from the memoirists toward whom I now turn in Chapter Five. These individuals, who represent a variety of backgrounds, likewise bring their good



intentions to bear on disaster zones in ways that nonetheless reproduce rather than redress the neoliberal values that create differential vulnerabilities around the world.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE KINDER FACE: “WARM, INTERESTING” WITNESSES AND THE THERAPEUTIC MEMOIR IN POST-DISASTER HAITI AND JAPAN

In Chapter Four, I described the orphan care movement’s priority on neoliberal values of the family and private solutions to global problems even over its own core theological tenets. In this chapter, I examine the ways in which individual memoirists who visited Haiti and Japan after their respective disasters also reiterate neoliberal values without any conscious ideological connection between them.

As a photographer and filmmaker, Gerard Thomas Straub realized that, although he had traveled to Haiti immediately after its catastrophic earthquake, he had no particular skills to put to use to help victims. “I was already feeling useless and unneeded,” he writes in his memoir of his visit.<sup>1</sup> “Everyone else was saving lives. I was filming.” Although he professes that he exhibited the “utmost sensitivity and sympathy” as he filmed, he soon “enraged” a medical doctor and his patient, who expelled him from the recovery room where he had been observing. Dejected, Straub reflects, “I questioned my reasons for being there. Was I helping the people of Haiti?”

In this chapter, I examine how witnesses’ accounts of their well-intentioned visits to these disaster zones reflected racial assessments of both nations. As in Chapter Two, I perform a comparative analysis of the discourses around race and culture in each nation

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<sup>1</sup> Gerard Thomas Straub, *Hidden in the Rubble: A Haitian Pilgrimage to Compassion and Resurrection* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2010): 67-68.

to suggest that in both cases the witnesses' stories manifest the same logic of neoliberalism that focuses on self-expression and individual identity and discourages state intervention on behalf of the disaster victims. While these assessments have more profound consequences for Haiti, as the more vulnerable nation, they also apply to Japan, which becomes more of a romanticized, aesthetic milieu than a real place requiring real reform, especially as it faces the ongoing threat of nuclear radiation.

Would Straub's presence in Haiti in and of itself contribute to meaningful change? In fact, studies of humanitarian accounts of suffering sometimes have emphasized the important role of witness testimony in creating support for intervention. Didier Fassin, for instance, writes that "the sympathy felt for the misfortune of one's neighbors generates the moral indignation that can prompt action to end it."<sup>2</sup> The dissemination of moving stories and images helps to build what Fassin calls "humanitarian reason"—a "morally driven, politically ambiguous, and deeply paradoxical strength of the weak."<sup>3</sup> This reason, in turn, legitimizes interventions from the state, from nongovernmental organizations, and from individuals. In fact, argues Fassin, testimony becomes viewed as equally important to aid itself. Likewise, in their study of the genre of memoir, Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith argue that since the 1980s, "life narratives have become one of the most potent vehicles for advancing human rights claims," and these narratives include not only those of the victims but also of the witnesses, who "[play] a central role in the formulation of new rights protections."<sup>4</sup> Yet,

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<sup>2</sup> Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012, trans. Rachel Gomme): 1.

<sup>3</sup> Fassin, xii.

<sup>4</sup> Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith. *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004): 1; Schaffer and Smith, 16.

in Straub's anecdote, the reader engages less with what Straub witnessed than with his feelings and discomfort. Straub's argument, if he makes one at all, points to no particular course of ameliorative action for the earthquake victims in Haiti or anywhere.

Straub's retelling of the ejection from the recovery room is atypical of the post-disaster narratives of American visitors to Haiti and Japan that I analyze in this chapter in that it confronts profound questions about the utility of witnessing and documenting the suffering of victims of natural disaster. The critical self-reflection at this moment is precisely the sort for which books such as David Rieff's *Bed for the Night:*

*Humanitarianism in Crisis* have called. "The moral test of being an onlooker at other people's tragedies," Rieff contends, "is one that few of us are likely to pass reliably."<sup>5</sup> Especially through photographs and film, it is not difficult to feel sympathy for victims, as Straub clearly does. Yet what does this sympathy achieve? Rieff asks, "Does having seen images of starving babies really allow people to come to any kind of informed view about whether there should be an airlift of food, or political engagement, or even a military intervention?"<sup>6</sup> In this case, can Straub's sensitive and sympathetic feelings translate into appropriate calls for action? It seems fairly clear to him and to the reader that, at that moment, they cannot.

However, the story quickly resolves this tension. Reeling, Straub collects himself and then encounters a doctor from St. Thomas who is also volunteering in Haiti. This second doctor relates a story about a friend of his, another medical professional who had

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<sup>5</sup> David Rieff, *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002): 3.

<sup>6</sup> Rieff, 34.

come to serve the Haitian people and had been disheartened that he could not better help the first two patients he encountered. Straub remembers,

After finishing the story, the doctor looked at me and said, ‘And that was my friend’s first hour in this hospital. He failed to revive a child and amputated the leg of an infant. Normal conventions don’t apply in post-earthquake Haiti. Don’t let being tossed out of the recovery room bother you.’<sup>7</sup>

Cheered, Straub moves on to continue his filming and writing. He drops his self-questioning and continues on to describe, sometimes in graphic detail, images of physical and material suffering. Beyond taking photographs and writing in his personal journal, it is unclear in the text what humanitarian or journalistic work Straub undertakes, and he does not reflect again on the voyeuristic nature of his stay.

This passage illustrates a stance similar to what David Kennedy describes in his *The Dark Sides of Virtue*, in which he writes, “Humanitarianism tempts us to hubris, to idolatry about our intentions and routines.”<sup>8</sup> In this case, Straub closes down his own interrogation of the meanings and purposes of his “watching” work. When he questions himself, he is reassured only by the observation that Haiti is so bad that he is free to relieve himself of the burdens of ethics that would apply in his own country. Straub, a filmmaker, seems to privilege the work of watching in the sense that Kennedy describes when he writes that humanitarians, himself included, tend to “enchant our tools, substitute work on our own institutions and promotion of our own professional expertise for work on the problems which gave rise to our humanitarian hopes.” Straub photographs Haiti because he is a photographer, not because Haiti needs photographers. He uses Haiti as a place of spiritual reflection because he is in need of spiritual reflection

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<sup>7</sup> Straub, 70.

<sup>8</sup> David Kennedy, *The Dark Sides of Virtue: Reassessing International Humanitarianism* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011): xviii.

and believes his readers are too, not because Haiti requires his spiritual reflections. Even Straub's explanation for his purpose in Haiti centers on his own needs. He wanted to go to Haiti because he "*felt this deep need* to be one with the suffering people of Haiti, to see their anguish, to feel their pain. I felt my being there in Haiti's darkest hour would help *me* connect more emotionally to their plight."<sup>9</sup>

In his quick and self-assured recovery, Straub's text manifests an attitude typical of the narratives I describe below, in which uncomfortable feelings that relate to suffering are acknowledged but quickly banished in favor of comforting self-reassurance and maintenance of the geopolitical status quo. Straub brushes aside concerns that might undercut his own authority and belonging in Haiti with an argument that Haiti is so fundamentally flawed that *any* action taken there with good intentions is morally justifiable. Thus, as Haiti becomes framed in terms of inevitable hopelessness, it becomes a therapeutic moral landscape through which one can work out personal problems, project his or her character, or feel connected to humanity in ways that often feel inaccessible within the United States. As Elizabeth V. Spelman has written in her summary of Hannah Arendt's *On Revolution*, "to present oneself as suffering with [victims] while not one of them" often serves as "crucial evidence of one's possessing virtue as well."<sup>10</sup> Because readers identify with Straub and the other narrators, they, too, by extension feel some measure of virtue in reading the accounts.

Moreover, the witnesses' very act of writing their stories participates in what Dean terms "communicative capitalism"—an ethic that combines "consumerism,

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<sup>9</sup> Straub, 50. Emphasis mine.

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth V. Spelman, *Fruits of Sorrow: Framing Our Attention to Suffering* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997): 64-65.

personalization, and therapeutization” to promote the process of creating messages that circulate in the wider society.<sup>11</sup> The point of messages in communicative capitalism is not, primarily, to be *understood* but rather to be “repeated, reproduced, forwarded” as it advances the notion “that anyone and everyone can participate, contribute, express themselves, and create” and discourages “recognizing the underlying inequalities inextricable from complex networks.”<sup>12</sup> Here Dean is writing primarily about interactions that occur via internet technology. Admittedly, the texts I analyze here are not virtual. However, Will and McMiller are self-published. Walsh, Straub, and Gengel include the texts of email and blogs in their books, all of which are published by small houses; these methods of publication make creation of books much more widely accessible than the market itself can support. With the exception of Gretel Ehrlich’s text on Japan, the Amazon.com sales rank of all of these books is abysmally low. Yet the point seems not so much to be who reads them as the process that the writing provides for the authors themselves to place themselves as spiritually fulfilled moral actors in a geopolitical world order dominated by neoliberal capitalism. These texts are more or less writing cures for problems largely created by the dynamics of that world order. Yet that they are shared publicly reasserts rather than ultimately critiques the system.

Accordingly, these accounts and the feelings they generate do not translate clearly into meaningful calls for political, economic, or social change or even pleas for intervention as Fassin or Schaffer and Smith suggest. Instead, they produce a kind of pity for the victims that in turn reproduces the differences between themselves and the victims

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<sup>11</sup> Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2009): 6.

<sup>12</sup> Dean, 27-28.

while suggesting that, ultimately, as neoliberalism ideology suggests, political intervention is unnecessary and unwise. By crafting stories of their own personal redemption, in which troubled places produce moral, therapeutic, and aesthetic meaning, the witnesses attend primarily to their own traumas that originate both prior to and after their arrival in the disaster zone and begin to process the scenes of massive devastation. The good feelings that come from these redemptions marginalize the sociopolitical contexts for suffering that would be the basis for meaningful structural change.

In this sense, these memoirs produce what Dana L. Cloud calls “rhetorics of therapy.” Cloud writes that this rhetoric seeks “to encourage identification with therapeutic values: individualism, familism, self-help, and self-absorption” in order to maintain the sociopolitical status quo under the terms of neoliberal capitalism.<sup>13</sup> The therapeutic is

a distinct rhetorical genre identifiable by linguistic markers: language of healing, consolation, and adaptation or adjustment. The most important rhetorical feature of the therapeutic is its tendency to encourage citizens to perceive political issues, conflicts, and inequities as personal failures subject to personal amelioration. Therapy offers consolation rather than compensation, individual adaptation rather than social change, and an experience of politics that is impoverished in its isolation from structural critique and collective actions.<sup>14</sup>

Writing about the uses of autobiography, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson contend that “*narrators take up models of identity that are culturally available*. And by adopting ready-made narrative templates to structure experiential history, they take up culturally

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<sup>13</sup> Dana L. Cloud, *Control and Consolation in American Culture and Politics: Rhetorics of Therapy* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, 1997): 2.

<sup>14</sup> Cloud, 3.



designated subjectivities.”<sup>15</sup> I argue, then, that the writers that I describe below apply therapeutic frameworks to their own narratives, ultimately marginalizing calls for meaningful change. As Cloud has demonstrated, narratives of therapy are indeed widely available in United States culture, in the form of self-help books, films, political rhetoric, popular music, and so on.

In their emphasis on the private individual, the narrators of these memoirs reify neoliberalism’s emphasis on “individuals as social agents” and “the complete privatization of social responsibility,” thereby presenting what Cloud has called “the kinder face of the neoliberal project.”<sup>16</sup> By telling the story of these places through their own voices rather than those of the victims, the writers of the accounts I detail below prioritize their own sensations, feelings, and thoughts over those of the victims with whom they purport to connect. This solipsism also denies those victims their own capacity to act as social agents of political change and suggests that moral resolution occurs when their own feelings are restored, their own identities affirmed, meaning created. The narrators’ own therapy, then, becomes been successful.

Part and parcel of therapeutic discourse in the case of Haiti—but not Japan—is the diagnosis of the native culture with its own self-defeating neuroses that have long damned Haiti to failure, as a place where squalor and disease are natural consequences of a *cultural* problem rather than the result of the geopolitics that continue to relegate Haiti to such conditions. Haitian history, then, becomes a tale of inevitable failure based in its

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<sup>15</sup> Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. Introduction. In Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, editors. *Getting a Life: Everyday Uses of Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996): 9. Emphasis in original.

<sup>16</sup> Cloud, 15; Cloud, 24; Dana L. Cloud, “Shock Therapy: Oprah Winfrey, Celebrity Philanthropy, and Disaster ‘Relief’ in Haiti,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* (2014): 13.

inherently ill-adapted culture. Haiti itself fails to achieve the goals of therapy as it fails to adapt to the neoliberal world order and, perhaps more importantly, demonstrates character flaws that require it to be treated as a lesser nation that requires supervision from the United States or other more “developed” nations. Japan, by contrast, is portrayed as keenly adapted, perhaps—as I suggested in Chapter Two—even better adapted than the United States, and the consumption of disaster in that nation thus can be portrayed in ways that are pleasurable and aesthetic while still doing nothing to address fundamental questions about life and death in a nuclear world. These diagnostic assessments of Haitian and Japanese culture on a therapeutic spectrum marginalize political, social, economic, or racial explanations for disaster or for change and thus support a conservative stance that discourages organized collective action that might make structural change.

In my attention to these stories, I contribute to the literature surrounding humanitarian sentiment an emphasis on private individuals rather than focusing, as many scholars have, on the more explicitly political logic of nongovernmental organizations. I have included all the first-person, book-length texts I was able to identify that involve individuals traveling to Haiti or Japan after their respective disasters to engage in any way with what had happened there. I excluded texts written by those who experienced the disasters firsthand because I felt that the physical and psychological trauma involved in experiencing a disaster of that magnitude would not be an appropriate object of my analysis of ideology. The texts represent a variety of authors and types of readership. The memoirs of Haiti, which are self-published or published with very small houses, are more numerous than those from Japan, presumably in part because of that nation’s

geographical proximity to the United States and its greater economic need. They are also less literary. The pieces about Haiti that I describe below are written by men and women who do not identify primarily as writers, whereas the story from Japan, *Facing the Wave: A Journey in the Wake of the Tsunami*, is written by an established and celebrated voice in the literary world: Gretel Ehrlich, best known for her writing about distinctive places such as Wyoming and Greenland. Even amongst the narratives from Haiti, the writers differ from one another in professional and personal backgrounds. Susan Magnuson Walsh is a Christian nurse with prior experience in Haiti. A man who calls himself only “Dr. Will” is a white Buddhist doctor who flies to Haiti without having been there before. Another story was co-written by a Massachusetts couple, Len and Cherylann Gengel, both Catholics, who lost their daughter, Britney, to the earthquake while she was volunteering there during her winter break from college. The couple undertakes a massive project in Haiti, with which they had no prior relationship, in her memory. Ronald James McMiller, Jr. is an African-American sailor who serves for 34 days in Haiti with the United States Navy. Gerard Thomas Straub is a filmmaker interested in poverty as an extension of his Catholic faith. But the commonality between these writers as well as Ehrlich, in Japan, is an emphasis on the personal, private, emotionally connected, therapeutic response to disaster that ultimately does little or nothing to challenge the status quo.

Although each writer expresses what I presume to be sincere desires to care for disaster victims, several of the Haitian memoir writers frame their trips to Haiti as a way to address their own losses or personal issues, as a form of therapy in the most literal sense. Dr. Will writes only vaguely of his “own situational pain that still awaited

resolution back home”<sup>17</sup> as he reflects on his time in Haiti, but he writes in more detail about his friend Jim, whom he recruits to volunteer with him. Jim was “an underemployed physician suffering from major depression” caused by “a recent divorce, loss of job, bankruptcy.”<sup>18</sup> Dr. Will writes pointedly of his friend, “I truly believed that a trip to Haiti where he could actually help others would turn his inward focus around, and help him see the world in a different light. It would be good therapy for him, and I mused, just might save his life as well.” For Straub, who describes himself as “just a lost soul, a simple pilgrim trying to find my way back home, back to God,” Haiti offers spiritual contemplation: “the anguish of Haiti pushes me deeper into prayer, deeper into the heart of God. Being in a situation of extreme suffering makes it easy to strip away all that is inessential or superficial. In Haiti my prayer life became more vibrant and real.”<sup>19</sup>

McMiller’s account frames serving in Haiti with the Joint Maritime Preposition Operation, for which he volunteered, as an opportunity to showcase his own positive characteristics, chiefly his leadership skills and pride in being a black naval officer. McMiller peppers his account with quotations about strength, character, and faith and points to his “core values when it comes to helping others.”<sup>20</sup> “I exercise leadership, and I take pride in being a good leader,” he writes in one of many passages that express pride in his work.<sup>21</sup> Yet his account of his actual activities in Haiti is perplexingly obscure. For instance, on his fifth day in the country, McMiller writes, “Today started off pretty good.

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<sup>17</sup> Dr. Will. *My Heart in Haiti: A Physician’s Experience After the Earthquake of 2010* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2010): 81.

<sup>18</sup> Will, 11.

<sup>19</sup> Straub, 43; Straub, 159-160.

<sup>20</sup> Ronald J. McMiller, Junior, *My 34 Day Memoir of Haiti: From Whence We Come* (Denver, Outskirts Press, 2013): 1.

<sup>21</sup> McMiller, 16.

I had some work to do and it was cool. I just have to remember to control my involvement with someone else's work. Overall today was a decent day.”<sup>22</sup> On his seventh day, he writes, “While waiting for the first craft to hit the beach I was there as the safety officer. My boss and his boss were there to make sure all measures had been covered. This was an exciting time for me because I trained those Beach Masters for times like this. They made me proud.”<sup>23</sup> Despite his professed excitement and pride, what the duties and measures that the sailors undertook here and in similar passages is vague at best. On the sixteenth day, he notes that he is “bored” in Haiti.<sup>24</sup> Nearly the entire exposition of this book takes place within the navy camp, describing in detail his food, entertainment, and fellow officers. None of these details connects to the suffering occurring around the base, and nowhere does McMiller note the disparities between his meals and entertainment options and those likely to be available to the Haitians whom he is there to serve. Nonetheless, as McMiller prepares to leave the country, he reflects, “The drive off the base gave me a chance to reflect on what we accomplished as a powerful force.”<sup>25</sup> Although McMiller surely must have accomplished more than he details in the book, the text emphasizes feeling good about himself and the navy rather than on the needs and people of Haiti.

Walsh, who begins her work in Haiti in 2006 and is the writer most informed about Haiti and its cultural and political background, writes that the loss of her son, Brad, to a car accident three years earlier motivated her to be involved in Haiti. Her son's death gave her and her husband “a new perspective on life and time” that were “why I wanted

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<sup>22</sup> McMiller, 11.

<sup>23</sup> McMiller, 14.

<sup>24</sup> McMiller, 27.

<sup>25</sup> McMiller, 68.

to go to Haiti.”<sup>26</sup> Likewise, Len and Cherylann Gengel use volunteer work in Haiti as a way to grieve their child. They explain, “We never could have anticipated that an earthquake in the Caribbean would have such an impact on our lives. In an instant, we lost our daughter, Britney, and with her the life we had known and built together as a family.”<sup>27</sup> The Gengels, motivated by their daughter’s last text message to them, in which she expressed a desire “to move here and start an orphanage myself,” built an orphanage in Haiti that they named “Be Like Brit,” in honor of their daughter. The couple concludes their story with a reflection on loss that also points to their own healing process:

Our family suffered a horrific loss, and the people of Haiti have suffered a great loss as well—beyond anything that most of us could imagine. Over the past two and a half years of building Be Like Brit, they have taught us how blessed our life really is.... We lost our child, and the children who will fill Brit’s orphanage have lost their parents, their families. Together we will enlarge the circle of our family, hold hands, and fill their hearts and ours with love.<sup>28</sup>

Although the Gengels clearly find some measure of solidarity in the common experience of loss, they neglect to acknowledge the relative privilege they have in their choice of how to mourn and memorialize their daughter. Len Gengel writes that they had grown accustomed to receiving “heartfelt condolences” from people in the United States who had heard of the loss of their daughter, yet when a Kreyol translator shares their story with a group of Haitians at the orphanage’s groundbreaking ceremony, he notices, “puzzled,” that the locals are strangely unmoved.<sup>29</sup> The translator “was telling these people some of the details of our gut-wrenching ordeal,” Gengel continues, but “they

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<sup>26</sup> Susan Magnuson Walsh. *Walking in Broken Shoes: A Nurse’s Story about Haiti and the Earthquake* (Larkspur, Colorado: Grace Acres Press, 2011): 8.

<sup>27</sup> Len and Cherylann Gengel (with Gary Brozek and Christine Belleris). *Heartache and Hope in Haiti: The Britney Gengel Story, Making Our Daughter’s Last Wish Come True* (Deerfield Beach, Florida: TriMark Press, Inc., 2013): 269.

<sup>28</sup> Gengel, 269-270.

<sup>29</sup> Gengel, 206-207.

essentially sat there stone-faced.” Gengel slowly realizes that the “people had no expression of emotion not because they felt nothing, but because they all had experienced the same tragedy. All of those people in the audience had suffered a loss, many of them far greater than mine.” This “pivotal” realization, however, does not lead Gengel to reflect on his own privilege or to draw from the insights of his fellow mourners; instead, it reaffirms for him that because he and the Haitians in the audience “had something in common,” what he was doing “was about returning something to these people who’d had their lives torn apart.” He does not acknowledge what they are giving him by being there.

The Gengels’ desire to help Haitians is secondary to their own mourning process. Their decision to build an orphanage is not a reflection of Haitian requests for help but rather their late daughter’s last wish. Indeed, prevailing sentiment in and outside of Haiti about the country’s most pressing needs argued against such an undertaking. As the *New York Times* reported on December 4, 2012, since the earthquake, “a consensus has developed among government officials, children’s advocates, religious leaders and others that a new approach is required, starting with a reduction in the number of orphanages.”<sup>30</sup> Indeed, the Gengels’ story ends with their orphanage largely empty as they attempt to locate children to populate it. Although they cursorily state their priority for helping “true orphans,” the very first child they meet has two living parents, and the second seems to come to them on ambiguous premises at best, relinquished by a woman claiming to be his aunt.<sup>31</sup> The Gengels conclude that it is not easy to verify these stories and take the child

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<sup>30</sup> Emily Brennan, “Trying to Close Orphanages Where Many Aren’t Orphans At All.” *New York Times*, December 4, 2012, accessed July 31, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/05/world/americas/campaign-in-haiti-to-close-orphanages.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/05/world/americas/campaign-in-haiti-to-close-orphanages.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).

<sup>31</sup> Gengel, 288.

gratefully without verification, separating him from an extended family who might have, if it were not for poverty, been able to care for him. The Gengels' work in memory of their daughter is well intentioned but ill informed—in no small part, one can conclude, because the “empathy” Gengel feels with the Haitian people is a feeling in his own heart rather than the result of real, sustained dialogue or relationship.<sup>32</sup> Nonetheless, Len Gengel writes, “I’ve never doubted that we were doing the right thing in choosing to construct and fund an orphanage in Haiti.”<sup>33</sup>

The Gengels' text, like most of the others, reflects a lack of engagement with the local victims of the earthquake. *Heartache and Hope* names only few Haitian characters; almost all either work for the couple or are children. Haitian characters are in short supply in the other texts as well. McMiller's account of his time in Haiti mentions few Haitian people by name. One exception is a baby named Kevin who resides at the New Life Children's Home, yet his commentary on that child is limited to “Wow, he's a cool baby.”<sup>34</sup> He mentions that the Haitian people to whom he spoke were “very happy to speak to me” after he witnessed a car accident, and he assumes, focusing on his own image rather than on the needs of those in the accident, that this welcome is because “they were proud to see someone of color in power.”<sup>35</sup> Dr. Will's text identifies several of his patients, primarily children, by name, yet their stories are almost always told in terms of their abject physical and medical needs. Although Will clearly feels affection for the children he treats, his descriptions of them reduce their humanity to that of bodies in pain; the reader experiences a voyeuristic horror as she or he reads about “Wesley

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<sup>32</sup> Gengel, 207.

<sup>33</sup> Gengel, 213.

<sup>34</sup> McMiller, 35.

<sup>35</sup> McMiller, 57.



Adams, age 12,” who “had open fractures; the bones had protruded through his skin when broken, and the act of rescue and splinting had pulled those bone fragments back beneath the skin” and “could die from infection at any moment.” At nine years old, Max Caleb had “a 4-inch chunk of skin missing behind his knee. The fat was glistening and serous fluid oozed into his soiled dressing.” Seven-year-old Rosemond’s damage to her leg was so severe that Will “nearly fainted.” These passages are just a few of the stark descriptions of the injuries Will details at length throughout his text.<sup>36</sup>

The absence of speaking Haitian characters is particularly surprising in Straub’s text, which is much longer, denser, and more focused on descriptions of Haitian suffering. Yet, other than his translator, Reginald, few of the Haitians in the book are named or described in detail. His descriptions of Haitians whom he meets barely distinguish one from the other, as all are depicted as desperate and without options: “I met a hungry mother and her week-old son, just clinging to life,” he writes in one example.<sup>37</sup> Another man with whom he shares a few meals is never named but is described as “articulate, well-educated, and clear-headed...but he had no clear options on how to change his situation.”<sup>38</sup> Other times, Straub quotes the stories or emails of aid workers who have interacted with Haitian people more directly. In particular, he relates the stories of Chicago nurses Tiffany Cupp and Anne Marie Colby, who connected more directly with patients they treated. Straub details their stories, including lengthy passages written by the nurses themselves. However, his including these stories emphasizes his respect for the nurses rather than understanding the needs of their patients. Of Colby,

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<sup>36</sup> Will, 45-47.

<sup>37</sup> Straub, 140.

<sup>38</sup> Straub, 140.

Straub writes “I am greatly impressed and inspired by her willingness to so mirror the self-emptying love that Christ calls us to practice.”<sup>39</sup> Of Cupp, Straub enthuses, “I think it is a wonderfully hopeful sign that a young person like Tiffany can make such a huge sacrifice and walk away from her life in order to give herself so fully to people in need.”<sup>40</sup> Thus even when he has a chance to include people who have more direct relationships with Haitian people, he focuses on the American kindness rather than the stories of those whom they serve.

The descriptions of Haitian adults in these texts depict them in terms that deny them the values of therapy that Cloud describes. They are not treated as individuals; they are not able to help themselves. If they have families at all, the families provide no protection or solace. The exclusion of Haitian adults from these texts reflects the priority of the therapeutic goals for the storytellers over the needs of the Haitian people, and this inversion of priorities has concrete effects on what happens in Haiti after the earthquake. By witnessing or participating in Haiti’s recovery—and, just as importantly, by documenting it in narrative form—these writers frame for themselves new identities as compassionate world citizens and shape or reshape their personal identities. However, the absence of Haitian voices allows the narrators to speak for and on behalf of the Haitian victims without their own interpretive frames being compromised. This distinction has important consequences for the reader. Schaffer and Smith argue that “empathic identification” is a “means to the reader’s own self-affirmation as an empowered agent, here an agent of social change and humanitarian betterment.”<sup>41</sup> Yet the empathy that the

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<sup>39</sup> Straub, 121.

<sup>40</sup> Straub, 93.

<sup>41</sup> Schaffer and Smith, 25.

reader feels is with the writers themselves rather than with the Haitian people, whose feelings and insights remain primarily objects of the narrators' imaginations. This displacement of empathic identification only reinforces the inequities between the victims and the comparatively wealthy Americans who witness and consume their experiences.

One of the primary ways in which readers are encouraged to identify with the writers rather than the victims is through an emphasis on the writers' physical and sensory experiences. This strategy allows the reader to experience vicariously the bodily experiences of the writers, a powerful way to link the sympathies of the readers to those of the writers. As Cloud has noted in her discussion of Oprah Winfrey's coverage of the Haitian earthquake, an emphasis on smell allows viewers, in Winfrey's case, but also readers, in the texts I examine here, "to inhabit a subjective, visceral response" that is the ultimate privatization of experience.<sup>42</sup> Winfrey's interviews of guests about their experiences in Haiti continually ask them to offer their own physical and emotional experiences in what Cloud calls a "continual invocation of the body and feelings as the loci of appropriate responses to the earthquake." Readers thus experience what it was like to be a visitor in Haiti at that time rather than to understand from a Haitian perspective what happened—or why or how. This inherently subjective, private interpretation of the event stands in, then, for deeper analysis or understanding.

Each book offers some of its most vivid writing when it describes sensory experiences related to filth and disgust. It is also noteworthy that many of the texts emphasize the indescribability of the experience, which underscores the degree to which the sensory experience was, in and of itself, traumatic. Will notes that, stepping off the

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<sup>42</sup> Cloud, "Shock Therapy," 49.

plane, his “senses were immediately aroused.”<sup>43</sup> Although Will contends that he lacks “the talent to describe the extent of what [he] saw,” he clearly prioritizes the telling, emphasizing “my reactions, my experiences, and their subsequent meaning to me.” He explains, “On top of the usual cacophony of [third-world] smells, the haze carried burnt flesh upon it, garbage rotting from abandoned piles, and human excrement piling up because sanitation systems were non-existent.” Walsh describes coughing and struggling to breathe as she and her companions took in the “putrid” scent of “thousands of decomposing and burning corpses in the streets and in mass graves.”<sup>44</sup> She writes, “Hot acid burned my esophagus... Shortly thereafter, we wiped our faces clean with the sleeves of our shirts, using the blend of moisture and salt from sweat beading and tears falling indistinguishably down our filthy faces.”<sup>45</sup> Len Gengel, heading to Haiti to recover the body of his daughter, reflects,

I’ve been in the building trades for a lot of years, so I’m used to the smell of raw sewage from pipes and septic tanks, but I’d never smelled anything like this—a savage mixture of human waste and the stomach-churning smell of decaying corpses. It was like this odor was a living thing, and it came up to you and wrapped itself around you and slithered up your nostrils and nasal passages.<sup>46</sup>

Sensitive to how terrible the images of Haiti would be for his wife and living children, Gengel decides to stop photographing. “It’s not like I shut my eyes and tried to deny that any of what I was seeing was real,” he explains, “but I didn’t see the point of capturing those digital images. If we say that we burn CDs or DVDs, then I don’t know what word to use for the searing sensation I felt in my eyes, my brain, my gut, and my heart.” The primacy of the sensory experience of Haiti is undeniable in these texts.

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<sup>43</sup> Will, 20-21.

<sup>44</sup> Walsh, 130.

<sup>45</sup> Walsh, 130.

<sup>46</sup> Gengel, 133-134.

As Cloud insists, these examples illustrate the centrality of the narrators themselves—not just their feelings, but also their bodies—in the telling of the stories by vividly recounting their overwhelming sensory experiences. More than that, though, these descriptions—and their indescribability—also illustrate the trauma that the writers experience *as witnesses*. They both seek and withdraw from these experiences, both needing to describe and feeling unable to do so. As the most senior sailor in his group, McMiller worries for the “psychological well being” of his team because none was “mentally or emotionally prepared for what we were about to see.”<sup>47</sup> Although many of the writers came to Haiti to work out some personal pain from their lives in the United States, the disaster impinges upon them a fresh trauma that will require a therapeutic response.

This fresh trauma also provides context for the retreat to personal and familiar comforts that is invoked in several of the texts; the restoration of American-style food, sanitation, and safety provides a kind of solace and comfort after the physical and psychological assaults on their minds and bodies. The Gengels, for instance, document their discomfort with the “abject poverty” and “violent acts” in Port-au-Prince.<sup>48</sup> They therefore choose to build their orphanage on a piece of land in Grand Goâve, outside the city in a location that isolates them from the hazards of everyday life—and people—in Haiti. Describing the site, they write, “It is peaceful and the views are breathtaking as you look above the poverty, and out over the bay.” When American visitors come to see their orphanage, they escort them away from the capitol, keeping them safe behind “the protective windows of the air-conditioned bus.” Later that evening, the guests dine at the

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<sup>47</sup> McMiller, 6.

<sup>48</sup> Gengel, 273-275.

orphanage on “a hearty dinner of American comfort food—macaroni and cheese, and lasagna—prepared by nine Haitian cooks.” On another visit, the couple writes about encountering a protest against a local mayor on their way to the orphanage compound. As their driver navigates around the scene and “we ascended the mountain” to the orphanage, the Haitian workers expressed excitement about their return, and their anxieties recede.<sup>49</sup> “We always feel like rock stars when we come back,” they write, “This was just what we needed to forget about the protest. We were once again glad that we had built where did, not only for the peace and tranquility but for the safety.” This feeling of discomfort and fear, resolved feeling “like rock stars,” exemplifies Cloud’s language of the therapeutic and closely mirrors Straub’s self-assurance in the anecdote that opens this chapter. Bad situations are resolved with their own comfort and positive feelings. Throughout the Gengels’ descriptions of Haiti, an emphasis on isolation and familiar comforts restores the sense of fear, horror, and unease they repeatedly experience in the country while also skirting encounters with the actual local political contexts in which they operate.

McMiller’s text focuses almost entirely on descriptions of his physical comfort, food, and entertainment. On one day in which he expressed excitement and pride in his work, he spends nearly as much of the page describing a good cup of coffee and the cleanliness of the bathrooms. On his tenth day, he interprets the movie *Friday* to entertain his shipmates. On his thirteenth day, he takes in a comedy show and eats “chicken pesto pasta with white meat and a chicken salad.”<sup>50</sup> On the 19<sup>th</sup> day, he details his meal of “red

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<sup>49</sup> Gengel, 285-286.

<sup>50</sup> McMiller, 23.

beans and rice with teriyaki chicken along with a huge Philly steak and cheese.”<sup>51</sup> On the 28<sup>th</sup> day, he details a visit to an Army breakfast that featured “turkey sausage, potatoes, scramble [sic] eggs with Texas Pete hot sauce.”<sup>52</sup> Two days later he enjoys “scrambled eggs with cheese, oatmeal, grape juice (cold).”<sup>53</sup> On his final night in Haiti, he enjoys a movie about Las Vegas, talks about television programs *The Unit*, *NCIS*, and *Miami Vice* and notes that “everybody enjoyed themselves.”<sup>54</sup> These familiar comforts seem to represent for McMiller solace from the devastation around him, and the fact that he spends *more* time documenting these kinds of details than the suffering itself suggests that his diary-like writing process was itself a form of recentering himself in familiar contexts on a daily basis.

Although readers identify with the physical experiences of the narrators and deny the interiority of Haitian characters, the narrators do portray the exterior, bodily suffering of the Haitian people in detail. However, these descriptions of horror are often framed in terms of American disbelief at the resilience of Haitian victims. Whereas the American writers suffer physically from simply witnessing the devastation, Haitians in these texts seem almost completely accustomed to dramatically more horrific misery, as if Haitians are inured to similar or worse assaults on their bodies. Their descriptions of bodies and bodily functions of the Haitian people tend to normalize and naturalize squalor and indignity in that nation. For instance, McMiller writes, “Their bodies have become adapted to bugs and other rodents....[T]hey have become accustomed to sleeping

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<sup>51</sup> McMiller, 35.

<sup>52</sup> McMiller, 56.

<sup>53</sup> McMiller, 61.

<sup>54</sup> McMiller, 63.

wherever they can lay their head [*sic*].”<sup>55</sup> Walsh writes of Haitian feet that suffer without proper shoes: “Worms, in the form of tiny ova that can survive in dirt, can easily enter the bloodstream through small fissures in the bottom or the sides of the feet. The small parasites an then travel through the bloodstream, grow in the lungs, and mature in the intestines.”<sup>56</sup> Will describes children bathing in a river where women washed clothes and “pigs and goats wallowed in the adjacent mud.”<sup>57</sup> Straub repeatedly describes people urinating and defecating in public and laments the disposal of bodies in trash bags. “Flies were buzzing around them,” he writes, “and the stench was truly repugnant.”<sup>58</sup> Although no writer celebrates these descriptions, each nonetheless conveys the vast disparities between what Haitian and American bodies can expect or endure in such a way that Haitian suffering becomes naturalized. Thus the descriptions of the writers’ own feelings of sensory assault, with which the reader presumably identifies, actually serve to portray the Haitians as fundamentally different—at home in disgust.

These descriptions of people accustomed to misery feed into the common suggestion that Haiti was *already* a desperate place, even before the earthquake—a sentiment repeated in most of the texts. In fact, the history that they provide, which is, with the exception of Walsh’s book, scant, often seeks to explain little more than the squalor itself. McMiller’s and the Gengels’ texts give no historical context for the disaster at all. But for Will and Straub in particular, Haitian history offers important explanatory power for the situations that they encounter. In recounting Haitian history as a way for contextualizing the disaster, Dr. Will begins with Columbus’ arrival in Hispaniola in

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<sup>55</sup> McMiller, 48.

<sup>56</sup> Walsh, 151.

<sup>57</sup> Will, 22.

<sup>58</sup> Straub, 75.



1492 and then quickly fast-forwards to 1697, when the island was divided into French and Spanish territory. He then writes, “The Spanish portion evolved into the Caribbean paradise of the Dominican Republic; the French portion spiraled down a long degrading road into the despair that had become Haiti.”<sup>59</sup> The next sentence of his history describes January 12, 2010, the day of the earthquake, collapsing more than three centuries of history into a story of inevitable horror, with no reasons given for the decline and no acknowledgement even of the triumph of Haitian independence from France. He argues that even if scientists could have predicted the earthquake in advance, “it would not have made any difference. The town of Port-Au-Prince was just another third world earthquake deathtrap from the get go.”<sup>60</sup> “If god exists, he has no love for Haiti,” Will notes.<sup>61</sup> A similar tone introduces Haiti in Straub’s book: “The earthquake was actually almost irrelevant to the real story. The real story was that Haiti was already a mind-boggling disaster long before the earthquake, but outside of a few dedicated relief agencies and individuals, no one noticed, no one cared.”<sup>62</sup> Straub quotes a missionary to Haiti who calls the country “as close to hell as you can get.”<sup>63</sup>

Only Walsh, who had maintained a sustained commitment to Haiti before the 2010 earthquake, understands Haitian history in a more nuanced light. Sympathetic to the government’s inability to accept all the offers for immediate help it received right after the earthquake, Walsh explains that devastation to the infrastructure at the airport, seaport, government offices, and elsewhere limited what was possible. Moreover, she

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<sup>59</sup> Will, 5.

<sup>60</sup> Will, 6.

<sup>61</sup> Will, 20.

<sup>62</sup> Straub, xviii.

<sup>63</sup> Straub, xiii.

adds, “It should be noted that Haiti fought hard for its independence from slavery 200 years ago, and that foreign countries, in both the distant and recent past, have not always had Haiti’s best interest in mind.”<sup>64</sup> Walsh therefore offers prayers for President Preval, whom she puts into historic and geopolitical context as a leader who had good reason to be skeptical of offers of help from other nations.

Straub’s text, however, is much more damning. Discrediting “an array of historical, social, and political reasons” that others give for the problems, Straub argues that Haiti’s suffering will continue because “no one really wants to end it or at least there is no collective will to end it.”<sup>65</sup> Therefore, he concludes, “the situation in Haiti is virtually hopeless. No amount of well-intentioned ‘projects’ is going to make a difference.” He also includes a passage from his own diary, in which he argues, “Haiti is an ugly place because wide-scale suffering is accepted and allowed to flourish.” Straub’s word choice here is particularly noteworthy. Although Straub apparently is exhorting his *readers* to care about Haiti, thereby including the United States in the “no one” who “really wants to end it,” his conclusion that nothing can be done to make a difference also suggests the ultimate futility of attempting change in a place he portrays as “postapocalyptic.”<sup>66</sup> His choice of the passive voice, which names no clear subject for the sentence, suggests that people inside and outside Haiti accept and allow “wide-scale suffering.” Moreover, the “no one” who cares includes, in his assessment, the Haitian people. He portrays the Haitians as morally compromised: “the more you help the poor of

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<sup>64</sup> Walsh, 113.

<sup>65</sup> Straub, xx-xxi.

<sup>66</sup> Straub, 18.

Cite Soleil,” he writes, “the more they want.”<sup>67</sup> Haiti, he contends, “is a dismal place teeming with anger and rage.”<sup>68</sup> He emphasizes that the “change that’s needed in Haiti...needs to emerge from the inside out. External change without an internal change is doomed to failure.”<sup>69</sup> The language here of “rage” and “internal change” clearly resembles the language of the ill-adapted therapy patient who is more or less beyond outside help.

McMiller echoes Straub’s dismal assessments of Haitian character by noting that foreign donations to Haiti are likely to taper off “because countries will not give it to a corrupt government.”<sup>70</sup> Suggesting an overreliance on foreign aid, McMiller notes, “The people don’t care about their own people because all the countries that gave food. Well, some of the locals would make the people buy a ticket to get the food that was given to them for free; that was wrong in so many fashions.” Here again, the suggestion seems to be that external support for Haiti is pointless without internal reform of the Haitian character, because the Haitian people themselves do not want meaningful change. In these understandings of Haitian history and psychology, Haiti’s true history and situatedness in geopolitics take a back seat to assessment of Haitian character. Haiti is portrayed as irresponsible, untrustworthy, and unreachable. Just as Cloud explains that the rhetoric of therapy “subverts potential opposition to the social order by blaming sufferers for their own sociopolitical victimization,” here Haiti as a nation is blamed for its own subordinate geopolitical position.<sup>71</sup> Application of the therapeutic discourse to a

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<sup>67</sup> Straub, 150.

<sup>68</sup> Straub, xx.

<sup>69</sup> Straub, 16.

<sup>70</sup> McMiller, 52.

<sup>71</sup> Cloud, *Control and Consolation*, 10.

nation rather than an individual is not surprising, given that, as Cloud documents, in the United States, “the government began to treat the nation itself as a ‘patient’ during World War II” and continued the practice well through the Cold War.<sup>72</sup> Philip Cushman eloquently explains the problem with this mode of characterization:

If we psychologize and medicalize every human action by ridding it of any significant political cause, we condemn ourselves to denying the effects of the macro structures of our society. Therefore we will leave those structures intact....If we cannot entertain the realistic possibility that political structures can be the cause of personal, psychological distress, then we cannot notice their impact, we cannot study them, we cannot face their consequences, we cannot mobilize to make structural changes, and we will have few ideas about what changes to make. We will become politically incompetent.<sup>73</sup>

This type of dismissal of political contexts occurs not only in the United States but also in its interpretations of other nations, like Haiti.

Even Walsh’s text, which does provide a more nuanced view of the political contexts of Haiti’s suffering, ultimately does not translate that understanding into a particularly clear call for change. Hers remains a narrative of personal feeling—a “nurse’s story.” That Walsh does indeed include some accurate analysis of the sociopolitical does not disqualify her text from the rhetoric of therapy; as Cloud notes, therapy is a “strategic rhetoric in capitalist society that grants hearing to complaints and even admits they have their origins in sociopolitical arrangements” and then ultimately marginalizes them.<sup>74</sup> In Walsh’s case, although she includes some political analysis, she ends her story with a call for empathy and unity—not for a slate of specific political or economic changes. Using the metaphor of “walking in another’s shoes,” she encourages

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<sup>72</sup> Cloud, *Control and Consolation*, 48.

<sup>73</sup> Philip Cushman, *Constructing the Self, Constructing America: A Cultural History of Psychotherapy* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1995): 337.

<sup>74</sup> Cloud, *Control and Consolation*, 32.

readers to *feel* as the primary mode of response. Walsh explains that she gives away her shoes on the last day of her visit—her custom when she leaves Haiti. “Giving away our shoes feels like offering up a piece of ourselves, which can hug, support, and bring comfort to the soles of our Haitian friends, as we also remember the souls of each. This is just a little way we can continue to walk with them, even as we leave.”<sup>75</sup> It is a touching sentiment and a kind gesture, to be sure—but its ultimate priority is feeling with, not advocating for. The gesture brings solace to the writer and allows her to end her story on a redemptive note.

In these texts, the writers embrace neoliberal principles in that they foreground the primacy of the individual or reaffirm essential inequalities between the United States and Haiti. However, perhaps counterintuitively, they also affirm neoliberalism in their condemnation of excessive greed in the United States. For instance, Will writes repeatedly of the affluence of the United States and the ways in which such affluence inures Americans to compassion for those who suffer in Haiti. In one passage, he writes, “My guilt at living in the affluent world of America, the land of plenty despite our economic crisis, surfaced and made me truly uncomfortable. This world was not fair.”<sup>76</sup> Straub writes about Americans’ “reckless pursuit of comfort and extravagance” in a nation “organized around one goal: to constantly increase production and consumption” in a way that destroys families and turns citizens into “individuals in a market.”<sup>77</sup> Comments such as these seem to indict American capitalism, arguing for the arrogance and greed of its system.

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<sup>75</sup> Walsh, 152.

<sup>76</sup> Will, 30.

<sup>77</sup> Straub, 29.

Yet Dean offers a read of spiritual fulfillment in capitalism that helps to make sense of this seeming contradiction. One of the fantasies of free trade in neoliberalism, she argues, is that free trade will provide adequately for the needs of individuals within its system—that it will be enjoyable and fulfilling. When individuals find that free trade is not enjoyable, she contends, then the assumption is that the trade was not truly fair—the exact language that Will uses—*not* that the market itself is fallible. Dean writes, “Neoliberal ideology’s fantasy of free trade...accounts for the lack of...enjoyment in terms of excess, that is, as the sacrifice or expenditure of ‘too much.’”<sup>78</sup> The person who seems to “have it all” and yet remain unhappy—as the writers depict Americans in comparison to Haitians—is someone who fails, in Dean’s theory, to “realize that capitalism necessarily generates a surplus and so he can’t realize, make real in his own life, a limit to his desire.”<sup>79</sup> Therefore, she says, a number of cultural characters from Ebenezer Scrooge to Gordon Gekko serve as morality tales warning us “not to be *too* absorbed, *too* captivated, by the delights of the free market.” She continues, “The free-marketeer who sells himself, who sells out, who sells it all, overidentifies with neoliberal ideology, eliminating the place of the warm, interesting person that the system is supposed to serve, whose needs the system is supposed to meet.” These are the kinds of Americans that the authors critique for lacking compassion.

Thus the critiques of American materialism, when combined with the therapeutic stories of personal redemption that restore their writers to their statuses as “warm, interesting” people, illustrate that demonstrating compassion for Haiti is used as a corrective to American overidentification with neoliberal capitalism that threatens to

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<sup>78</sup> Dean, 59.

<sup>79</sup> Dean, 61-62.

make Americans into ungrateful and overzealous materialists. But in so doing, it does not dismantle the system of free trade but rather makes writers and readers alike feel better about themselves as they operate within it.

And thus suffering is redemptive. But it is redemptive only for those who witness, feel, and document it—which is to say, those who do not really suffer in the neoliberal world order, those who see “themselves as autonomous and free, possessed of such inherent human rights as property, privacy, and the right to manage their own affairs.”<sup>80</sup> Yet those people, as Cloud notes, are contrasted in global capitalism to “another set of subjects who worked for wages in squalid conditions, obliged to produce goods on a scale never before imagined”—or, we might say, most Haitians. Witnessing and describing suffering—feeling it—allows individuals to right their relationships to the market by making themselves better people and making *meaning* or *use* out of poverty and suffering that is portrayed as truly beyond meaningful redress. Both aims affirm neoliberalism and its structural inequalities. Thus suffering ultimately redeems rather than critiques neoliberal capitalism.

On its surface, Gretel Ehrlich’s widely read *Facing the Wave* would seem to have little in common with the narratives from Haiti except that it was penned by an American who traveled to a foreign disaster zone shortly after the crisis. Ehrlich, unlike the Haiti writers, is a celebrated author of creative nonfiction, and the book was nominated for a National Book Award in 2013 and won the PEN Center USA’s 2014 award for creative nonfiction. Furthermore, her book introduces many Japanese characters and speaks extensively about their experiences while including few details from her own biography.

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<sup>80</sup> Cloud, 24.

She gives no particular reason for her trip to Japan, therapeutic or otherwise, except that she had long studied Buddhism, noh theatre, and Japanese poetry. In an interview, Ehrlich explained that she “just had to go” to Japan because of her “inexplicable link to” the country.<sup>81</sup> In another interview she called herself “inexplicably drawn to all things Asian,” displaying little knowledge, apparently, of the differences between various Asian cultures and people.<sup>82</sup> Her reasons for going to Japan, then, are primarily aesthetic and artistically expressive. Her purpose, it seems, is to make art and reflect on her Buddhist beliefs. In one rare display of self-conscious candor, she describes a sleepless night in Sendai. Pointing to the purposelessness of her trip, she writes to her “lover, a former war correspondent, and ask him if I’ve been so thoroughly radiated here by nuclear fallout that I’ve gravely endangered my health and our happiness together. Have I acted rashly for no reason?”<sup>83</sup> Like Straub’s, Ehrlich’s mission is vague.

During her stay in Japan, Ehrlich travels with various guides and their families through the Tohoku region, compiling a text that is organized only loosely chronologically, beginning in June, 2011. It includes short poems, excerpts from blogs written by others, journalistic accounts of the nuclear crisis, and several stories of the victims. Like Straub in Haiti, Ehrlich does not undertake any particular work, humanitarian or otherwise, but rather spends her time watching, writing, and reflecting on

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<sup>81</sup> Pacifica Network, “Ruth Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being* and Gretel Ehrlich, *Facing the Wave*,” *Writer’s Voice*, June 12, 2013, accessed December 1, 2014, [soundcloud.com/pacificanetwork/writers-voice-ruth-ozeki-a](http://soundcloud.com/pacificanetwork/writers-voice-ruth-ozeki-a).

<sup>82</sup> Quoted in Elizabeth Floyd Mair, “In the Aftermath of Disaster,” *Albany Times Union*, March 8, 2013, accessed December 1, 2014, <http://www.timesunion.com/living/article/In-the-aftermath-of-disaster-4337367.php#ixzz2NEzkG6or>.

<sup>83</sup> Gretel Ehrlich. *Facing the Wave: A Journey in the Wake of the Tsunami* (New York: Vintage, 2013).



the deeper meanings of suffering. Although the book is written in the first person, Ehrlich often seems strangely peripheral to her own tales; she never formally introduces herself or her purpose for being in Japan or how she comes to know her guides, and she focuses primarily on the stories of other people. In this sense, she might seem to diverge from the writing style of the memoirs about Haiti.

Yet it is the style of Ehrlich's writing, rather than the narrative, that keeps her the center of the story even as she writes about other people. Although critics and most readers reviewed the book warmly, some readers have complained that the author's highly lyrical style has distracted from their understanding of the narrative. For instance, "Laura" on the website Goodreads notes, "the author appeared to use a private language and deeply personal imagery (so deeply personal that it meant nothing to me as the reader)."<sup>84</sup> On Amazon.com, one reviewer wrote, "This book seems to be more about the author. She seems to easily go into lengthy talk about how SHE feels about certain experiences surrounding these events rather than how the survivors have gotten thru their ordeals [*sic*]. I almost wanted her to just get out of the way of the people she was covering so we could hear THEIR story and not how she felt about it."<sup>85</sup> Another concludes,

Ehrlich makes the mistake of writing this book about her own journey, instead of putting the focus on the tsunami survivors where it belongs. Her observations are pretty cliché, and her writing overwrought and trite. The whole thing feels rather exploitative, as if Ehrlich were writing to make herself look profound rather than

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<sup>84</sup> "Laura," comment on "Facing the Wave: A Journey in the Wake of the Tsunami, by Gretel Ehrlich,": January 9, 2014, accessed March 12, 2015, <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/15792477-facing-the-wave>.

<sup>85</sup> "BookLoverAzleTexas," "Customer Review: "It Was Not What I Was Expecting At All," April 10, 2014, accessed March 12, 2015, <http://www.amazon.com/review/R11KKFM6HJF24Z/#R11KKFM6HJF24Z>.

to give voice to these victims. She's well-meaning, but I couldn't help thinking the book an exercise in vanity.<sup>86</sup>

These comments from readers are among the only critiques I was able to find amidst virtually unanimous critical praise for this book, which seem almost reflexively to trust the beauty of Ehrlich's prose. No critics that I have discovered have questioned whether Ehrlich's desire to make something beautiful of the disaster might have distorted her reportage. It is telling that these negative reviews come from people who are apparently outside the literary community, whose priority seems to be on understanding the disaster rather than on artistic expression.

Indeed, every one of its sentences teems with highly stylized lyrical language—the point of the book is, it seems clear, the evocation of this very language. Ehrlich describes an aftershock, for instance, like this: “From under a thin futon on tatami that no longer smells like grass, I hear the rattle of shoji screens until a seismic wave carries the house forward and upward in a hard jolt—a slice of contained chaos—and drops it again, down the fact of a geologic wave to Earth's uncertain crust.”<sup>87</sup> She describes water: “After being displaced at the rupture site it becomes a moving mass whose fluidity is like something solid. Yet it slips and slides, shoves and gathers. It splits the ends of things, fills and empties them, and carves new spaces that are blunt, tipping, and as sharp as knives.”<sup>88</sup> A rainfall “comes hard and morning light is washed black as if the tsunami's

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<sup>86</sup> “Ellen W. ‘Avid Reader’,” “Customer Review: Well-Meaning but Ultimately Self-Serving,” March 14, 2014, accessed March 12, 2015, [http://www.amazon.com/Facing-Wave-Journey-Wake-Tsunami/product-reviews/0307949273/ref=dpx\\_acr\\_txt?showViewpoints=1#reviews-container?sortBy=helpful&reviewerType=all\\_reviews&formatType=all\\_formats&filterByStar=two\\_star](http://www.amazon.com/Facing-Wave-Journey-Wake-Tsunami/product-reviews/0307949273/ref=dpx_acr_txt?showViewpoints=1#reviews-container?sortBy=helpful&reviewerType=all_reviews&formatType=all_formats&filterByStar=two_star).

<sup>87</sup> Ehrlich, 9.

<sup>88</sup> Ehrlich, 34.

shadow-wave had inked the air and gone back to scrape darkness from stone.”<sup>89</sup> The book’s primary value is in its lyrical virtuosity rather than its illumination of the material situation in Japan in 2011.

Although her writing is infinitely more self-conscious and literary than that of her counterparts writing from Haiti, Ehrlich, like them, also stresses her own sensory horrors: “Don’t breathe. Don’t swallow. Stay covered. Knee boots, gloves, face masks on.”<sup>90</sup> She continues,

I see aqueous corruption: the ruined, broken, bloated; the sickening to-and-fro of corpse-thickened water, and ghost-thickened air. An odd smell pervades—one that is hard to pin down. It is decomposing plants, fish, and flesh, and the mineral smell of bodies being burned; but the radiation that moves through flesh has no scent at all.

The indulgently descriptive exposition not only in these passages but throughout the book draws attention to the mind of the author, to her subtle insights and fluency with language. In this sense, we can see that Ehrlich, who noted in one interview that the disaster provided “vividness and juiciness” to the images around her, remains at the center of her report from Japan.<sup>91</sup> She has come to Japan to create art, to use her particular gifts with language to find aesthetic meaning in the disaster. Japan, then, provides a vibrant setting for a book, like others she had penned. Although her position in the narrative is not central, her voice predominates, even as she claims in the same interview that she “wanted to have more sustained conversations with people.”

As desperate as she is to connect with people to interview and document in the text, Ehrlich does sometimes prioritize her own desire to pursue aesthetic meaning over

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<sup>89</sup> Ehrlich, 61.

<sup>90</sup> Ehrlich, 18.

<sup>91</sup> Pacifica Network, np.

the pain of the people whom she visits. For instance, her guide Masumi, clearly traumatized by the disaster, is convinced that there is a ghost on her body. In one particularly upsetting moment, Ehrlich writes, “I try to calm her but she becomes more fitful, holding her head and yelling: ‘I don’t want to be in these places. I don’t want to do this work for you!’”<sup>92</sup> Ehrlich nevertheless pushes her to continue on: “I tell Masumi I want to see Kannonji, the temple behind Ookawa Elementary School that was washed away. She says she can’t do it and I ask her to be brave and please drive.”<sup>93</sup> Terrified, Masumi drives recklessly to the remains of the temple and lets her passenger out, locking the doors of the car behind her. While Masumi waits in the car, still scared, Ehrlich explores the grounds alone to muse about “the temple’s nonexistence, its incensed air, its secret font, its shadowed recess” and so on. Ehrlich gives no indication that her desire to reflect poetically and spiritually on the lost temple might be injurious to the spiritual well-being of the woman on whom she relies for translation and transportation. This passage is especially striking in its contrast to her comments in an interview, in which she stated that Japan after the earthquake provide a place “in which compassion can arise” and claimed that “the impact on [Masumi’s family] kind of transferred to me” to the extent that she “felt it along with them.”<sup>94</sup>

Thus Ehrlich clearly prioritizes her own impressions and interpretations even though she includes the voices of Japanese characters in her book. In this way she is like the writers in Haiti. Her treatment of Japanese people in the text, likewise, is also reminiscent of the Haitian memoirs in that it seems to fit the characters into familiar

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<sup>92</sup> Ehrlich, 136.

<sup>93</sup> Ehrlich, 137.

<sup>94</sup> Pacifica Network, np.

cultural stereotypes. Ehrlich's Japanese characters all seem to embody "Japanese culture," defined in very traditional terms. For instance, all of her interviewees are employed in pre-modern professions: they are fishermen, rice farmers, Buddhist and Shinto priests, a geisha, a shaman. She emphasizes as well their traditional cultural practices and beliefs. Of one farmer, she reports,

He tells me how once the houses stood close together with a narrow, flower-strewn path between, how sounds of the *shakuhachi* haunted moon-viewing nights. Garden plots had onions, cabbage, and daikon that shook green into the air. In winter, farmers sang *jinku*—old-fashioned songs. No one was rich but fish, fresh water, flowers, fruit, and food were abundant.<sup>95</sup>

Here again, it is quite obvious that the language—the heavy alliteration in the last sentence, the poetic turns of phrase such as “shook green into the air”—are the embellishments of the author, as they are completely in line with the tone of the rest of the book, rather than the expressions of the man who apparently relates his story to her, presumably in Japanese, a language she does not speak. Her voice overpowers the man's as she paints Japan before the earthquake and tsunami as a traditional, rustic, good place. Even the author's continued mention of Masumi's fear of ghosts seems to ensure that the reader understand Masumi's connection to traditional religious beliefs. In Ehrlich's Japan, contemporary popular culture—a major cultural export of that nation—is all but banished from description. Moreover, the focus on farmers and priests suggests a rural setting, even though Sendai, one city where she stays, is home to more than a million people. Another city that she documents, Ishinomaki, is home to more than 160,000. There is little sense in Ehrlich's book that Japan exists in the modern, developed world.

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<sup>95</sup> Ehrlich, 122.

There is, however, one major exception to this characterization. Ehrlich uses poetic language to describe Japan in anti-modern terms, but she also appropriates a contrasting technical language of science to emphasize the distinction between that world and the nuclear crisis at Fukushima that threatens to obliterate it. In language very often directly lifted from internet websites and news articles without attribution, Ehrlich describes the mounting nuclear crisis in technical sentences such as “35,800 terabecquerels of cesium-137 were emitted during the disaster, not 15,000 terabecquerels as Japan’s nuclear regulator announced” or “The Institute of Radiological Protection and Nuclear Safety in France estimated that between March and mid-July, 27.1 petabecquerels of cesium-137 leaked into the Pacific Ocean.”<sup>96</sup> Although these sentences are not written beautifully, in Ehrlich’s typical prose, the style here matters. It is a technical, futuristic, official language that paints a dystopian vision of Japan as a nuclear power that threatens to obliterate its rustic country and traditional people. It is also noteworthy that Ehrlich directly copies many of these phrases from internet news articles published in October of 2011. This suggests that her journey in Japan was not, in fact, focused on journalistic reporting as some reviewers have suggested. This fact reinforces the sense that Ehrlich was there mostly for the creation of aesthetic meaning. None of her interviews is with anyone associated with the nuclear disaster.

Ehrlich invokes many times the terror of this nuclear disaster—including her own fear that she is being irradiated. For instance, she writes, “Older couples from Fukushima Prefecture are taking the train to Yamagata to get away from the radiation, but once there,

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<sup>96</sup> Ehrlich, 196.

commit suicide because they can't stand to be away from their old neighborhoods.”<sup>97</sup> Elsewhere she describes the effects of radiation on soil and on pets left behind in Fukushima or worries over ingesting radiation through food. Throughout the text, radiation is the silent backdrop that haunts the already devastating scenes of destruction and personal loss, a featureless presence that is made more frightening for its silence and seems more devastating because Japan is characterized in such simple, agrarian, traditional terms.

Ehrlich's aesthetic sensibility interferes with any possible political interpretation of her experiences in Japan, also foreclosing, like writers in Haiti do, geopolitical solutions. In a key passage early in the text, Ehrlich describes the “aesthetic ideal in old Japan” as one of “perishability and desolation—*sabireru*.”<sup>98</sup> She continues, “Simplicity led to a sense of beauty measured out in transience and absences, not a machined regularity.” This passage is important because she clearly condemns the “machined regularity” of the modern world—in part by banishing it from descriptions of Japan in general but even more importantly by reminding us of the ever-present risk of nuclear power. Yet this threat increases perishability, even on top of the already demolished spaces where the tsunami hit; perhaps no threat to modern life is more potentially devastating than the nuclear one. And yet perishability is, in her own terms, an *ideal*. Thus in Ehrlich's iteration of the Japanese aesthetic, the nuclear threat actually heightens the aesthetic context for suffering by silently but continuously threatening further “perishability and desolation,” which, in turn, is generative of art and creative meaning-making.

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<sup>97</sup> Ehrlich, 176.

<sup>98</sup> Ehrlich, 39.

In this way, Ehrlich's artistic creations are themselves therapeutic. She performs this therapeutic intervention on her own personal level, soothing herself—recall that she expresses fear about irradiating herself—as she turns chaos into art. But she also provides readers with an aesthetic meditation on nuclear destruction, wresting from the language of the hypermodern and hyperscientific a poetic feeling that makes her and most of her readers feel refined, thoughtful, and mournful—but not particularly resolved toward any kind of action. Although Ehrlich clearly is not trying to promote nuclear power here *per se* (rather, quite the opposite), her use of its threat as a heightened aesthetic context is very hard to read in any useful way for making change. It is especially difficult given that her argument against nuclear power is that it threatens a premodern kind of life in Japan—the Japan of geisha and shamans—that is already primarily a construct of the Western imagination and no longer, if it ever was, the lived reality of most Japanese people.

Indeed, this aesthetic-therapeutic resolution relies entirely on an image of Japan and Japanese people that paints them in classically Orientalist terms, unlike those in the West. They are stoic, traditional, familial, and superstitious. Suffering, it seems, is in their cultural DNA. Citing a “list of Japan’s seismic events” that “dates back to the year 684,” Ehrlich argues that earthquakes have had a profound imprint on “Japanese ideas about religion, architecture, theater, and literature”—primarily through “concepts of plentitude and uncertainty, of togetherness framed by impermanence.”<sup>99</sup> Indeed, throughout the text, Ehrlich includes examples of strong and traditional familial bonds—for instance, Masumi refuses to remove some of the items salvaged from her grandmother’s home because she

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<sup>99</sup> Ehrlich, 12.



is not next in line to inherit them. Employing the terms of the well-adjusted therapeutic, Ehrlich praises the “[c]ourage and self-discipline” of “this deeply traditional culture.”<sup>100</sup> Although she admits in this passage that “confusion” and “nightmarish fear” infect life in Tohoku after the earthquake and tsunami, she praises “an ability to accept ‘what is’ without sentimentality, even as the government persists with its numbing denials.” Moreover, the United States’ own role in introducing the nuclear age—nowhere more devastatingly than in Japan—is only obliquely addressed, as if the nuclear age had no clear historic or political context. Ehrlich’s description of the Japanese character relegates those questions to the periphery because the Japanese themselves, she suggests, do not ask such questions. Musing about Japanese culture with another travel writer, Pico Iyer, she reflects, “We agree that the tsunami teaches us to ‘un-ask’ the usual questions: Why me? Why these losses, this suffering? People here don’t make an enemy of sorrow. They know that pain is real; that neurotic suffering is only the flapping of ego.”<sup>101</sup> She quotes Iyer: “For all the sadness that will not go away, I can’t help feeling, after twenty years living in Japan, that it’s the country’s strengths, more than its weaknesses, that have been and will be highlighted by recent cataclysms.”

I include these quotes at length because they illustrate fairly stereotypical observations of the admirably stoic Japanese people, ones that, as I show in Chapter Two, are often found lacking in American life. But one can also hear in these descriptions the therapeutic values of acceptance, self-help, and the familial. Cloud’s formulation of the therapeutic allows us to see how the language above—the Japanese willingness to acclimate to difficulty as well as to enjoy plentitude, even seeing it as part of an inherent

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<sup>100</sup> Ehrlich, 174.

<sup>101</sup> Ehrlich, 174-175.

Japanese identity—is not just an aesthetic of Japan or of Buddhism but is indeed the language of neoliberal capitalism in a world vulnerable to dramatic inequalities and reversals in fortune. Yes, Ehrlich suggests, the world teems with confusion and fear; however, acceptance of impermanence allows us to see disaster as “both destructive and beautiful.”<sup>102</sup> We find resolution to the chaos by meditating on impermanence and accepting it, by embracing “this floating world.”<sup>103</sup>

Slavoj Žižek has noted in a lecture on Buddhism and global capitalism that “Western Buddhism presents itself as the remedy against the stressful tensions of capitalist dynamics, allowing us to uncouple from this frenetic and frenzy rhythm and retain inner peace and enlightenment.”<sup>104</sup> Ehrlich’s text clearly does the same. Recalling a discussion he had with a “top manager” in business, Žižek parallels Buddhist concepts such as “the idea of being,” “the fragility of existence,” and “fleeting phenomena” that “can fall apart at every point” with ideas about “our market today.” These parallels, he suggests, allow the businessman to “speculate all day” as if “it is just a cosmic play” because he is “aware of the nothingness of it.” Therefore, Žižek offers that if Weber were to rewrite his famous *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* today, he would need to rename it “*The Taoist or Buddhist Ethic and the Spirit of Global Capitalism*.”

Ehrlich’s book may not intend to argue for capitalism, but its logic of impermanence and desolation absolutely aligns. Žižek is careful to note that he does not intend mock or oversimplify Buddhism. Nor do I. I will forego any attempt to analyze the

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<sup>102</sup> Ehrlich, 215.

<sup>103</sup> Ehrlich, 35.

<sup>104</sup> Slavoj Žižek. “The Buddhist Ethic and the Spirit of Global Capitalism.” European Graduate School Lecture, August 10, 2012, accessed December 1, 2014, <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/slavoj-zizek/articles/the-buddhist-ethic-and-the-spirit-of-global-capitalism/>.

fidelity of Ehrlich's interpretations of Buddhist thought to doctrine and leave to other scholars the actual relationship between Buddhism and neoliberalism. However, Ehrlich's use of Buddhism in an Orientalized aesthetic space resonates undeniably with the language of capitalism, especially when, as I have shown above, Ehrlich keeps her interpretive voice at the very center of her piece. Rather than transcend the self, Ehrlich's expressive sense and sensibility dominate the text. She is, by virtue of her writing, a "warm, interesting" person, in Dean's language, in the sphere of global capitalism. Her style reveals her fundamentally American, neocapitalist ethos.

Ehrlich's Buddhism, then, resonates completely with the needs of neoliberal capitalism and its own fascinations with creative destruction. Indeed, in language that might well have been quoted in Naomi Klein's study of "disaster capitalism," Ehrlich states in an interview about her time in Japan that "[i]n everything being wiped clean, there was perhaps the possibility for a new start....a sort of imaginative space."<sup>105</sup> Ehrlich's book, then, can be read as an *ars poetica* of neoliberal capitalism that critiques the market's excesses—but not, fundamentally, the system itself. "Impermanence," Ehrlich writes,

is a living experience, a rolling of the dice, a chance-dance, a breaking down of what seemed solid: kitchen, boat, car, wedding ring, child, lover; the annual cleaning of graves. True existence is nothing but nosedives and quick gulps of air, as Earth flexes her geological muscles. In one minute, everything can change. Seashore to charnel ground; charnel ground to dance ground where the play of living and dying keeps taking place.<sup>106</sup>

So, too, is neoliberal capitalism a rolling of the dice. Ehrlich, it seems, only tells us that we should valorize an acceptance of these vulnerabilities, not how we might change

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<sup>105</sup> Pacifica Network, np.

<sup>106</sup> Ehrlich, 149.

them. It is almost unthinkable to imagine how such acceptance could translate into political will of any sort other than the neoliberal.

Although Ehrlich makes vulnerability beautiful, while her counterparts in Haiti make vulnerability disgusting, the difference is less significant than it might seem. Depictions of both Haitian and Japanese suffering are diagnosed according to their racial categories: Haitians as ill-adapted to the neoliberal order and Japanese as hyper-adapted. In both cases, suffering is to be understood as endemic to the very culture of each place, thereby making geopolitical intervention unnecessary or even unwise. The retreat from geopolitical redress, in turn, allows neoliberalism's individual actors to transform these devastated spaces into fertile ground for their own aesthetic, ethical, and therapeutic use. Haiti and Japan—and the suffering in both places—are commodities to be mined for meaning and personal identity, as well as for capitalist development, and these authors do so at the expense of creating meaningful humanitarian reason for substantive change.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **CONCLUSION**

As I concluded this project, which has looked at two states of emergency abroad through the lens of race, another state of emergency arose closer to my home in Saint Louis, Missouri. The August 9, 2014 death of unarmed black teenager Michael Brown at the hands of white police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson is not, of course, a natural disaster like those I discuss here, but the chaos that erupted in the streets of Ferguson and other communities around the Saint Louis area in the months afterward nonetheless rocked the area, causing a great deal of property damage; huge economic costs; fear in black and white communities; and curtailment of freedoms of the press, speech, and assembly. More importantly for this project, the Ferguson crisis was widely understood as a forceful expression of black political demands for reform not only of policing in the area but also of other racist systems, such as education, voting rights, and municipal court fees, that disproportionately disenfranchise black citizens. The powerful and sometimes violent suppression of these demonstrations by the state—whether via the Ferguson, county, or state police or via the National Guard—demonstrated identical values to those expressed in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. The priority in the early days of the August protests, as well as during the protests after the non-indictment of Officer Wilson in November, was suppression of black claims to their lives and to full expression of their citizenship, in favor of white security and protection of private property and business.

Storm victims in New Orleans and protesters in Saint Louis repeatedly were reframed as violent looters rather than citizens in need of protection from the state. This fact framed expression of black citizenship rights as a threat to private property and to innocent white people. As the region prepared for the announcement of the grand jury's decision not to indict Wilson (widely considered a foregone conclusion), gun sales spiked as white homeowners in areas far from Ferguson armed themselves in preparation for the chaos and violence that they expected to ensue, even though no white citizens had been injured by black protesters in the three months of protests prior to the grand jury decision. On social media and elsewhere, white citizens threatened, apparently with impunity, to shoot and kill black protesters in their neighborhoods. Moreover, widespread concern for businesses not only in Ferguson but also in Clayton and Saint Louis City assumed that black protestors were criminals, not citizens. Insistent portrayals of Michael Brown as nothing more than a "thug" who "deserved it" seemed to spread beyond Brown himself to characterize all black protesters. "Black culture," not white institutional violence, was, in the eyes of many white people, the core explanation for Brown's death.

These conditions—white fear of presumed black anarchy, as well as threat to economic stability—created the context that many white observers believed just cause for tear-gassing crowds of innocent citizens; for the introduction of military gear to suburban streets; and to the curtailment of the free press, the right to assembly, the right to free speech, and so on. Thus when Governor Jay Nixon deployed the National Guard, declaring a state of emergency days in advance of the November grand jury decision, it did not, apparently, matter that no actual emergency—no earthquake, no tsunami—was occurring; the threat was entirely rhetorical. Black assertion of citizenship rights was

itself a state of emergency, a threat to peace. Again, even though government is widely hated among Americans, many—even those conservative groups who often present themselves as opposed to interference from the government—considered it acceptable for the government to assert itself in clearly undemocratic ways so long as it subdued black protest, protected private property, and allayed white fear. Racist predictions about what black people would do once again trumped an analysis of what they actually did—much like racialized depictions of Japanese people after their tsunami allowed commentators to consider what *didn't* happen there rather than what did.

There has been little in the way of compassionate response to the crisis that Ferguson ignited. Some white marchers have joined in protest, and volunteers have donated time to help children who missed school because of the crisis. Others have donated money to the Ferguson library and to businesses that were vandalized or looted. Yet the overwhelming backlash against the protesters has been more vocal and pervasive. The families that grieve Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, John Crawford, and other black men and women killed by police have been accused of inciting riots, seeking financial gain, abusing drugs, or simply “playing the race card” when they insist on justice for their loved ones. Cartoons have mocked Michael Brown’s death. When Brown’s stepfather reacted momentarily in anger, grief, and shock to the news that Wilson would not be tried, the lieutenant governor suggested Louis Head be charged with “inciting a riot,” even though Brown’s family had been imploring the public to maintain peace for months. Protesters were taunted as jobless, lazy welfare recipients. One white woman told me that she believed that Michael Brown’s parents ought to accept that it was “his time to go” and accept God’s will. Another white woman told me that protesters

walked near her car, scaring her daughter though they had done nothing aggressive or malicious. Coming near her daughter at all, she said, “crossed the line,” and she was enraged, seemingly completely oblivious to the ways in which black mothers were also, more urgently, concerned for the well-being of their children. The loss of these sons, and the pain of these mothers, was lost on her and many other people not only in the Saint Louis area but in fact around the country.

What is different about the nature of responses to the disaster in Ferguson from the compassionate responses that I describe in the reactions to the disasters in Haiti and Japan—beyond the obvious catalyzing event—is that there is no way to escape the racially political nature of this crisis. Although Haiti’s earthquake devastation very clearly results not only from the severity of the seismic shock but also from the centuries of neglect, exploitation, occupation, and racism, it is possible to imagine earthquakes as entirely arbitrary, as just another event in a long history of devastation in that uniquely unlucky country. But no one reasonably can discuss the crisis in Ferguson as one that transcends racial politics. Instead of appealing to common humanity, the characterizations of black victims of police brutality have worked to dehumanize these men and their families and communities or to deny the very racial terms of policing, incarceration, and death. They have done the opposite of seeking a common humanity.

The violent backlash against black protest is, furthermore, a powerful disincentive for Asian Americans to assert their collective citizenship rights. Crimes against Asian Americans go underreported, partly for this very reason.<sup>1</sup> Asian American success in the

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<sup>1</sup> C.N. Lee, “Anti-Asian Racism and Violence,” *Asian-Nation: the Landscape of Asian America*, January 6, 2015, accessed January 6, 2015, <http://www.asian-nation.org/racism.shtml>.



United States relies largely on its separation, rhetorically and politically, from ideas of black dysfunction and criminality, and this separation limits the political solidarity that could unite people of color in the United States in resistance to white supremacy.

In popular responses to Haitian and Japanese victims, many Americans could adopt a “colorblind” rhetoric that reassures white Americans that they *do* in fact, care across racial lines. But the Ferguson crisis shows that white Americans by and large cannot in fact relate to or empathize with those who stake their citizenship claims in explicitly racially conscious terms, those who are political, those who disrupt the neoliberal values that protect whiteness and private property. These are the priorities of neoliberalism, and the popular sense of what “peace and right” mean in and outside the United States. These are the fundamental terms of popular articulations of compassion in response to the disasters in Haiti and Japan, and they are precisely what is lacking in Ferguson and everywhere that political resistance is organized in consciously racial terms.

Ferguson reminds us that it is easier, sometimes, to feel solidarity with those who are far away from us, whose lives we can imagine in our hearts and through their silence. But Ferguson reveals that the imperial scope of the United States is not only transnational but also domestic. The United States’ empire is not only “over there;” it is in any community—Ferguson or New Orleans, for instance—where poor, black people are left unprotected by the state that ought to ensure their rights: to life, most fundamentally, but also to democratic political expression. White America can feel good about its compassionate response to Haitian and Japanese victims because it gives them a way to deny their own racism at home. We can only feel good about victims of disaster when we

can quell their political power and reinforce “colorblind” white supremacy. White compassion, then, requires racial amnesia, even as it seeks to redress racism consciously, as the evangelical orphan care movement seeks to do.

White Americans feel sympathy when God or nature afflicts people of color, leaving them defenseless, but this compassion ends when its own complicity in creating systems of defenselessness is critiqued. When black Americans seek to change the terms of inequality, compassion falls away. The values of neoliberalism have taught us to feel—to change our hearts, and sometimes even to change radically our personal lives and the lives of our families. We may cry and grieve and give; we may reflect and pray and love. But we must not make change to the racist power structures of the world that produce these injustices. It is much easier to accept these terms when those who are hurt are far away, belong to a “culture” we can understand through our own lenses, and cannot contest the characterizations of their lives. It is easy to do when we can benefit economically and spiritually. True “right and peace,” though, will require that we give much more and take much less.

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## VITA AUCTORIS

Corinne Wohlford was born in Neenah, Wisconsin, in 1975 and was raised in Wisconsin, Connecticut, and Indiana. In 1997, she earned a bachelor's degree in art history and English from Wittenberg University in Springfield, Ohio. After a year of teaching English in Tochigi prefecture, Japan, she enrolled at Washington University in Saint Louis, where she earned a Master of Fine Arts degree in writing in 2000. Her poems have been published in a variety of literary magazines, including *Georgetown Review*, *Harvard Review*, *New Ohio Review*, *Southern Indiana Review*, *Margie*, *Plainsongs*, and *Pleiades*, and she was a finalist for the Grolier Poetry Prize in 1999. In 2001, she accepted a position teaching English at Fontbonne University. In 2006, Wohlford earned a master's degree in American studies at Saint Louis University and began teaching in American culture studies at Fontbonne and became chair of the Interdisciplinary Studies department. She has since moved to the Department of History, Philosophy, and Religion, where she now serves as Assistant Professor of American History and Culture. She is the co-creator and director of Fontbonne's first-year seminar program, Culture and the Common Good, as well as the university's first African-American and American studies programs. She also oversees the university's Dedicated Semester program. She has presented on her research and pedagogy at meetings of the American Studies Association, Mid-America American Studies Association, Haitian Studies Association, Midwest Popular Culture Association, Association for Integrative Studies, Higher Learning Commission, and the Council of Independent Colleges Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education.