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DIGITAL MISSIONARIES:

THE NEOLIBERAL SPONSORSHIP RHETORIC OF

COMPASSION INTERNATIONAL

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by

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Abstract

This project is a feminist rhetorical criticism of the neoliberal contours of

Compassion International's sponsorship model. Compassion International is an evangelical,

Protestant humanitarian organization that serves to connect a financially secure sponsor with

an impoverished child in the Global South via a monthly monetary gift. Through a thorough

rhetorical analysis of Compassion International's website, this project argues that this

sponsorship model is indicative of a corrupted model of Christian missionary rhetoric online.

Coopted by parallel systems of neoliberalism, patriarchy, and racism, Compassion

International's sponsorship model commodifies, dehumanizes, and silences the children that

it claims to sponsor. In doing so, the model redefines both sponsor and child positionalities

via an affective economy of love that articulates sponsors as global caretakers and parents

and children as objects for spiritual consumption. All told, Compassion International's

sponsorship model constructs a borderland space in which the very definition of both mission

and commission is redefined as passive, rather than active. It is clear that Compassion

International's sponsorship platform is ripe for rhetorical criticism, and the problems it is

perpetuating speak to the greater issues facing Christianity and online humanitarian work

today.

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Acknowledgments

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Epigraph

"Jesus said, 'Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.'"

- *Matthew 19:14 (New International Version)*

Introduction

The Great Commission Gone Digital

Matthew 28:19 boldly declares, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."[1] This passage from the first of the New Testament Gospels is indicative of a much greater force in Christianity—that of mission. God's call—His *commission*—to humanity, as expressed in verses like Matthew 28:19, is at the heart of this project's analysis. As such, this thesis aims to contextualize contemporary Christian missionary work through a discussion that encompasses concepts and approaches ranging from theological interpretation to feminist rhetorical analysis focused on a critique of neoliberalism. Historically, much of the "missionary sense" embodied within Matthew's aforementioned call (and similar passages) has been interpreted by the Church as a clear appeal for missionary work abroad. Indeed, historical Christianity is ripe with examples of European and American missionaries working to establish Christian strongholds in the far corners of the earth. How, though, is God's commission for missionary service understood and responded to by Christians today?

In fielding an answer to this question, my research with this project has led to several more related inquiries. How, precisely, is Christian mission produced in contemporary Christian practices? When produced through such practices does Christian mission become corrupted? Of course, these are very broad questions that are unanswerable completely in the scope of my endeavor here. With this in mind, I seek to triangulate this project a bit more specifically by homing in on a single organization as my primary site of rhetorical study in order to make arguments about the current state of Christian mission. This organization,

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[1] Matt. 28:19 NIV

Compassion International, is one of the more prominent Christian humanitarian organizations currently operating, and it is also one with a long and renowned legacy within Christian evangelical circles. This project will argue that Compassion International's missionary platform is predicated on a corrupted sponsorship model that is articulated via a blended appeal to sponsors founded on contemporary rhetorics of neoliberalism, digital commodification, love, and adoption. Moreover, this project will also suggest that Compassion International's corrupted missionary outreach is potentially exemplary of a greater problematic movement in the ways that the contemporary Church interprets God's commission to humanity.

Before I launch more directly into this project's exploration of Christian mission via Compassion International's sponsorship model, it is important to briefly discuss the idea of corruption more directly. If, as I argue, Compassion International's sense of mission is corrupted, does this render all of its acts of missionary service as problematic? Does, as some would argue, Compassion International's reproduction of neoliberalism and other oppressive systems of domination render its model necessarily *bad*? Or, alternatively, is there a potential for hope, for improvement, for change? Can Compassion International rearticulate its mission sense, can it reposition and redefine its approach so as to better exist independently of these institutions of power? I suggest that it can and, indeed, that is *should*. To do so, however, will require an overhaul of the rhetorical foundation of the model.

In breaking down this corrupted articulation of Christian missionary work, this thesis will interrogate the ways in which technology has redefined how organizations like Compassion International rhetorically construct God's commission to humanity via digital frameworks online. In doing so this project will unpack how technology directly influences

both ends of the spectrum in the sponsorship model. Both the children in need of sponsorship *and* the sponsors themselves are implicated within this missionary framework and, as such, with this analysis I am working to uncover answers as to how this technological shift in the articulation of mission reproduces positional understandings of both the sponsors themselves and the sponsored children through the aforementioned normative rhetorics of digital neoliberalism, commodification, and so on.

Compassion International is a child-sponsorship organization that is very well known within Protestant Christian circles, particularly within the evangelical denominations of the Church. The organization's pedigree as a Christian humanitarian organization is an important element of this thesis project as I will seek to examine not only Compassion International as a unique site of rhetorical inquiry, but I will also work to connect the issues embedded within Compassion International's mission structure to greater cultural issues facing contemporary Protestant Christianity. Compassion International was founded in 1952 with the original purpose of providing Korean War orphans with food, shelter and, most importantly, Christian education.[2] Since, Compassion International has expanded and evolved into a sponsorship organization based in the United States that has—to date—connected over 2 million impoverished children with sponsors.[3]

Today, Compassion International continues to serve with a clear and simple mission statement as its guiding light. Compassion International's website clearly states that it is

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[2] "About Us," Compassion International, accessed August 2013, http://www.compassion.com/about/about-us.htm

[3] "Where We Work," Compassion International, accessed August 2013, http://www.compassion.com/where-we-work.htm

"Releasing children from poverty in Jesus' name."[4] This mission statement is central to this project's analysis and will be a central theme that weaves it way throughout this thesis. As one of the central pillars upon which the sponsorship platform is constructed, this mission statement affirms quite powerfully, "In response to the Great Commission, Compassion International exists as an advocate for children, to release them from their spiritual, economic, social and physical poverty and enable them to become responsible and fulfilled Christian adults."[5] Here, Compassion International directly implicates their organizational purpose within God's aforementioned commission for service. Certainly important, this theological link will be discussed at length in the coming analysis. All this said, while I argue that this mission statement provides an important opening space through which to critique the rhetoric of Christian mission today, this is just the tip of the rhetorical iceberg that is Compassion International. Indeed, in order for us to better understand the missionary framework *as corrupted*, I suggest that it is necessary for us to look deeper—into the blended digital, theological, and humanitarian fabric of the sponsorship model itself.

Compassion International's mission model is built on a foundation that connects a monetary sponsor with an impoverished child. Typically, these sponsors are American— single adults, married couples and, in some cases, whole families or churches. Here, it is important to note the immense cultural reach that Compassion International has developed within the contemporary Protestant Church. For example, I have been exposed to Compassion International in a variety of forms and places, including at Christian concerts, during church services, and even via flyers posted on the bulletin boards of faculty offices at

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[4] "Mission Statement," Compassion International, accessed August 2013, http://www.compassion.com/mission-statement.htm

[5] Ibid.

my Protestant undergraduate university. While these are examples from my own personal experience, I believe that they are indicative of the wider cultural power that Compassion International has developed within evangelical Christianity over the last two decades. Thus, Compassion International is not only a significant site of rhetorical study for this project, but is also an organization with a wide cultural influence which only makes the harms it perpetuates all the more appalling, shocking, and rhetorically significant.

Practically, Compassion International's website argues, "In a world where more than a billion children live on less than U.S. $2 per day, connecting one child with one sponsor is the most strategic way to end child poverty."[6] The sponsorship model functions primarily through a monetary donation, or "gift," given by the sponsor each month.[7] This $38-a-month gift allows Compassion International to provide impoverished children with the following: ongoing Christian training, educational opportunities, treatment and training to maintain child health, development of self-confidence and social skills, and key life skills and vocational programs.[8] This is followed by a declaration to prospective sponsors that "Sponsorship is easy."[9] These aspects of the sponsorship model are a central impetus for addressing the questions posed previously in this introduction. This thesis will unpack the rhetorical arguments embedded within statements like these and, more broadly, the arguments made by the model itself. What are we to make of Compassion International's argument about the sponsorship model as a strategic one? How does this connect to Matthew

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[6] "Child Sponsorship," Compassion International, accessed August 2013, http://www.compassion.com/how-we-work/child-sponsorship.htm

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

28:19's articulation of humanity's Great Commission on Earth? What does this argument imply about the current state of the American missionary model? And, ultimately, how does Compassion International's sponsorship structure point to the ongoing influence of neoliberalism, patriarchy, and racism within both contemporary Christianity *and* humanitarian work more broadly?

With this brief introduction into Compassion International in mind, the central research question of this project is as follows: In what ways is Compassion International's sponsorship model indicative of a rhetorically flawed platform for Christian humanitarian work in our digital age? Within this overarching research question this project seeks also to address the following issues as ways to map the contours of Compassion International's corrupted sponsorship model online. Has, as Compassion International's sponsorship platform implies, Christian mission become easy? Has a conception of mission been reduced to the click of a mouse and a few keystrokes on a home computer screen? Indeed, what are the moral costs of making mission so "consumer-friendly" and easy? How does it fundamentally transform our conceptions of ourselves as fulfilling the missionary call of the Gospels and how, ultimately, does it transform the conceptions we attribute to the people that we mission to? To further lay the initial foundation for this analysis, I next turn to a brief discussion of the methodology and purposes of this project.

<center>Methodology & Purposes of the Project</center>

This project will employ a feminist rhetorical methodology in order to critique a sponsorship model that has been fundamentally shaped by neoliberalism. This methodology allows for the interrogation of neoliberalism as it is intertwined with strains of patriarchy and dehumanization, and it also provides a unique space through which to offer a call for political

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change. Moreover, this feminist methodology recognizes the inherent value in interdisciplinary scholarship and thus also offers a space through which to examine the intersections of additional lines of scholarship in this project, including work on globalization, class, technology, and religious studies, among others.

In this project I define feminism as a movement and perspective (one that is both scholarly *and* personal) that encompasses the multiplicity of identity, acknowledges the inherent value of all subaltern peoples and is, ultimately, a purposeful move made to dismantle patriarchal, neoliberal, and racist practices through political resistance and action. This definition is based in the collective work of several respected feminist theorists, including (but certainly not limited to) bell hooks, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Adrienne Rich. Furthermore, this definition is supplemented by the work of feminist rhetorical scholars like Karen A. Foss, Sonja K. Foss, and Cindy L. Griffin. This project's definition of feminism acknowledges and respects the historical lineage of feminist political work focused on women's rights. In doing so, the feminist lens employed in this thesis also further acknowledges the importance of interrogating power differentials as they are rhetorically articulated.

Working within this model, I turn directly to Cheryl Glenn's summation of the ways in which power infiltrates and influences rhetoric. Glenn writes, "Rhetoric always inscribes the relation of language and power at a particular moment."[10] Pushing further, she suggests that this intersection encompasses not just who can or may speak and listen, but also what is said and *what is silenced*.[11] As such, this project's feminist methodology offers a scholarly

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[10] Cheryl Glenn, *Rhetoric Retold: Regendering the Tradition from Antiquity Through the Renaissance* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997), 1.

[11] Ibid., 1-2.

lens through which I seek to interrogate the power differentials embedded within the technological apparatus of Compassion International's sponsorship model itself while simultaneously interrogating the classist power differentials that redefine sponsor and child positionalities within this model. Using this feminist lens in conjunction with other theoretical approaches yet to be discussed, I seek to recover the silenced and dehumanized voices within Compassion International's sponsorship model by homing in on a number of particular rhetorical moments within the sponsorship model. In doing so, I seek to bring their plight to the forefront of current rhetorical conversations about visual, digital, and Christian rhetorics.

The primary purpose of this project is to highlight, discuss, and politically resist instances of neoliberalism and patriarchy that are embedded within Compassion International's contemporary model of Christian mission. As such, a definition of both terms is necessary for paving the foundation for this project moving forward. Though both will be discussed at length in the upcoming chapter, it is helpful to illustrate each briefly here. Neoliberalism is defined as an institutional power structure focused on the normative perpetuation of market capitalism. Structured through a variety of frameworks, contemporary neoliberalism is highly intertwined with institutional systems like globalization and capitalism. Patriarchy, on the other hand, must also be explained in order for this project's feminist lens to be calibrated correctly. Although the primary theoretical focus of this analysis will be on uncovering instances of neoliberalism, I do suggest that it is important to focus our understanding of institutional power structures like neoliberalism by recognizing how they interact alongside others like patriarchy, racism, globalization, and so on. I begin with an argument offered by Adrienne Rich, who writes that "patriarchy exists nowhere in a

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pure state."[12] I begin here in order to assert that patriarchy is difficult to define and pinpoint. It is not only socially constructed, as feminist theorists and feminist rhetorical scholars have argued, but is also normatively applied in various ways by various institutions. This project, then, will seek to specifically situate Compassion International within a larger strain of patriarchal Christianity.

Rich also suggests that each successive generation of feminists, including myself, are the "latest to set foot in a tangle of oppressions grown up around each other for centuries."[13] Rich's conception, I suggest, applies not just to patriarchy, but to neoliberalism as well. With this in mind, this project does not seek to deconstruct patriarchy and neoliberalism completely nor do I mean, at any point, to suggest that this is even possible. However, I do seek to expose some of the normative power structures of contemporary Christianity as they are digitally reproduced within Compassion International. To do this I will base my project on a definition of patriarchy that expands from Rich's and is based within the work of Foss, Foss, and Griffin and bell hooks, respectively. Engaging the work of feminist theorist Starhawk, Foss, Foss, and Griffin argue that patriarchy is a hierarchical system that is not limited to the oppression of women by men, but is instead much more normatively embedded within the oppression of all subaltern peoples.[14] Similarly, hooks structures patriarchy within a blended perspective that she defines as "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy."[15] Within

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[12] Adrienne Rich. "Notes Toward a Politics of Location," in *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives*, eds. Carole R. McCann and Seung-Kyung Kim (New York: Routledge, 2004), 451.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Karen A. Foss, Sonja K. Foss, and Cindy L. Griffin. *Feminist Rhetorical Theories*, (Long Grove: Waveland Press, 2006), 116.

[15] bell hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (New York: Atria Books, 2004), 17.

this framework, then, this project's definition of patriarchy is the systematic oppression of subaltern people through normative power structures expressed through one or more of the following: gender, class relations, race relations, technology, and so on. Using this understanding of patriarchy, this project seeks to resist the dehumanizing economic forces that are normatively produced within Compassion International's sponsorship model.

I am focusing this project's purpose and its analysis through a scholarly perspective mapped out by the work of feminist rhetoricians Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa E. Kirsch. Royster and Kirsch argue that feminist rhetorical studies as it exists today seeks "not to prescribe a singular path for analysis or knowledge-making."[16] With this in mind I do not propose to base my analysis through a single methodology, but instead seek to offer an interdisciplinary approach that combines rhetorical, feminist, technological, and theological lenses of scholarship. More specifically, Royster and Kirsch suggest that the methodological purpose of work in feminist rhetorical studies is to "embrace a set of values and perspectives … that honors the particular traditions of the subjects of study, respects their communities, amplifies their voices, and clarifies their visions."[17] This methodological perspective is crucial to the analysis that I seek to undertake with this project. Through the acknowledgment of the historical line of Christian mission and through the acknowledgment of the multiplicity of Christian identity today, this project begins to open a space for the political change necessary to do just as Royster and Kirsch argue. By examining, acknowledging, and attempting to change the model offered by Compassion International,

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[16] Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa E. Kirsch, *Feminist Rhetorical Practices: New Horizons for Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy Studies* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012), 14.

[17] Ibid.

this project works to establish a dialogue that allows for the greater respect, amplification, and clarification that Royster, Kirsch, and other feminist rhetorical scholars have repeatedly called for.

Royster and Kirsch also explain that this feminist rhetorical methodology fundamentally means that rhetorical critics should "pay attention, not just to ethics and representation but specifically to ethos, to the ethical self, both in the texts we study and the texts we produce."[18] I see my work with this project as also existing within this framework. As such, I contend that it is crucial for me to briefly situate myself relative to this project before navigating down this analytical path any further. In doing so, I seek not to deflect from my analysis in any way. Quite the contrary, I hope that by situating my various positionalities alongside the winding contours of Compassion International's sponsorship model that I will be better able to present my analysis and reflections on the problems occurring within the platform.

In the past, I have had direct experience with Compassion International. As a teenager I first encountered Compassion International's missionary call during the intermission of a contemporary Christian music concert I was attending in my hometown. In between acts, the concert promoters came on stage and showed a video produced by Compassion International. Full of images of impoverished children this video was nothing short of captivating to me. While I had previously seen images such as these—in textbooks, in movies, and elsewhere—I had, up to that point, never really emotionally connected with the faces of the children in need. As I was comprehending this emotional tidal wave, the organizers pointed us in the direction of dozens of tables on the floor of the amphitheater—each with hundreds of

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[18] Ibid.

pictures of children in need of sponsorship. As we were asked to pray about the decision to sponsor a child—for only $28 a month (as they said repeatedly)—I asked my mother if, together, we could sponsor a child. After some back and forth, we decided to each sponsor a child. So, with the decision made, I went down to the table, selected a child from Indonesia, and began the sponsorship process excited to be making a difference in the world. All that said, my sponsorship process was quickly decided, but nothing much came from it, in the end. While I received many letters from my child, I never responded. My missionary act— commenced in a fit of emotional connection—did not remain at the forefront of my life, and my desire to *actively* make a difference in the world quickly faded.

Indeed, more recently I stumbled upon Compassion International's website after hearing about a similar organization during a local church service that made me think about sponsoring a child again. As I accessed the website, my thoughts drifted back to my previous experience. Clouded with a mix of guilt, confusion, and a desire for redemption, I logged on to Compassion International's website with the aim of sponsoring another child. Intent on correcting my mistake, I was shocked to discover the problematic structure of Compassion International's online website. Frustrated, confused, and even more disconcerted by what I saw, I began to map out how I could make use of my thesis as a space through which to research and begin to discuss some of these issues. Thus, the previous account is nothing short of my personal exigence for this project.

In offering these personal encounters with Compassion International, I seek primarily to inform you, the reader, of my previous experiences. I have a unique vantage point for my analysis of Compassion International. As a previous sponsor, I certainly am aware of the process, and this has helped to inform the contours of this project. In outlining this unique

positional space, I would like to also further situate myself relative to this project. I am a

Christian, and I was raised in the evangelical tradition of the Protestant faith. As such, I am

quite familiar with not only Compassion International and similar organizations, but I am

also versed in the missionary tradition that they operate within. I am also male, middle-class,

a graduate student, and first-world. Each, respectively, offers me a vast amount of privilege

relative to this project. It is important for me to acknowledge where I stand relative to the

neoliberal, patriarchal, and racist systems of domination that I am critiquing within this

project. Within my previous sponsorship experience, I functioned as the dominator—the

person with power. I, armed with a credit card and the reproduced image of a child selected

at random from a table during a summertime concert, participated within the same systems of

neoliberalism and racism that I am critiquing here. The very fact, even, that I am in a position

to critique such systems speaks to the privilege that I enter into this project with. All that

said, this is one of the primary reasons for my selection of the feminist lens for this project. I

hope, by simultaneously acknowledging my privilege while offering an analysis of

dominating power systems, that I can work to create some positive political change within

contemporary Christianity and lay a foundation for future research in this same vein.

Altogether, this discussion of methodology suggests a "feminist epistemology" that

views, as Uma Narayan has argued, "mainstream theories about various human enterprises,

including mainstream theories about human knowledge, as one-dimensional and deeply

flawed because of the exclusion and misrepresentation of women's contributions."[19] Using

Narayan's conception of feminist epistemology as a guide, this project expands this argument

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[19] Uma Narayan, "The Project of Feminist Epistemology: Perspectives from a Nonwestern Feminist," in
Feminist Theory Reader, eds. Carole R. McCann and Seung-Kyung Kim (New York: Routledge, 2003), 308.

to not focus solely on the exclusion of women's contributions but instead to focus more broadly on the continued silencing, dehumanization, and redefinition of impoverished children and their first world sponsors by Compassion International's sponsorship model. As such, the methodology of this project functions primarily to expose, resist, and ultimately *change* the dominating practices of Christian mission embedded within organizations like Compassion International.

Narayan argues that the invocation of such a feminist epistemology will work to "change the very nature" of the patriarchal norms of the world around us.[20] This is where I see this project as having the potential for positive change. I hope to use this project as a stepping stone for helping organizations like Compassion International to redefine their conceptions of mission to better recognize the neoliberal and directly oppressive foundations of their current sponsorship models and to, ultimately, change such models to begin to breakdown the ongoing neoliberal structures within contemporary Christian conceptions of mission. To do this I hope to use the research of my thesis as a mechanism to reach out to Compassion International in order to argue for a better system. With this in mind, I see this project's ultimate purpose as a space for me to redefine a small, yet substantial in its own right, portion of contemporary Christianity's ongoing dominating normative structure.

Ultimately, I am conceiving of this project as one situated within the feminist rhetorical model of scholarship pioneered by feminist rhetorical scholars like Cheryl Glenn, Krista Ratcliffe, Kristy Maddux, Jacqueline Jones Royster, Gesa E. Kirsch, and others. Through my interrogation of digital Christian mission I hope to create a space for further discussions of the rhetoric of Christian mission in a contemporary setting. Some work has

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[20] Ibid.

been done on conceptions of mission historically, such as scholarship that has been completed on Puritan rhetoric and the rhetoric of other Church movements. However, there has been no rhetorical work completed on Compassion International specifically, and little scholarship in our field has been focused on the ongoing shift in the application of Christian mission online. I hope to blend these strains of rhetorical scholarship, and to call for further work on how the rhetoric of Christian mission is inherently predicated on, and built upon, an inherently oppressive structure.

<div align="center">Organization of the Project</div>

This project will be organized into several thesis chapters. Following this introduction, the project proceeds through three content chapters, followed by a conclusion. The first chapter situates the multifaceted theoretical approach for this project. Its principal aim is to pave the theoretical foundation for the analysis to come in the subsequent chapters. Divided into four sections, this chapter explicates the specific approaches to feminism and neoliberalism already discussed, and also situates Compassion International within broader scholarly conversations on humanitarian rhetoric and phantasia. By situating the multifaceted theoretical approaches to this project more fully, this chapter serves to thoroughly establish the scholarly foundation for the analysis to come in the next two chapters.

Chapter two directly applies this theoretical foundation through a full rhetorical analysis of Compassion International's sponsorship model directly. This chapter interrogates the digital platform of Compassion International's website through a discussion of the visual and economic aspects upon which the act of sponsorship operates. By focusing in on various rhetorical "moments" within the sponsorship process, this analysis argues that Compassion International commodifies impoverished children through a corrupted rhetoric of digital

neoliberalism. Placed into a normative neoliberal matrix from which they cannot escape, these children are dehumanized, silenced, and rhetorically constructed as "items." Thus, this chapter thoroughly situates Compassion International's model as not just neoliberal, but as a clear example of the ways in which contemporary Christian mission work is digitally filtered through a rhetoric of "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy."

This analysis leads naturally into the primary focus of chapter three on the ways in which Compassion International's corrupted missionary platform is rhetorically constructed as a digital borderland space. In making this argument this chapter analyzes the sponsorship model by focusing on how Compassion International's appeals to potential sponsors are filtered through an affective economy of love that reproduces rhetorics of neoliberal adoption and parenthood. This chapter also offers a discussion of the ways in which this affective economy, in conjunction with the visual and economic foundations for the sponsorship model discussed in chapter two, redefines positional understandings of both sponsor and child relative to Compassion International as a humanitarian entity and relative to the very act of missionary service itself.

Chapter three segways into the conclusion of the project. In addition to reviewing the principal claims of the analysis, the conclusion also accomplishes a number of other important tasks. Primarily among them, it briefly situates the overall project within ongoing scholarly conversations about feminist, Christian, visual, digital, and humanitarian rhetoric. In addition, this final discussion outlines lingering questions of the project and highlights future plans for this research trajectory. Finally, the conclusion restates the political nature of this project and offers a call to Compassion International for substantial change to the

sponsorship platform. Moving forward, then, I turn next to chapter one and a thorough

discussion of the various theoretical paradigms upon which this project rests.

Chapter One

Theoretical Approaches: Feminism, Neoliberalism, and Phantasia

As a prelude to the analysis to come in chapters two and three of this project, this chapter is focused directly on outlining the multifaceted theoretical approach to this thesis. While elements of these theoretical paradigms will be woven throughout the analysis chapters, it is, I believe, quite necessary to thoroughly construct the theoretical foundation upon which these chapters will rest. Thus, in the pages that follow I will outline a trajectory that both maps feminist theory through a discussion of feminism as both a constructive term and as a discipline, and also outlines this project's perspective on standpoint theory and intersectionality. This will then move into a discussion of neoliberalism and humanitarian rhetoric, and will be followed by a brief overview of the rhetorical concept of *phantasia*. I turn first to a more holistic tracing of feminism as it relates to this project.

Feminist Theory

Feminism

Feminist scholarship, like most academic traditions, has undergone several shifts over the years. From the early days of feminist pioneers like Sojourner Truth and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, through the social movement trajectory of the second wave, and onto today, feminism has established itself as a discipline fundamentally built upon a foundation of social justice. Much of this trajectory has been focused through a historiographic lens and, indeed, much of contemporary feminist scholarship seeks to recover essential writings, ideas, and voices that have been silenced and ignored.[21] This social justice tradition is, without a doubt, founded upon the political movement for women's rights and equality. Recognizing

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[21] Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979), 11.

this foundation for feminist theory is central to this project, and in invoking feminist theory as the primary theoretical framework for this thesis I do so by wholeheartedly paying recognition—and profound respect—to this history and the accomplishments, setbacks, and triumphs woven within it.

That said, this project will not focus primarily on women. Instead, I seek to use feminist theory as a theoretical lens through which to frame my analysis of Compassion International. I suppose at this moment you may be asking yourself something along the lines of, "Why feminism?" This is certainly not an unworthy question, as there are—of course—countless different theoretical paradigms that I could foreseeably invoke in outlining this project. First, I turn to feminism because it is a scholarly movement that I find not only useful, but one that is particularly valuable due to its senses of political potential and personal invigoration.[22] I too find bell hooks' assertion that contemporary feminist politics is not "a woman-only thing," but rather that "feminism is for everybody," to be a particularly appropriate space from which to begin this discussion.[23] My selection of feminism as the guiding light for this project is thus a very purposeful one. I do so with the aim of weaving together multiple critical scholarly perspectives through the social justice, historiographic, and political resistance pillars upon which feminist theory operates in contemporary scholarship. As will be articulated in the coming pages, this project aims to raise several different lines of inquiry with regard to Compassion International. These investigative paths will include the following: the effects and implications of neoliberalism on Compassion International's sponsorship model, the constructions of unique sponsor and child

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[22] bell hooks, "Marching for Justice: Feminist Interventions," *Black Renaissance* 1, no. 2 (1997): 32.

[23] Ibid.

positionalities, and finally, the role of humanitarianism in the construction of the aforementioned positionalities and neoliberal power structures. Each of these theoretical lines of inquiry will be built upon a feminist theoretical perspective. This does not mean that each theory will be muted in the name of feminism. Rather, as I hope will be illustrated in the coming sections of this chapter, I suggest that each will instead be *invigorated* through the scholarly act of weaving together with feminist theory.

Before I move forward to these different theoretical approaches, I would like to first articulate a bit more clearly what exactly "feminism" entails for this project. Feminism can certainly be defined in multiple different ways. Indeed, many contemporary feminists maintain slightly different articulations of the movement as based in their personal experiences, their positionalities, and the political purposes of their respective scholarly projects. While this is certainly an aspect of feminist theory that complicates and creates potential for confusion, conflation, and misappropriation, I agree with feminist scholarship that instead contends that rather than confuse, "this variety opens up choices and possibilities and speaks to the very nature of feminism."[24] Thus, for both me and this project, I see feminism as follows: feminism is a scholarly, theoretical, political, and personal framework predicated on social justice and equality. It is an approach to criticism focused on resisting oppressive power structures, and is one equally focused on creating discursive and political spaces for subaltern voices to be heard. Feminism, then, exists not just as a critical or theoretical endeavor, but as one innately concentrated on political change and the public good that can come as a result of such resistance.

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[24] Foss, Foss, and Griffin, *Feminist Rhetorical Theories*, 1.

Feminism is "a vital, engaging, and exciting perspective from which to view virtually every facet of life."[25] This boisterous declaration of feminism's ongoing scholarly potential appears at the outset of Karen A. Foss, Sonja K. Foss, and Cindy L. Griffin's feminist rhetorical collection *Feminist Rhetorical Theories*. While the passion each scholar has for feminist scholarship is clear, I assert that much of their introduction is also a useful starting place for defining feminism as a scholarly enterprise with innate value. Of central importance in beginning to construct the feminist foundation for this project is the conception of feminism as a scholarly movement inherently designed to give voice to marginalized and devalued individuals that are routinely oppressed by the dominant cultures of the world.[26] This act of "giving voice" and the move to reduce both the purposeful *and routine* acts of silencing that occur every day are thus central cornerstones of this project. Within the interrogation of the discursive capabilities (and the lack thereof) of the groups and people associated with Compassion International, this project thus seeks to critique, question, and fight against the various neoliberal, technological, and spiritual power structures upon which such acts of silencing occur. In doing so, this project fits within another of the feminist purposes articulated by Foss, Foss, and Griffin, to "[establish] and [legitimate] a value system that privileges mutuality, respect, caring, power-with, interconnection, and immanent value."[27] That said, while this is all fine and good in the abstract, I suggest that it is important to take this discussion a bit deeper in defining the central tenets of feminism more specifically in order to lay the necessary theoretical foundation for this project.

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[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid., 5.

[27] Ibid.

Returning to the shift away from a focus primarily on women's rights and women's oppression, I turn to the work of bell hooks' in order to further explicate the necessity and political potential of this move. hooks defines feminism as a political movement that fights to end the sexist, classist, and racist oppression of women.[28] She suggests that "when feminism is defined in such a way that it calls attention to the diversity of women's social and political reality, it centralizes the experiences of all women, especially the women whose social conditions have been least written about, studied, or changed by political movements."[29] Embedded within hooks' definition is the importance of studying the subaltern—not just women, but others who are stigmatized, oppressed and silenced as a result of various power structures (not just those that are patriarchal). Indeed, hooks recognizes that ongoing feminist resistance and critical scholarship "must be solidly based on a recognition of the need to eradicate underlying cultural basis and causes of sexism and other forms of group oppression. Without challenging and changing these philosophical structures, no feminist reforms will have a long-range impact."[30] This shift to "other forms of group oppression" is supported by other feminist scholars, including the aforementioned Foss, Foss, and Griffin who suggest, "Many feminists now expand the use of the term *feminism* to include eliminating the oppression of all people who are marginalized by the dominant culture, including but not limited to people of color, people with disabilities, people of different ages and socio-economic classes, and lesbians and gay men [emphasis in original]."[31] I agree with both

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[28] bell hooks, "Feminism: A Movement to End Sexist Oppression," in *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives*, eds. Carole R. McCann and Seung-Kyung Kim (New York: Routledge, 2003), 53.

[29] Ibid., 52.

[30] Ibid., 56.

[31] Foss, Foss, and Griffin, 2.

hooks' and Foss, Foss, and Griffin's assessments, and contend that contemporary feminism—while historically founded upon the fight to end the oppression of women—has since expanded to include resistance not just to sexist oppression but, rather, the oppression of all subaltern peoples.

To further this project's understanding of feminism relative to institutional forms of oppression, it is important to discuss patriarchy (as the historically dominant center of feminist resistance) before turning to other theoretical frames for analysis. In discussing this term, I pay specific attention to the connection between patriarchy and neoliberalism as parallel—and in many ways intersecting—forms of oppression. Doing so, I suggest, opens up a space in this project for a feminist interrogation of neoliberalism focused less on overriding patriarchal structures, and focused more on the influences of market economics, consumption, and globalization on the subaltern. It is safe to say that much has been written within feminist scholarly circles about patriarchy over the last three decades. However, it is important to recognize that—like feminism itself—definitions of patriarchy vary among scholars, and thus it is crucial to engage some of these approaches as a way to make clear the conception of patriarchy that will be used in framing this project.

I would like to begin with Adrienne Rich's conception of patriarchy as "the domination of the fathers."[32] In offering this view of patriarchy Rich emphasizes the inherent multi-facetedness of contemporary patriarchy. Not unlike the broader view of feminism as a fight against the oppression of all subaltern peoples, Rich's framing of patriarchy's influence is similarly sprawling and encompassing. Indeed, she writes of patriarchy as being "the

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[32] Adrienne Rich, *Arts of the Possible: Essays and Conversations*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 11.

original model of oppression on which all others are based."[33] I do not necessarily agree, completely, with Rich's assertion. While Rich's argument suggests that patriarchy is the source of all oppression, I suggest that this move casts too narrow of a light on the various other institutional power structures upon which society functions. To say that neoliberalism, for example, is predicated on patriarchy is, in my opinion, a bit too wide of a conflation to make. Instead, I seek to frame patriarchy as one of many institutional forms of oppression worthy of being considered and critiqued. The more important takeaway from Rich's argument has to do with power. Implicated within her argument is the idea that oppression, at its roots, is based on power dynamics regardless of whether they are associated with gender, class, race, or anything in between.

Perhaps bell hooks' noted conception of patriarchy as "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" might be a more apt, and indeed helpful, framework through which to filter this project's analysis. In offering her framework, hooks argues that the very fabric of Western society has become subordinated to the perpetuation of interlocking systems of racism, capitalism, and sexism that combine to form the definition of "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" that she offers.[34] Her articulation of this multi-faceted power structure does not stop at naming these interlocking systems, but goes further by pointing out the varied hierarchical power structures and systems of domination that are embedded within each.[35] Summarizing this view, Foss, Foss, and Griffin suggest that hooks' articulation seeks to

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[33] Ibid.

[34] bell hooks, "Design: A Happening Life," in *Readings in Feminist Theory*, eds. Karen A. Foss, Sonja K. Foss, and Cindy L. Griffin (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2006), 71.

[35] Foss, Foss, and Griffin, *Feminist Rhetorical Theories*, 76.

critique and "intervene in the culture of domination that characterizes Western culture."[36] Moreover, they argue that hooks' characterization of patriarchy opens a space for feminist analysis that combines "the interlocking structures of sexism, racism, class elitism, capitalism, [and] heterosexism."[37] This approach is central to the interrogation of power structures that this project aims to complete.

Much of hooks' work on the subject is focused on the intersectional forces shaping oppression in black culture. For example, hooks herself notes that in some of her work she has centrally focused on the issue of black masculinity by paying particular attention to the ways in which racism and sexism combine to oppress.[38] These interlocking forms of oppression that make up the "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" that hooks notes are tangibly constructed and invoked in many of the social institutions of contemporary society, including religious institutions.[39] "White supremacist capitalist patriarchy" does not begin or end in any one place or with any one set of power structures. Though hooks herself acknowledges that she feels the patriarchal domination of women by men is the most prevalent in contemporary society, the concept's critical force actually stems from its recognition that while this may be the case (in hooks' view) there are, indeed, multiple power structures at work.[40]

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[36] Ibid., 45.

[37] Ibid.

[38] hooks, "Marching for Justice," 32.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Foss, Foss, and Griffin, *Feminist Rhetorical Theories*, 77.

Contemporary patriarchy, hooks suggests, stems from the ongoing social systems of marriage, capitalism, and family economics that have infiltrated everyday society.[41] More importantly, this sense of patriarchy is instilled in men (and women) as "a serious political commitment to maintaining political regimes throughout the United States and the world."[42] hooks' focus on the political manifestations of patriarchy are especially useful in unpacking some of the convergence points between patriarchy as a standalone power structure and other institutionalized forces dominated by politics, like neoliberalism, capitalism, and the like. Indeed, hooks is quite clear in her assertion that "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy," as a defining power structure in Western culture, is ultimately one of the more provocative and useful critical lenses through which to "describe the interlocking political systems that are the foundations of our nation's politics."[43] I agree with hooks' assessment, and join her in suggesting that this lens is not only useful as a descriptive tool, but is also a valuable theoretical perspective through which to critique, engage with, and politically resist the normative power structures of contemporary Christianity as exemplified in Compassion International's online sponsorship model.

It would be foolish not to recognize, as hooks certainly does, the importance of race and racism in the domination of the subaltern in contemporary society. Much of her scholarship focuses on issues faced by blacks, but she is purposeful in her act of combining her focus on racial critique with similar critiques of sexism and capitalism. Indeed, while much of her early work focused on issues facing black women feminists (see *Ain't I a*

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[41] bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman* (Boston: South End Press, 1981), 76.

[42] Ibid, 99.

[43] hooks, *The Will to* Change, 17.

Woman and *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, among others), she is nonetheless clear in her later work about the necessity of avoiding the pitfall of prioritizing one critique over another.[44] In combining these critiques, hooks' theory allows one to better stay clear of the creation of critical hierarchies that prioritize some identities and oppressions over others.[45] Indeed, I feel it necessary to recognize the purposefulness and critical power of this move by hooks in her construction of "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy." This point will be made clearer in this chapter's upcoming discussions of standpoint theory and intersectionality.

Alongside patriarchy, one of the typically overlooked concepts in hooks' conception is that of capitalism. hooks points out that many contemporary feminists have made it a point to focus on the intersection of class and the feminist struggle against patriarchal oppression.[46] She is clear throughout her work, however, that class remains a primary mechanism through which domination and oppression occurs in both the West and around the world. Structured primarily through interlocking forces of market economics and globalization, hooks is decisively straightforward with regards to the need for contemporary feminists to continue to interrogate capitalism as it is intertwined with other power structures like patriarchy and racism.[47] One of the values, then, of hooks' weaving together of racial, power, economic, and gendered critiques is that it allows for a more vibrant, full, and unobstructed analysis of identity and positionality as they are rendered by said market forces. As such, in invoking hooks' theoretical lens, I seek to avoid the pitfall of ignoring class in favor of race (or vice

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[44] Foss, Foss, and Griffin, *Feminist Rhetorical Theories*, 73.

[45] Ibid., 76.

[46] bell hooks, *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 8.

[47] Ibid., viii, 1.

versa), and instead hope to articulate how these various forces converge to normalize problematic aspects of capitalism in contemporary Christianity.

One of the most clearly articulated threads that connects hooks' conceptualization of "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" over the years is the concept's focus on domination. Domination, hooks contends, continues to be the "organizing principle of today's civilization."[48] Culturally, "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" is manifested in some of the most well-known, normative, and seemingly-accessible institutions of contemporary Western society. It is important to note that all members of these institutions are "agents of domination" due to the socializing and normalizing forces at play.[49] It is not just the rich white men of society (though they are certainly a force at play in this critique) that perpetuate these systems of domination, it is also everybody who internalizes and enforces the values of these institutions and power structures.[50] As such, it is crucial to not just critique the interlocking forces of sexism, capitalism, and racism, but also to create awareness and to give voice to those who are silenced and marginalized by each. This, as will be discussed in the closing chapter of this thesis, is a central, practical goal of this project. I seek, in invoking hooks' work, to not only critique these forces as they structure contemporary Christianity, but also to work to create positive political change in Christianity as a dominant social institution in contemporary society.

As I close my discussion of feminism, then, I have a few final comments before I launch into the remaining sections of this chapter. First, I would like to reiterate my stance

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[48] Ibid., 116.

[49] Foss, Foss, and Griffin, *Feminist Rhetorical Theories*, 76.

[50] bell hooks, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: The New Press, 1995), xii.

that feminism is not the end-all-be-all theoretical perspective of this project. Instead, I see feminist theory as a perspective through which to focus this project while simultaneously opening a wide space for the inclusion and use of other critical theoretical frames filtered through a feminist lens. In doing so, I seek to latch onto and complete bell hooks' call for genuine feminist liberation. She writes, "The only genuine hope of feminist liberation lies with a vision of social change that takes into consideration the ways interlocking systems of classism, racism, and sexism work to keep women exploited and oppressed."[51] I agree, and in combining these interlocking systems, I seek to create a theoretical space for an examination of other subaltern voices—in this case the children of Compassion International. So, as I march on, I will take heed of the calls for interdisciplinary critique discussed thus far, and in the coming pages will discuss specific theoretical perspectives for this project that range from feminist theories on standpoint and intersectionality to neoliberalism and rhetorical theory.

Standpoint Theory

Standpoint theory has had a contentious history (to say the least) over the last few years in feminist theory circles. It is no secret that feminist scholars—and for that matter non-feminist scholars as well—have been debating its theoretical validity and practicality for quite a while now. I certainly recognize the limitations of it as a theoretical approach, and I will work to illustrate its usability in the coming pages. I suggest that standpoint theory offers a unique theoretical platform through which to merge several critical identity approaches to rhetorical study. With standpoint theory's primary focus on the locations and borders of identity and the corresponding epistemic privileges and oppressions that occur with each, I

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[51] hooks, *Where We Stand*, 109.

seek to account for the ways in which the cacophony of identities—race, gender, class, nationality, and religion, among others—that are woven into the rhetorical fabric of Compassion International's online presence construct specific arguments. These arguments, I contend, work to construct unique positionalities and rhetorical spaces for both potential sponsor and potential sponsored child. A discussion of these respective sites of argument will be central to chapter three's discussion. For now, I turn to a more fully explicated conception of standpoint theory.

In a recent article, noted feminist and standpoint theory scholar Sandra Harding lamented the meandering history of the theory within academia. Harding argued, "It would be hard to find a theory within almost four decades of feminist research and scholarship that has remained as controversial as has standpoint theory."[52] It is quite astonishing that, of the multiple waves of feminist thought, of the nearly a half of a century of academic scholarship, of the thousands of articles and books, standpoint theory is, arguably, the approach most battered and bruised. Echoing Harding, Susan Hekman notes that the contemporary conception of standpoint theory is one that relegates the approach to the scholarly trash heap, "a quaint relic of feminism's less sophisticated past."[53] Fortunately, there are some contemporary scholars making active use of standpoint theory, and there are some efforts (notably a recent special issue dedicated to the theory in feminist philosophy journal *Hypatia*) to reinvigorate the theory for the twenty-first century.

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[52] Sandra Harding, "Standpoint Theories: Productively Controversial," *Hypatia* 24, no. 4 (2009): 192.

[53] Susan Hekman, "Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited," in *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*, ed. Sandra Harding (New York: Routledge, 2004): 225.

Originally, standpoint theory was devised to account for the location of knowledge and to establish a theoretical paradigm through which to legitimate alternative claims to truth—primarily those made by women. Pioneered out of Dorothy Smith's essay, "Women's Perspective as a Radical Critique of Sociology," standpoint theory sought to advance women's rights and women's discourses by better accounting for the difference between the gendered perspectives and power structures of Western society.[54] Speaking from the discipline of sociology (though the argument carries weight across disciplines), Smith notes this binary quite clearly and suggests that it is tangible in every sense of the word. She writes:

> The theories, concepts, and methods of our discipline claim to account for, or to be capable of accounting for and analyzing the same world as that which we experience directly. But these theories, concepts, and methods have been organized around and built up out of a way of knowing the world which takes for granted the boundaries of an experience in the same medium in which it is constituted. It therefore takes for granted and subsumes without examining the conditions of its existence.[55]

Smith's early conceptualization of what would become standpoint theory thus hinged on an attempt to shine a clearer light on the epistemological and ontological experiences of women.[56] Innately distinct from those of men, these experiences were caught up in a web of power structures that could not, in Smith's view, be deconstructed with the tools of those same power structures. Instead an alternative approach predicated on location was needed. This alternative came to be regarded as standpoint theory.

Predicated on the situatedness of all people within society, Smith's articulation of the theory turned previous sociological theory on its head. Explicating this idea, she writes:

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[54] Dorothy Smith, "Women's Perspective as a Radical Critique of Sociology," in *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*, ed. Sandra Harding (New York: Routledge, 2004): 21-22.

[55] Ibid., 27.

[56] Ibid., 22.

"Women's perspective, as I have analyzed it here, discredits sociology's claim to constitute an objective knowledge independent of the sociologist's situation. Its conceptual procedures, methods, and relevances are seen to organize its subject matter from a determinate position in society. This critical disclosure becomes, then, the basis for an alternative way of thinking [about] sociology."[57] As such, standpoint theory was born on an epistemological bed, and that foundation continues through to today. When using this perspective the only way of examining knowledge is to begin from within.[58] While not named as standpoint theory, and certainly not without its holes, Smith's early conception is, nonetheless, an important starting point for the examination of texts from a feminist rhetorical perspective based in standpoint theory.

Smith's essay was focused solely on the experiences and power struggles of women. This was certainly the case of much of early standpoint theory, and it is imperative to note standpoint theory's historical focus on women. It is equally crucial to recognize the foundational commitment of standpoint theory to "the high value of women, their activities, needs, and desires," and the epistemological implications that follow from this commitment.[59] However, with this acknowledgment I turn to one of the primary critiques of standpoint theory as it was initially conceived. Like much of early feminist scholarship, a full discussion of the spectrum of difference—the various interlocking identities that existed within the identity category of women—was not the primary focus of most writing on standpoint theory. This is certainly one of—if not the biggest—critiques of standpoint theory.

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[57] Ibid., 28.

[58] Ibid.

[59] Harding, "Standpoint Theories," 193.

Contrary to the approach taken by early feminist theorists, the approach to standpoint theory offered as a theoretical foundation for this thesis expands the epistemological potential of the perspective to account for not just women's experiences and unique points-of-view, but also those of other marginalized groups. As such, much of the analysis in the later chapters of this project is predicated on a blended perspective that filters various critical approaches—namely critique of neoliberalism and critical race theory—through the transcendental potential of standpoint theory and intersectionality. Indeed, standpoint theory has been called a "trans-disciplinary" theoretical approach with the innate potential to weave together strains of critical scholarship on race, class, sexuality, and religion (among others).[60] So, with this project I seek to account for the ways in which Compassion International constructs and highlights various standpoints while simultaneously hiding others.

Epistemically, one of the central tenets of standpoint theory as it evolved was the recognition of a "*naturalistic* conception of knowing" [emphasis in original].[61] Essentially, this understanding of standpoint acknowledges a purposeful framing of knowledge upon which the theory—if it is to be successfully employed—must hinge. Here, Joseph Rouse's articulation of standpoint theory is helpful. He writes:

> They [knowledge claims] arise in specific circumstances and have real consequences. They are not merely representations in an idealized logical space, but events within a causal nexus. It matters politically as well as epistemically which concepts are intelligible, which claims are heard and understood by whom, which features of the world are perceptually salient, and which reasons are understood to be relevant and forceful, as well as which conclusions are credible.[62]

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[60] Ibid., 193.

[61] Joseph Rouse, "Standpoint Theories Reconsidered," *Hypatia* 24, no. 4 (2009): 201.

[62] Ibid.

As the above selection articulates, a useful aspect of standpoint theory is its focus on illuminating the everyday knowledges that are derived from daily, lived experience. Moreover, as Rouse suggests, it is critical to give voice to the silenced sites of knowledge. I interpret this suggestion to include not only more private places of knowledge construction, such as the home, but more broadly as the salient experiences of the marginalized groups of society. In addition to this approach, standpoint theory provides a lens through which to attempt to understand how these discourses impact the dominant spheres of society. As such, this project aims to account for the positional and rhetorical impacts of both the sponsored child situated on the margins of society as well as the potential sponsor in the center.

Another important aspect of standpoint theory as it will be applied in this project is the clarification made by standpoint scholars between "acknowledgment and inclusion" and "serious engagement" of the marginalized identities of women, racial minorities, and the lower socio-economic classes of society.[63] This serious engagement, feminist scholars argue, entails more than simply broadening the scope of inquiry. Rather, it requires a thorough analysis of the power structures, the power differentials, and the multiple borders that are constructed to establish zones of otherization and marginalization. Our identities are innately tied to our abilities to employ power in contemporary society. Personal identity, Cheryl Glenn suggests, becomes one's "cultural capital, one's economic, political and social power."[64] It is thus through critical examinations of the ways in which identity informs power and functions as a conduit for institutional power structures to be effective that standpoint theory serves as a valuable mechanism for this project. Such an examination of

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[63] Harding, 193.

[64] Cheryl Glenn, *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004), 27.

positionality relative to power is what this project seeks to accomplish in its critique of Compassion International. When examining the positional and rhetorical arguments constructed by Compassion International, then, I seek to shine a light on the ways in which multiple forces of oppression continue to solidify these problematic power structures and borders.

Indeed, this project seeks to use standpoint theory as a theoretical gateway into the oppressive worlds created by various institutional power structures. In reviewing the theoretical legacy of standpoint theory Sandra Harding suggests that much of these forms of oppression (she focuses on "poverty" and "misery") can be found in the workings of institutional systems like education, the economy, and the law (among others).[65] With this project, I seek to expand Harding's focus by including two additional institutions—religion and technology. As was illustrated in the introduction to this project, the primary religious focus of this thesis is on Protestant, evangelical Christianity. With regards to technology, I will be focusing primary on the Internet platform as the site of much of Compassion International's mission model. In offering a foundation for the critiquing of these systems, Harding goes on to suggest, "Standpoint research projects are focused on critically examining what's wrong and what's still useful or otherwise valuable in the dominant institutions of society, their cultures and practices."[66] This, I suggest, is a helpful lens through which to broadly focus the aims of this project. So, as I press on, I seek to place this project's goals within the spectrum offered by Harding. In my critique of the rhetorical constructions of oppression illuminated by Compassion International's sponsorship model, I aim to

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[65] Harding, "Standpoint Theories," 195.

[66] Ibid.

highlight the ongoing forces of oppression woven into contemporary Christianity through modern technologies.

Intersectionality

The central question concerning contemporary intersectionality concerns the conception of a "politics of location."[67] Chandra Mohanty suggests that our "politics of location" refers to "the historical, geographical, cultural, psychic, and imaginative boundaries which provide the ground for political definition and self-definition for contemporary U.S. feminists."[68] This definition, while quite expansive, serves as a theoretical mechanism through which to connect the previous discussion of standpoint theory to the act of rhetorical criticism integral to this project. I suggest, when working with Compassion International, that the ways in which various identities of both sponsor and child are framed is crucial to an understanding of how power structures such as neoliberalism, technology, and Christianity are operating within contemporary evangelical mission work.

It is not enough just to focus on a single standpoint. Instead, standpoint theory must be infused with a discussion of multiple identities.[69] Indeed, contemporary feminist scholars such as Jeannine Hill Fletcher have argued that a "fundamental insight of feminist theory has been that identities are not constructed on a singular feature (e.g., gender or religion) but that persons are located in multiple spaces and that these aspects of identity are mutually

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[67] Adrienne Rich, "Notes Toward a Politics of Location," 448; Sandra Harding, "Introduction: Standpoint Theory as a Site of Political, Philosophic, and Scientific Debate." in *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual & Political Controversies*, ed. Sandra Harding (New York: Routledge, 2004), 8; Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Feminist Encounters: Locating the Politics of Experience," In *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives*, eds. Carole R. McCann and Seung-Kyung Kim (New York: Routledge, 2003), 460.

[68] Mohanty, "Feminist Encounters," 460.

[69] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991), 1243-1244.

informing."[70] Hill Fletcher also outlines the importance of taking into account religious affiliation as legitimate identity marker through which to make claims about intersectionality.[71]

To be clear, a discussion of the politics of location through the frame of intersectionality is a difficult path to go down. First and foremost, it is critical to work to avoid a hierarchization of identity. When marginalized peoples are forced by dominant institutions of society to choose between, say, race and gender, they are inherently oppressed.[72] It is crucial, then, for scholars to take notice of the possibility of such hierarchy within contemporary institutions and to avoid reifying such problematic hierarchies in their scholarship. I seek to do this (and to avoid the aforementioned reification) through an examination of the various racial, socio-economic, national, and religious identities embedded within Compassion International's framing of both sponsor and child.

Additionally, Mohanty raises another important concern to take heed of when moving forward with this project. She argues that the idea of location offered above implies both self *and* collective definition.[73] For example, by highlighting the Christian, first-world, and American positionalities of potential sponsors, I am placing them into very wide, murky, categories. This certainly has the potential to be problematic, as surely not all potential sponsors are the same (even within their respective categories). As such, like other feminist scholars, I wish to make this point very clear: I recognize the limitations of intersectionality

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[70] Jeannine Hill Fletcher, "Shifting Identity: The Contribution of Feminist Thought to Theologies of Religious Pluralism," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 19, no. 2 (2003), 6-7.

[71] Ibid., 15.

[72] Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins," 1244.

[73] Mohanty, "Feminist Encounters," 469.

as a theoretical mechanism. However, I suggest that, in the long run, it provides a nonetheless helpful lens through which to examine the discursive implications of contemporary Christian humanitarian discourse. I hope to articulate this usefulness a bit more clearly in the following paragraphs.

The multifacetedness of each person's identity offers a seemingly infinite number of epistemologies that are at work in society. Race, gender, religion, age, sexuality, class, nationality, ability, etc.—all are possible identities through which people come to experience the world, themselves, and the rhetorical objects around them. While respecting the multifacetedness of identity, I will rely primarily on a discussion of race, class, nationality, religion, and accessibility to technology as positional markers in the overall construction of identity within the scope of this project's analysis. I seek to examine the rhetorical implications of these convergent identities, and hope to unpack the ways that these identities are innately shaped by the neoliberal, dehumanizing, and oppressive forces of various normative power structures within contemporary Christian organizations.

To accomplish this task, I will rely heavily on Alison Wylie's extension of Donna Haraway's conception of situated knowledges. Wylie's argument is especially useful in articulating a theoretical potential for intersectionality. She writes, "What individuals experience and understand is shaped by their location in a hierarchically structured system of power relations: by the material conditions of their lives, by the relations of production and reproduction that structure their social interactions, and by the conceptual resources they have to represent and interpret these relations."[74] As suggested above, the role of interlocking

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[74] Alison Wylie, "Why Standpoint Matters," In *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual & Political Controversies*, ed. Sandra Harding (New York: Routledge, 2004), 343.

identities is fundamental in shaping the experiences and knowledges of all of us in society. How do these identities—those of race, class, nationality, and so on—contribute to the continued normalization of neoliberalism in humanitarian discourse? With this project, I aim to pose an answer to this question, and to offer a discussion of the ways in which this problematic trend might be reversed within contemporary Christianity.

So, I hope to engage in a critical endeavor aimed at uncovering the limitations and potentialities of these situated knowledges.[75] To do so, however, cannot be accomplished via standpoint theory and intersectionality alone. No—as discussed previously—I plan to blend these perspectives with a critical rhetorical approach founded also on an interrogation of neoliberalism, recent scholarship on humanitarian discourse, and rhetorical theory on *phantasia*. Each will be addressed in the pages to follow. Moving forward, then, let us shift our critical eye toward a discussion of neoliberalism.

<div align="center">Neoliberalism & Humanitarianism</div>

Neoliberalism

Much has been written within rhetorical scholarship on various issues brought on by the rise of neoliberalism in contemporary society. Before I launch into my summation of these perspectives, I would like first to frame this project's conception of neoliberalism and the impact of market economics through a perspective offered by James Arnt Aune at the outset of his book *Selling the Free Market: The Rhetoric of Economic Correctness*. He suggests that one of his book's central purposes is to "[help] readers develop ways of talking about economic policy issues publicly."[76] He goes on to note, "U.S. citizens for some time

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[75] Ibid., 344.

[76] James Arnt Aune, *Selling the Free Market: The Rhetoric of Economic Correctness* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2001), xiii.

have lacked the ability to deliberate publicly about the meaning of the market and its increasing invasion of every aspect of their daily lives."[77] Aune's framing of the lack of citizen awareness about the market power structures embedded within contemporary society is a central exigence for the incorporation of neoliberal theory into this project. I find his naming of the normalization of market capitalism as "an invasion" to be a helpful frame, as well. I contend that this invasion has certainly permeated both contemporary Christianity and humanitarian discourse more broadly. So, in the following pages, I seek to lay out a theoretical framework through which this project can work to respond to Aune's concern. By discussing the intersections of neoliberalism, globalization, and market capitalism through the development of online technologies, I aim to lay a foundation for an uncovering of the multiple, and incredibly problematic, dehumanizing power structures upon which Compassion International's sponsorship platform rests.

Of course, neoliberalism did not spring up out of the ether, fully formed, claws out, ready to attack society. No, instead, it developed meticulously out of a series of global events including World War II, the Vietnam War, and the subsequent rise of technology and the globalization of economics and human capital.[78] While I do not have the space in this project to fully articulate the contours of these historical pillars of neoliberalism, I do wish to respect the idea that neoliberalism—like most institutional power structures—is one with deeply entrenched political, social, and cultural histories. As such, neoliberalism is an ever-evolving

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[77] Ibid.

[78] Bensaid, Daniel, "Permanent Scandal," in *Democracy in What State*, ed. Amy Allen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 16.

system, and because of this I argue it is prudent to continue to interrogate both old *and* new sites of intersection between neoliberalism and other societal institutions.

Building off of the exigence laid out by Aune previously, this project's theoretical mapping of neoliberalism will also be based off of Wendy Brown's scholarship. Particularly, I find her article "American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and De-Democratization" to be a keenly insightful discussion of the contemporary influences and problems of neoliberalism. Of particular importance to this project is Brown's focus on the intersections between neoliberalism and religion. Her argument, here, is direct. She writes, "many American churches and other religious institutions today have significant corporate dimensions (and often address their constituencies in neoliberal discourse)."[79] I agree, and seek to build off of this framework with this project. So, using her template as a guide, I will next briefly contextualize the definitions and scope of neoliberalism that will frame the analysis sections of this project.

In Brown's conception, neoliberalism is "a market-political rationality."[80] More specifically, she argues that neoliberalism should be thought of as the following:

> … it must be conceived of as more than a set of free market economic policies that dismantle welfare states and privatize public services in the North, make wreckage of efforts at democratic sovereignty in the South, and intensify income disparities everywhere. Certainly neoliberalism comprises these effects, but as a political rationality, it also involves a specific and consequential organization of the social, the subject, and the state.[81]

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[79] Wendy Brown, "American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and De-Democratization," *Political Theory* 34, no. 6 (2006): 698.

[80] Ibid., 691.

[81] Ibid., 693.

There are two key pieces of information in this definition of neoliberalism that are critical for

this project's theoretical foundation moving forward. First, as is clear with Brown's

articulation of "North" and "South" (although this binary is itself problematic), neoliberalism

is a global phenomenon at work not only in the United States or the West, but worldwide. Of

particular consequence within this globalized framework is the idea of otherization within

neoliberal institutions. How does neoliberalism, as Jean Comaroff argues, get projected onto

a victimized other?[82] This other is, I argue, most often the "developing world," the Global

South, the non-Christian—all those bounded within the subaltern. How, then, does Christian

neoliberalism reproduce such acts of otherization and victimage through the acts of

sponsorship by Compassion International? Secondly—and perhaps more importantly—

Brown's framework argues that neoliberalism plays an immensely pivotal role in the

construction of individual subjects relative to social institutions such as Christianity and

various humanitarian organizations.

Indeed, Brown goes on to suggest that not only is neoliberalism a purposeful and

normative institutional structure, but further argues that it is so pervasive that it

fundamentally shapes the aforementioned social institutions through a "domination" of

market concerns and rationality.[83] Once again domination rears its ugly head, and here, I

suggest, bell hooks' theory of "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" can be useful. As

such, I seek to interrogate the ways in which Compassion International's sponsorship model

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[82] Jean Comaroff, "Beyond Bare Life: AIDS, (Bio)Politics, and the Neoliberal Order," *Public Culture* 19, no. 1 (2007): 199.

[83] Brown, "American Nightmare," 694.

and discursive framework is indicative of neoliberal processes of subject formation along socio-economic, religious, and racial lines.

To do this, I will focus the discussion of domination and positionality through this lens in the chapters to follow. I am particularly interested in examining the ways in which Compassion International, through the normalizing gaze of neoliberalism, renders both sponsors and sponsored children as "rational economic actors" in the Christian sphere of life.[84] How is Christianity delegitimized as a morally good social institution in the name of individual acts of economic sponsorship? How, as Brown suggests, are Christians working within Compassion International's sponsorship framework focused more on their spiritual "self-care" rather than the broader missionary goals of the organization?[85]

Ultimately, I aim to address these questions by interrogating the neoliberal implications for broader Christianity. To do so I will incorporate the idea of Christian citizenship into this project. Brown argues that there is an immense neoliberal impact on democratic citizenship in contemporary society. She writes, "Citizenship, reduced to self-care, is divested of any orientation toward the common, thereby undermining an already weak investment in an *active citizenry* and an already thin concept of a *public* good from a liberal democratic table of values."[86] If—as I suggest is the case—the broader positionality of "Christian" can be conceptualized within a framework of spiritual or religious citizenship, what are the broader repercussions of a corporate, economically-driven, missionary platform? How does this reshape the potential Christian sponsor's act of spiritual good as, instead, an

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[84] Ibid.

[85] Ibid.

[86] Ibid., 695.

act of spiritual consumption in the name of personal self-care? This is a guiding question for

this project, and is one that I suggest can be best answered by adapting conceptions of

citizenship to apply to Christianity as a social institution.

Finally, as has been alluded to in the previous pages, I see neoliberalism as a vital site

through which to frame and engage with Compassion International as a humanitarian

organization. In doing so, I seek to supplement the aforementioned definitions and frames

with Didier Fassin's argument that humanitarian work functions as "a politics of life."[87]

Essentially, Fassin suggests that it is prudent to conceptualize humanitarian work, and by

extension humanitarian discourse as well, as an effort to save individuals through a targeted,

neoliberal process of selection. According to a predetermined logic of interwoven

humanitarian priorities, this "politics of life" produces what Fassin calls "public

representations of the human beings to be defended (e.g., by showing them as victims rather

than combatants and by displaying their condition in terms of suffering rather than the

geopolitical situation)."[88] I find this to be a useful starting place through which to begin to

articulate this project's specific focus on humanitarian organizations and their discourses.

Contemporary Christian humanitarianism is, I argue, a neoliberal enterprise that functions as

a "politics of life." To illustrate this more fully, I next turn to a more holistic discussion of

humanitarian rhetoric.

Visual Humanitarianism

There is much that could be said about the discursive and critical significance of

humanitarian work in contemporary society. Much scholarship has focused on it, and there

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[87] Didier Fassin, "Humanitarianism as a Politics of Life," *Public Culture* 19, no. 3 (2007): 500.

[88] Ibid., 501.

are numerous books and articles that I could invoke in articulating the platform upon which I seek to critique Compassion International as a contemporary humanitarian organization. With this in mind, in the following section I aim to narrow this focus by discussing humanitarian work through the earlier critical lenses of this project focused on feminist and neoliberal critique. In doing so, I seek to construct a foundation that illuminates the contours of contemporary humanitarian aid. Where and why does humanitarianism occur? Who is targeted? How are these humanitarian organizations rhetorically framed? All will be central questions of this project's analysis, and as such I hope to briefly unpack important terms and concepts for this future discussion.

To begin, I turn to the work of rhetorical scholar Wendy S. Hesford. In the introduction to her book, *Spectacular Rhetorics: Human Rights Visions, Recognitions, Feminisms*, Hesford writes of a need for the "critical engagement of the normative frameworks and narratives that underlie human rights law, [that] shape the process of cultural and legal recognition, and [that] delimit the possible forms of public response to violence and injustice."[89] More specifically, she contends that critiques of humanitarian organizations must directly focus on the ways in which aid workers and organizations create and perpetuate discourses that construct humanity through various technologies and visual platforms.[90] This project's examination and interrogation of Compassion International wholeheartedly rests on the foundation laid out by Hesford above. As discussed in the introduction to this project, I define Compassion International as a prime example of a genre of contemporary Christian— and predominantly Protestant—humanitarian organizations. Moreover, as the subsequent

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[89] Wendy S. Hesford, *Spectacular Rhetorics: Human Rights Visions, Recognitions, Feminisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 3.

[90] Ibid.

analysis chapters will show, much of this analysis is focused exclusively on the online visual and structural arguments of Compassion International's sponsorship model. Thus, I seek to interrogate Compassion International as a clear example of Hesford's call for critical engagement of humanitarian organizations and the visual and technological platforms upon which they operate.

In framing the visual rhetorical foundations of Compassion International's sponsorship model, I hope to directly engage with the wide spectrum of recent rhetorical scholarship on visual rhetoric. Most of this discussion of these theoretical approaches will be explained in full detail in the upcoming analysis chapters as they apply directly to the analysis I will be making. For now, though, I seek to briefly outline some of the key ideas upon which my analysis of the visual images of contemporary humanitarian discourse will be framed. Cara Finnegan, for example, is clear in her contention that photographs should not be separated from the texts and discourses they accompany, and that photographs are products of the visual culture from which they are created.[91] I agree, and I seek to employ Finnegan's framework in discussing not only the various photographs that appear on Compassion International's website, but also in discussing the visual layout of the website itself. Context, Finnegan asserts, is pivotal when conducting a rhetorical criticism of a visual object. She writes, "We do not encounter photographs in an isolated fashion; each encounter is framed by the context in which the photograph is experienced."[92] With the importance of this contextual focus in mind, this project's analysis of visual humanitarian discourses will be predicated on a thorough discussion of not only humanitarian culture, but the specific genre,

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[91] Cara A. Finnegan, *Picturing Poverty: Print Culture and FSA Photographs* (Washington: Smithsonian Books, 2003), xv.

[92] Ibid., xvii.

purpose, and goals of contemporary evangelical missionary organizations like Compassion International.

Another key concept that will be used to frame the visual aspects of Compassion International is the idea of images as "windows." I am particularly interested in adapting the way in which this idea is used by Lisa M. Mitchell in her discussion of ultrasound imaging technologies. She writes, "Most people—which includes practitioners, pregnant women, and the wider public—perceive ultrasound as a neutral and passive technology, as a 'window' through which the viewer can observe the fetus."[93] This metaphor functions in multiple ways. At the most shallow level, the "window" refers to the screen of the ultrasound monitor itself—the portal through which expectant mothers, partners, and medical staff can view the unborn child. Mitchell's argument seeks to push this idea a bit further by suggesting that "Actually, ultrasound images are highly ambiguous and must be interpreted."[94] Ultrasound images, therefore, are discursive objects—in the same vein articulated by Finnegan—that are worthy of critical interpretation.

What's interesting in Mitchell's argument is her articulation of the ways in which most ultrasound images—to the majority of expectant families as non-medically trained people—are highly ambiguous. They are images that parents, for the most part, cannot recognize outside of the idea that the image inchoately represents their child. "Ultrasound," Mitchell suggests, "is firmly lodged in North American cultural discourses as a 'normal part of pregnancy' that allows prospective parents a sneak preview of their infant's sex, age, size,

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[93] Lisa M. Mitchell, *Baby's First Picture: Ultrasound and the Politics of Fetal Subjects* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 5.

[94] Ibid.

physical normality, and personality."[95] Moreover, the image of the fetus presented through the "window" of the ultrasound has become normatively rendered as "so emotionally compelling that it has become a source of cultural entertainment."[96] All that said, I sure you are wondering why I have spent the better part of a page discussing pregnancy. How, you might be asking, is this relevant to the task at hand with this project?

I suggest that a very similar phenomenon is occurring with the visual contours of Compassion International's online platform. The images of children—waiting to be sponsored—function as "windows" through which the sponsor can become emotionally connected and attached to the idea of sponsorship. Not unlike the projections and visualizations that can be made about sex, age, personality, and so on, via the ultrasound image, so too can the photographic snapshot of a child within Compassion International's online catalog function as a sort of "pathetic window" through which potential sponsors are actively persuaded to contribute. I will return to Mitchell's framing of images in the analysis sections of this project, and for the moment I return to Hesford's line of inquiry in order to more broadly frame the visual implications of humanitarian rhetoric.

One of the primary arguments proposed by Hesford concerns the idea of "the human rights spectacle."[97] In Hesford's view, it is crucial (if not necessary) for rhetorical critics of humanitarian organizations to conceptualize the ways in which contemporary society has constructed human rights—and the humanitarian workers and organizations that respond to violations of human rights—through a perspective "mediated by visual representation,"

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[95] Ibid.

[96] Ibid., 6.

[97] Hesford, *Spectacular Rhetorics*, 7.

among other things.[98] Essentially, this perspective calls for purposeful recognition of the rhetorical and political power of visual and discursive "appropriations of human suffering in activist, cultural, and legal contexts."[99] Other scholars working on contemporary human rights discourses also support Hesford's focus on the power of the image. Susan Moeller, for example, calls for direct and purposeful interrogation of the media's role in shaping human rights discourses. I concur, and seek to extend and expand her conception of media to focus specifically on how online technologies frame contemporary human rights discourses.[100] Indeed, both arguments are integral to this project's analysis, and in this thesis I thus aim to extend their visions by further joining them with the theoretical approaches highlighted previously in this chapter.

In her focus on the spectacle and the visual representations that create it, Hesford further notes the importance of framing rhetorical critiques within the larger political structures of contemporary society.[101] As an example of this she cites the globalizing and capitalist forces embedded within humanitarian practices.[102] These are both certainly important and will be discussed in totality in the coming chapters of this project. Like Hesford, I contend that analyses of such discourses, visual representations, and organizations must be more specifically framed within a discussion of domination. Hesford cites gender, race, class, ethnicity, nationality, ability, and sexuality as examples of such sites of

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[98] Ibid., 7, 20.

[99] Ibid.

[100] Susan Moeller. *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 3.

[101] Hesford, *Spectacular Rhetorics*, 8.

[102] Ibid., 9.

domination.[103] I certainly agree, but with this project aim, again, to add two sites to her list—

religion and technology. Both are prime frameworks for the interrogation and analysis of

constructions of the humanitarian spectacle, and I contend that both are filtered through the

normative gaze of the "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" of contemporary society. As

such, critics must not stop at feminist critiques of the "morality market" of humanitarian

rhetorics but must widen the discussion. This project, then, seeks to widen the critical

discussion of humanitarian rhetorics by more fully examining the interlocking forces of

capitalism, neoliberalism, religion, and technology that construct much of these

contemporary human rights spectacles.

Also of particular importance is Hesford's recognition of the ways in which the

"history of human rights can be told as a history of selective and differential visibility, which

has positioned certain bodies, populations, and nations as objects of recognition and granted

others the power and means to look and to confer recognition."[104] Hesford's articulation of

the variability of the human rights spectacle is spot on, and it speaks to the racial, gendered,

and neoliberal power forces at play in Western society. Moreover, she is clear in her

articulation that these forces, while certainly at work in contemporary society, are certainly

predicated on historical power structures and technologies.[105]

Embedded within this argument is a recognition of the ways in which these power

structures silence and render various subaltern populations invisible. Of course, both the

granting of humanitarian visibility and the lack of visibility each come with issues for

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[103] Ibid., 12.

[104] Ibid., 30.

[105] Ibid., 51-52.

subaltern populations to face. With visibility comes the problems of the aforementioned human rights spectacle. While increased organizational visibility carries the potential for subaltern populations to have a voice and, as Cheryl Glenn suggests, signal the power and liberatory potential of previously marginalized voices.[106] All too often, though, the increased visibility of humanitarian aid workers and organizations actually precludes this potential for the voices of sponsored peoples. Acts of marginalization such as these are inherently violent. They render subaltern peoples through cracked and problematic humanitarian lenses in which they are conceptualized as the "suffering other" that is part of a highly complex, normative, and influential "affective economy that transforms others into objects of feeling and sight."[107] Indeed, this calls to mind the "politics of life" idea outlined by Fassin previously. This is particularly the case with populations outside of the United States. Individuals, groups, and entire countries that exist on the global periphery are often more difficult to conceptualize outside of this affective economy, and in order to create awareness and to recruit sponsorship it is typically necessary for organizations to work "to make an audience 'feel' the situation" in purposeful, specific ways.[108] In looking at Compassion International as a site of increased Christian humanitarian visibility, I hope to interrogate the acts of invisibility, dehumanization, and silencing that occur despite the increased visualization brought to the plight of subaltern children by the organization.

Indeed, Hesford gets at this point with her discussion of "recognition" as a central aspect of contemporary humanitarian discourse. She writes, "The scene of recognition,

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[106] Glenn. *Unspoken*, 3.

[107] Hesford, *Spectacular Rhetorics*, 57.

[108] Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue*, 38.

wrapped in American internationalist gift-giving rhetoric, appears to enable mutual recognition, but this scene often does little more than consummate an unequal exchange."[109] This is certainly a framework for interrogating the sponsorship models of organizations like Compassion International that are inherently predicated on this idea of "gift-giving" and the sense of visibility and recognition embedded within the organizations themselves. Thus, Hesford's argument picks up on the critiques of invisibility offered by Glenn and other feminist critics by calling for a "reset" of the ways in which we have come to view humanitarian discourses in today's society.[110] She calls for an engagement of humanitarian rhetorics that "calls into question the normative frameworks that govern subject formation and the scenes of suffering, as well as the recognition scenes in human rights discourse."[111] This leads to the final concept offered by Hesford that I will use to guide my analysis of Compassion International—that of "rhetorical agency."

While certainly not a term unique to Hesford, in her argument "rhetorical agency" takes on a purposeful connotation with regards to children, specifically, as they are represented through the human rights spectacle perpetuated by humanitarian workers and organizations. In making use of this term she writes that she aims to focus specifically on children's ability to represent themselves.[112] More specifically she calls for interrogation of the ways in which, "The spectacle of children suffering relies on certain international and national scripts—such as the rescue narrative and deterministic models of child

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[109] Hesford, *Spectacular Rhetorics*, 33.

[110] Ibid., 46.

[111] Ibid.

[112] Ibid., 154.

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development—that displace children's negotiations of enveloping discourses and material circumstances and thereby reinforce their disenfranchisement as moral agents and historical actors in the public sphere."[113] This call for interrogation of agency within the discourses of humanitarian organizations is another access point for this project. With regard to issues facing children, particularly from a public policy perspective, William Gormley Jr. argues that there is a decided lack of research and political resistance to the oppressions and challenges faced by children in the United States. He writes that though we claim to love children they "often get short shrift when public policy is made."[114] Using this as a point of departure, I suggest that this is all too often the case with rhetorical scholarship as well. As such, I hope to examine the ways in which Compassion International's sponsorship model silences *children's* unique agencies in the name of the multiple, normalized power structures already discussed in this chapter.

In doing so, this project also seeks to extend Hesford's argument that children's rhetorical agency is silenced in the name of the human rights spectacle's "rescue narrative" in which aid workers and humanitarian organizations operate on a platform of affective, "feeling capitalism" aimed at tapping into the heartstrings (and thus pockets) of first-world publics.[115] More importantly, with this project I plan on illustrating the ways in which Compassion International's sponsorship model and online platform function to perpetuate what Patrice DiQuinzio and Sharon M. Meagher refer to as a public policy rhetoric that is built upon the "paternalistic treatment of women and children that purports to protect them

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[113] Ibid.

[114] William T. Gormley Jr., *Voices for Children: Rhetoric and Public Policy* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2012), ix.

[115] Hesford, *Spectacular Rhetorics*, 159, 170.

but almost always disempowers them and sometimes harms them."[116] Again, similar to the argument made by Gormley in the previous paragraph, I find DiQuinzio's and Meagher's concept of a paternalistic discourse to be a vital access point for this project's critique of Compassion International. Their argument continues, "This logic is widespread in contemporary policy discourse, and it affects how people understand, and respond to, these policies and the problems they are meant to address."[117] While this is certainly evident in contemporary public policy rhetoric, I suggest that a similar phenomenon is actively occurring in contemporary humanitarian discourse as well. What are the ways in which the convergence of digital technologies, humanitarian rhetoric, and contemporary evangelicalism are combining to create a power structure that does just as DiQuinzio and Meagher argue—rendering children as disempowered, silenced, objects in need of economic and spiritual rescue?

Ultimately, the models discussed above pave the most clear and direct rhetorical framework for studying contemporary humanitarian discourses and attempting to answer this question. As exemplified by the concepts and ideas discussed above, the humanitarian foundation outlined in the previous pages aims to interrogate issues of violence, justice, silencing, and objectification that occur routinely within today's evangelical humanitarian organizations. In working to outline and resist these forms of humanitarian oppression, I seek to respond to Hesford's final call for ethical examination of the humanitarian and human rights discourses in our society. She writes that we, as critics, need to "better understand how

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[116] Patrice DiQuinzio and Sharon M. Meagher, "Introduction: Women and Children First," in *Women and Children First: Feminism, Rhetoric, and Public Policy*, eds. Sharon M. Meagher and Patrice DiQuinzio (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 1.

[117] Ibid.

culturally and legally based human rights representations legitimate certain identities, subjectivities, and social relationships."[118] I agree, and wish to respond directly to this call through the critiques of the sponsorship platform to be discussed in the upcoming two chapters, respectively.

<div align="center">Rhetorical Theory</div>

Feminist Rhetorical Criticism

With the final section of this chapter, I would like to briefly contextualize the previous discussions through a rhetorical frame. Rhetoric, Cheryl Glenn writes, "always inscribes the relation of language and power at a particular moment."[119] This includes "who may speak, who may listen or who will agree to listen, and what can be said."[120] Glenn's assertion is pivotal in framing the understanding of rhetoric that will guide this project. I do not claim to complete the same level of historiographic work that Glenn, and other feminist rhetorical scholars, have completed. I do, however, seek to better frame my analysis of Compassion International with a recognition that rhetoric is inherently predicated on power, and must be studied as such. As will be explicated in the following section on rhetorical theory, I seek to infuse the rhetorical theoretical frames of this project with the aforementioned perspectives on standpoint theory, intersectionality, and neoliberalism. Here, I do not wish to restate what has already been said with regards to the importance of various theories to this project. Instead, I seek to briefly articulate the ways in which such theoretical

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[118] Hesford, *Spectacular Rhetorics*, 191.

[119] Cheryl Glenn. *Rhetoric Retold*, 1.

[120] Ibid., 1-2.

models—when combined with rhetorical theory—result in a purposeful framework for constructive and politically productive rhetorical criticism.

Primarily, with this project I hope to encapsulate the feminist rhetorical criticism outlined by Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa E. Kirsch in their recent book, *Rhetorical Practices: New Horizons for Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy Studies*. Jones Royster and Kirsch argue that feminist rhetorical scholars have an obligation to focus their research on a multidisciplinary approach that seeks to "embrace a set of values and perspectives … that honors the particular traditions of the subjects of study, respects their communities, amplifies their voices, and clarifies their visions."[121] As I hope has been illustrated thus far through my discussions of feminist theory and neoliberal theory, I seek to blend the act of rhetorical criticism with a multidirectional, blended scholarly perspective that bridges disciplines and merges academic exigencies for this project. This blending of perspectives, as I hope has been made clear thus far, is centered on the important—but all-too-often overlooked—threads of power and domination that connect these different forms of institutional oppression. Scholarly conversations about these discursive threads, while increasing in number, need to continue.[122]

Moreover, this feminist rhetorical perspective seeks to not only critique objects such as Compassion International, it exists to push back against traditional power structures and interlocking forces of oppression that underlie institutions such as contemporary Christianity. Jones Royster and Kirsch call for a critical practice that persistently questions the actions and

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[121] Jones Royster and Kirsch, *Feminist Rhetorical Practices,* 14.

[122] Glenn, *Unspoken*, xii.

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judgments of such institutions.[123] This perspective, however, does not stop there. It pushes

even further by calling for tangible, political change—a call that I interpret as a need to offer

solutions to the broken institutional structures of humanitarian organizations and

contemporary Christian mission practices.[124] This will be evidenced throughout this project,

as I plan to combine a thorough rhetorical criticism of Compassion International—one that

combines multiple theoretical approaches—all while highlighting the importance of a

solution in the final chapter of this project. The social justice foundation for feminist

rhetorical criticism is, in my opinion, one that is crucial for the discipline as a whole. As will

be illustrated in the coming section on *phantasia*, I suggest that it is not only possible—but,

indeed, necessary—to continue to bridge rhetorical theory with a focus on issues of power,

injustice, silencing, and oppression. Only then, I contend, can rhetorical criticism work to

readily offer solutions and work to solve some of the ongoing rhetorical crises in

contemporary society.

Phantasia

 In recent rhetorical scholarship, the classical rhetorical term *phantasia* has been used

by several authors to continue the noble effort of using the original pillars of our discipline to

make arguments about contemporary society. *Phantasia* is the rhetorical idea of "bringing-

before-the-eyes," a classical term used to conceptualize the power of words and images to

frame and shift audience imaginations, positionalities, and understandings of objects.[125]

Fitting within what Debra Hawhee refers to as "rhetorical vision," *phantasia* is one of many

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[123] Jones Royster and Kirsch, *Feminist Rhetorical Practices*, 16.

[124] Ibid., 18, 31.

[125] Debra Hawhee, "Looking Into Aristotle's Eyes: Toward a Theory of Rhetorical Vision," *Advances in the History of Rhetoric* 14 (2011): 140.

"invigorating" rhetorical frames through which critics can examine the ways in which words, images, and other media combine to persuade.[126] Hawhee goes as far as to call *phantasia* "the central faculty for rhetorical vision," and she notes that it is "a crucial yet under-considered component of Aristotle's theory of rhetoric."[127] There is, of course, much that can be said about *phantasia* relative to contemporary society, and I believe that it provides a very useful platform upon which to frame my analysis of Compassion International. As such, I will briefly outline the rhetorical framework which I will use when employing *phantasia* as a critical tool in the upcoming analysis chapters.

Michele Kennerly's recent article on *phantasia* is particularly helpful in outlining the contours and practicality of this concept for my project. Kennerly begins her discussion with the following declaration, "Rhetoric's work often consists of giving presence to the *unseeable*—something not yet or never capable of being seen—or to the *unseen*—something visible but ignored [emphasis in original]."[128] I suggest that Kennerly's declaration fits squarely within the feminist rhetorical model offered previously by Glenn, Royster, Kirsch, and others. The role of the rhetorical critic—in many cases, at least—is not just to present an argument or interpretation of a text, but is also to highlight the hidden, the silent, the "unseen" and "unseeable." Moving forward, Kennerly suggests that rhetorical scholarship has the potential "To show something or someone previously unseen due to a deficit of attention or feeling."[129] This is, ultimately, the critical purpose of this project. I seek, through

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[126] Ibid., 139-140.

[127] Ibid., 141.

[128] Michele Kennerly, "Getting Carried Away: How Rhetorical Transport Gets Judgment Going," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 40, no 3 (2010): 269.

[129] Ibid.

a blending of the various theoretical paradigms offered thus far (and to come), to shine a light on the normative practices of Compassion International and to make, as Kennerly proposes, the unseen seen.

One aspect of *phantasia*, in particular, is useful for this project. Hawhee contends that, "Put most simply, the faculty of *phantasia* is activated when viewable matter is not immediately at hand and must be otherwise conjured, as with dreams, delusions and memories."[130] "Aristotle," she writes, "believes that other visual phenomena requiring one to exercise one's *phantasia*—to *phantasize*—include a reflection in water or in a mirror; the bright trace that remains after staring at the sun and then closing the eyes; a hazy figure in the distance that may or may not be a man."[131] The aforementioned examples of *phantasia*—all indicative of the intersections of memory, perception, and vision upon which the term is based—outline a unique framework for an examination of the lasting *phantastical* power of online images.

I argue that this is the case not just with online images more broadly, but is specifically evident with the images, words, and *perceptions* created by humanitarian organizations like Compassion International. The images, words, and other media of Compassion International's website function, I suggest, in two ways. Most immediately, they create the aforementioned visual "window" through which potential sponsors can connect with potential children to sponsor. Alongside this, I argue that such images, words, and other media function as a hazy, temporal collection of rhetorical objects through which potential

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[130] Hawhee, "Looking Into Aristotle's Eyes," 142.

[131] Ibid., 142-143.

sponsors continue to perceive themselves relative to their sponsored child long after the act of sponsorship has commenced.

I see this rhetorical phenomenon much in the same way that Ned O'Gorman conceives of the "after-images of phantasia," what he calls the "residue of sense perception" that can be "distorted by time, temperament, emotions" and other factors.[132] I seek to add to O'Gorman's list of factors by focusing more specifically on the ways in which positionality and standpoint function to shape *phantastical* acts of rhetorical imagination and remembrance. In doing so, I hope to address the following question. After the gift has been given, after the browser has been closed, what remains in the minds of potential sponsors? While this cannot be answered completely (as I cannot enter the head of every sponsor, of course), I do contend that Aristotle's conception of *phantasia* provides a path through which we can come to better understand the lingering power of the human rights spectacle as discussed by Hesford and others. As a rhetorical tool through which to better untangle the ever-shifting contours of human positionality, this project's invocation of *phantasia* fits within Hawhee's claim that "one cannot begin to account for human motives, desires, or suasion more generally without reference to the way people see, or *phantasia*."[133] I concur, and thus, *phantasia* will be a central rhetorical pillar upon which I will construct my analysis in this project.

Kennerly's interpretation of *phantasia* suggests that images and arguments have the potential to "transport" viewers and to alter perceptions in a variety of vivid ways. This

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[132] Ibid., 144; Ned O'Gorman, "Aristotle's 'Phantasia' in the 'Rhetoric': 'Lexis,' Appearance, and the Epideictic Function of Discourse," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 38, no. 1 (2005): 22.

[133] Hawhee, "Looking into Aristotle's Eyes," 145.

transport, she argues, functions to collapse the distance between people and places.[134] Indeed, this power is particularly evident in the shaping of audiences' perceptions of location relative to the objects and texts they are interacting with.[135] Kennerly's conception fits readily within Hawhee's contention that rhetorical vision—more holistically—has the innate ability to "form perception" and to help "words come to life."[136] This "captivating" power is a particularly insightful point of intersection between rhetorical theory and the discussion of the human rights spectacle discussed in the previous section. Kennerly argues that "Rhetorical *phantasia* does not merely captivate an audience: it takes them captive."[137] This is an important distinction, and it speaks—in the case of Compassion International—to the emotional power of human rights images. For example, this project, in employing the rhetorical vision framework offered above, aims to unpack the intersections between visual human rights images, humanitarian language, and the words and images associated with the neoliberal online platform upon which Compassion International's sponsorship model is built. Ultimately, I suggest that the images of children, the discourses of poverty, suffering, and need, function to didactically transport potential sponsors out of the comfort of their first-world position and into the "misery" of oppressed others.[138] Indeed, as will be explicated in the upcoming chapters, the *phantastical* impact of human rights discourse is evident and, indeed, is an untapped line of analysis in rhetorical scholarship today.

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[134] Kennerly, "Getting Carried Away," 270.

[135] Ibid., 274.

[136] Hawhee, "Looking into Aristotle's Eyes," 140.

[137] Kennerly, "Getting Carried Away," 275.

[138] Ibid., 285.

With this theoretical foundation in mind, I turn next to Compassion International's sponsorship model directly. By focusing on the digital manifestation of the platform through Compassion International's website, the upcoming chapter's analysis interrogates the visual and economic elements of the act of sponsorship. Framed through the aforementioned theories, this analysis takes aim at Compassion International's perpetuation of both neoliberalism and the human rights spectacle online.

Chapter Two

Christianity's Digital Agora:

Visual Economics of Sponsorship

Introduction

Contemporary society is inundated with the effects of our entrance into the digital

age. Nearly every aspect of daily life in Western society has gone digital. From the cars we

drive to the books we read, it is profoundly clear that much of what we do each and every

day is filtered through a digital lens. What, though, goes unnoticed when we overlook the

intricacies of our digital lives? What happens when digital platforms—such as those used to

purchase goods online—become so normative, so *ordinary*, that we come to expect them or,

worse, do not even take notice them at all? What, forging ahead with the previous example,

occurs when digital systems such as those used by retail websites are reproduced in

unexpected places like Christian missionary organizations? This chapter addresses these

questions.

Compassion International's sponsorship platform is an example of the digitally

unexpected. Infused with the images and spectacle one expects with a humanitarian,

philanthropic organization, Compassion International's homepage is also indicative of the

neoliberal, highly capitalist fabric of retail shopping websites. Compassion International's

website is built upon a digital platform that places children into shopping carts, constructs

problematic hierarchies, and dehumanizes children as "items" to be purchased by willing

missionary sponsors. These acts are not just unexpected, they are shocking considering the

mission statement, organizational history, and faith background of Compassion International.

Thus, Compassion International's sponsorship model is a prime example of the increasing

power that the digital realm has to subtly convey messages and perpetuate historical systems of domination.

A thorough investigation of Compassion International cannot begin without an investigation of its humanitarian platform. Compassion International is a Christian organization dedicated to sponsoring impoverished children in the Global South in the name of Jesus Christ. As a contemporary manifestation of Protestant missionary work, the organization is quite well known—and highly respected—within evangelical circles. How, though, does this model of sponsorship fit within contemporary humanitarian rhetoric? Does it fit within the model offered by Wendy Hesford and others (as discussed in the previous chapter)? I suggest that it does. Infused with the fervent religious passion and profound sense of spiritual commission that are some of the primary hallmarks of the evangelical tradition, Compassion International's sponsorship platform is a remarkable site for rhetorical analysis. By situating it within wider genres of humanitarianism and Christian missionary work, I contextualize Compassion International's platform as not only problematic, but also as indicative of the increasing normalization of oppressive humanitarian discourse in today's public sphere.

This chapter is organized in three parts. First, I introduce the idea of "gift giving" as a rhetorical framework for Compassion International's sponsorship model. This section contextualizes the model more holistically and provides an entryway through which to interrogate two primary levels of the rhetorical argument made by the platform itself. Using this framework, I next offer an analysis of the primary visual aspects of the website. In doing so, I focus on the influence of colors, layout, and juxtaposition of images and text. In the final section of this chapter, I focus on the economic framework of the sponsorship platform.

These discussions are, by no means, the only elements worth investigating. I suggest, though, that they are the most vivid examples of the problematic aspects of the sponsorship model. I argue that they interact together to create a rich rhetorical lens through which Compassion International persuades potential sponsors to give. Within this act of persuasion Compassion International's sponsorship model constructs children as dehumanized objects available for both economic and spiritual consumption.

<div align="center">Christian Humanitarianism Online</div>

The primary mechanism through which Compassion International's sponsorship model constructs sponsors as digital missionaries is through a rhetoric of "spiritual gift giving." The latter part of this term can go by many names, including (but certainly not limited to) philanthropy, charity, the aforementioned gift giving, and so on. Regardless of what one calls it, however, it is important to note that this rhetoric has been, and continues to be, an integral component of numerous cultural and religious traditions.[139] Focusing on the latter, I conceptualize this rhetoric as a more specific articulation of the broader Christian concept of missionary work. When taken online, this rhetoric manifests itself in very interesting ways and is, not all that surprisingly, full of multifaceted frameworks and seemingly paradoxical discourses. With this in mind, it is helpful to note that there are also, of course, many ways to conceptualize the purposes of this rhetoric. It is simultaneously spiritually, economically, and morally driven. As such, the following questions spring to mind when entering into an interrogation of Compassion International's spiritual gift giving rhetoric. What, ultimately, are the foundations of one's desire to give? Is this desire rooted in

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[139] Robert L. Payton, *Philanthropy: Voluntary Action for the Public Good* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1988), 40.

love? Personal gain? A sense of moral good? A sense of spiritual commission? A combination of all of these? Or something else completely?

To begin, I offer forward a statement concerning the ideal framework underlying philanthropy that is simple, but also quite profound: "do no harm." Borrowing from medicine, Robert L. Payton calls this the "first law of philanthropy."[140] Upon first glance this seems to be a fairly satisfactory starting place for an examination of Compassion International's rhetoric of spiritual gift giving. After all, if we think of charity as an act of moral good—as an act directed at improving the lives of others—than surely such acts should not come at a substantial price? As I have argued thus far in this project, there are certainly flaws within the philanthropic rhetoric of Compassion International's sponsorship platform. The sponsorship model has clearly drifted far from Payton's first law, and the harms reproduced with each act of sponsorship attest to the need for rhetorical reframing and organizational action. As I will show with this analysis, I suggest that Compassion International's sponsorship platform is constructed via a *corrupted* rhetoric of spiritual gift giving.

At the outset of the book *The Ethics of Giving and Receiving: Am I My Foolish Brother's Keeper*, William F. May writes: "Ideally, philanthropy embodies a love of humankind that issues in concrete deeds of service to others."[141] He goes on to categorize such philanthropic gifts into three categories: (1) goods, (2) time, and/or (3) money.[142] These three categories offer a compact and useful lens for the examination of the rhetoric of

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[140] Ibid., 28.

[141] William F. May, "Introduction," in *The Ethics of Giving and Receiving: Am I My Foolish Brother's Keeper?* eds. William F. May and A. Lewis Soens, Jr (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 2000), xvii.

[142] Ibid.

spiritual gift giving dispersed by Compassion International. In employing this categorical system for this project, specifically, I argue that a fourth must be added when working with religious organizations: (4) spiritual gifts. Within Compassion International's sponsorship model, this category represents the gift of the Gospel, the act of exposure to Christianity, and the spiritual connection between a sponsor and a child. This fits within the system of philanthropic responsibilities outlined by May. To give, he suggests, entails caring for the being of others.[143] Of course, this is, in many ways, still an idealistic perspective, just as May declares it at the outset of his discussion. However, idealistic or not, it can certainly be argued that the aforementioned framework is a fundamental aspect of both the historical and contemporary Christian missionary tradition.

When working with this missionary tradition from a rhetorical perspective it is useful to delineate between some of the predominant terms used to define Christian mission work today. The primary lexical distinction that needs to be made, here, lies in the rhetorical dimensions between "mission" and "commission." Mission, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, immediately connotes a Christian meaning. The first definition offered, in fact, references both the Christian Church and "Trinitarian theology" directly: "In Trinitarian theology: the sending into the world of the Son or Spirit by the Father, or of the Spirit by the Son, esp. for the purpose of salvation."[144] More specifically, further OED definitions offer meanings for the word that expand the sacred act of salvation from God to humanity through the missionary work of humanity on Earth. Mission, then, represents a clearly marked sense of active work and charity in the world, and is a hallmark of Christendom as a world

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[143] Ibid.

[144] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "mission," accessed June 15, 2013, http://dictionary.oed.com/.

religion.[145] Historically, mission work was completed both domestically and abroad, and usually consisted of attempts to bring non-believers to salvation in Christ through the spreading of the Gospel.[146]

Embedded within the missionary foundation of Protestant Christianity is the idea of the Great Commission. From the perspective of Christian missionary work, "commission" functions as the connecting thread between God's innate divine, forgiving nature and the aforementioned acts of mission and "spiritual gift-giving" on Earth. Commission connotes the authority of God as the omnipotent overseer of missionary work. While the Oxford English Dictionary's listings for "commission" do not directly support this assertion, the listings do note that etymologically, "commission" refers to "the action of committing, or fact of being committed."[147] Within this definition, I suggest, lies the powerful act of entrusting and the "giving of charge" from one person or being to another that is fundamental to Christians' conceptions of missionary work.[148]

Commission and mission are thus deeply intertwined, and in many ways are best illustrated through an understanding of the word "apostle." The word is derived from the Greek verb ἀποστέλλω (apostelló) meaning "to send" or, more precisely, "to send away."[149] Here, the English understanding of "commission" makes sense, as the verb connotes an active command toward missionary work. Indeed, when taken as a noun, ἀπόστολος

[145] William Richey Hogg, "The Rise of Protestant Missionary Concern, 1517-1914," in *The Theology of the Christian Mission*, ed. Gerard H. Anderson (New York: McGraw Hill Company, Inc., 1961), 95.

[146] Ibid., 105.

[147] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "commission," accessed June 15, 2013, http://dictionary.oed.com/.

[148] Ibid.

[149] *Strong's Concordance,* Bible Hub, "apostelló," accessed June 16, 2013, http://biblesuite.com/greek/649.htm.

(apostolos), meaning "a messenger" or "one sent on a mission," the definition inches ever closer to blending the meanings of "commission" and "mission" completely. In fact, combined, both words occur over 200 times in the New Testament alone, and speak to the deep missionary foundation first illustrated by the teachings of Christ and his Apostles in the Gospels.[150] Working within this framework, contemporary Christian humanitarianism, then, functions via an institutional discourse focused through the commission/mission binary. Thinking of the terms together, as com/mission, is thus helpful. Both terms must be called into question when interrogating the digital acts of mission at play with Compassion International's sponsorship framework.

This lexical model is perhaps most clearly articulated by Compassion International through their organizational mission statement. This statement functions as a barometer, of sorts, through which the subsequent arguments about the spiritual, economic, and moral benefits of sponsorship to come in this chapter may be framed, and is one of the more direct spaces from which to begin to unpack the organization's corrupted rhetoric of spiritual gift giving. The organization's mission is defined in response to Christianity's Great Commission for service, good will, and evangelical missionary work. Based in the New Testament, the Great Commission articulated by Christ and his apostles is the centerpiece of Compassion International's fight against poverty and suffering in the Global South. The Great Commission more broadly refers to the missionary themes of the Gospels themselves. There are, however, a handful of passages in the New Testament that offer clearer, arguably more specific, summations of this theme. Among them is the verse that opened this project, Matthew 28:19, which reads, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them

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[150] Ibid.

in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."[151] The key aspects of this verse are the words "make disciples" (*μαθητεύσατε* [mathēteusate]) and "baptizing" (*βαπτίζοντες* [baptizontes]).[152]

Working within this framework, the mission statement is simple and to-the-point: "In response to the Great Commission, Compassion International exists as an advocate for children, to release them from their spiritual, economic, social and physical poverty and enable them to become responsible and fulfilled Christian adults."[153] To intervene in the multiple forms of oppression that these impoverished children face, Compassion International's mission is constructed directly on a sponsorship platform that pairs a financially stable, responsible, Christian sponsor with a single child in need. Thus, through the act of "spiritual gift giving" in which sponsors not only provide financial support, but provide means through which children are "discipled to" and "baptized," potential sponsors are rendered digital missionaries through the online fulfillment of the Great Commission as implied by Compassion International's mission statement and founded upon Matthew 28:19 and other biblical passages.

Having this lexical topography in view helps one to navigate through the rhetorical twists and turns of Compassion International's sponsorship platform. With this discussion of mission in mind, this analysis seeks to demonstrate precisely how Compassion International's organizational mission is being actively distorted by the vivid realities of

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[151] Matthew 28:19 NIV

[152] *Strong's Concordance,* Bible Hub, "mathēteusate," accessed June 16, 2013, http://biblesuite.com/greek/mathe_teusate_3100.htm; *Strong's Concordance,* Bible Hub, "baptizontes," accessed June 16, 2013, http://biblesuite.com/greek/baptizontes_907.htm.

[153] "Mission Statement."

today's neoliberal and digital society. May is again useful in articulating this distortion. He argues that while the American philanthropic spirit is alive and well, it continuously, and I suggest *increasingly*, runs the risk of being coopted by a "series of moral traps."[154] While these moral traps are numerous, I contend that the primary trap that Compassion International has stumbled into is the "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" as embodied specifically within the power structures of Christian neoliberalism. Compassion International's sponsorship platform, as I will outline in the pages to come, has certainly been coopted by the monolithic web of neoliberal power structures at work in contemporary Western society. As such, the rhetoric of spiritual gift giving woven throughout the sponsorship platform itself must, I suggest, be pushed and prodded, it must be examined alongside its claims of spiritual and moral beneficence, and it must be interrogated so as to offer a way back—a different path—for the organization to move down in order to reclaim its sense of spiritual humanitarianism that has been overwhelmed by its oppressive neoliberal rhetorics of digital consumerism and dehumanization.[155]

Indeed, hundreds of pages (if not more) could be devoted here to unpacking the history of Christian gift giving and missionary work. While I do not have the space to offer such a comprehensive treatment of this lineage, I will briefly highlight what I see to be some of the fundamental, core aspects of this tradition. First, I agree with May's conception of historical American churches as "patrons" to the churches and peoples of the Global South.[156] I argue that this conception of missionary work is not only historically rooted, but is

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[154] May, "Introduction," xxi.

[155] Ibid., xxx.

[156] Ibid., xxii.

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a firm foundation upon which contemporary acts of missionary work are constructed. This conceptualization is certainly one in need of continued critical interrogation. What are the racial and socio-economic contours of the term "patrons"? What are the implications of the top/down binary structure that it implies between first-world Westerners and the rest of the world? I will focus on addressing these questions intermittingly in this chapter's analysis. However, chapter three will focus extensively on unpacking the identity implications of these sorts of constructions.

Furthermore, I contend that the next path in the Christian lineage of gift giving is certainly going to be predicated—and is, in many ways, *already* predicated—on the rise of increasingly portable and dispersed technological systems.[157] Digital technologies offer different values and different frameworks for conceptualizing oneself relative to others.[158] The redrawing of societal lines via digital technologies, I argue, is a fundamental component of the ways in which Christian rhetorics of giving are constructed today, and thus will be a fundamental frame for the discussion to come in this chapter.[159] In a world in which it is possible for Christians to become missionaries to the impoverished poor of the globe from the comfort of their own homes, it is critical for scholars (not just in communication studies, but in our sister fields as well) to work feverishly to unpack and interrogate the rhetorical, spiritual, and practical on-the-ground implications of this technological shift in Christian charity.

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[157] James P. Wind, "Congregations and Leaders: Realities about America's Primary Voluntary Religious Communities," in *The Ethics of Giving and Receiving: Am I My Foolish Brother's Keeper?* eds. William F. May and A. Lewis Soens, Jr (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 2000), 132.

[158] Ibid., 133.

[159] Ibid.

To do so, I turn next to a brief discussion of what is more precisely meant by spiritual "gift-giving." I find Marilee Mifsud's work to be useful in outlining the contours of this term. Borrowing from the work of Marcel Mauss, Mifsud argues that gift giving is a system of exchange between two or more parties that tends to operate in a cyclical fashion.[160] Of particular importance is the way in which gift giving is predicated on "a system of reciprocity in which the honor of the giver and the recipient are engaged."[161] This is of particular importance within the act of spiritual gift-giving, as it invokes the aforementioned sense of sacred commission that is central to Christian understandings of humanitarian work. The act of *spiritual* gift-giving, then, functions as an exchange among three entities, rather than two. Expanding the classic transaction model of giver and receiver, I suggest that the ideal Christian humanitarian exchange is constructed upon a model in which the giver offers a gift to the receiver that is uniquely filtered through the implicit sense of sacred commission outlined by God.

However, while multiple parties are involved within this ideal transaction model of gift giving, the actual act of spiritual gift giving via Compassion International's sponsorship platform is a one-way street. More precisely, the act of sponsorship, while presented as a union filtered through God's commission to humanity, is in reality a flawed top/down system. This fits squarely within May's argument that "the ideal of philanthropy tends to see the human race as two species: relatively self-sufficient benefactors and needy beneficiaries. It tends to presuppose a unilateral or one-way transfer from giver to receiver."[162] Indeed, this

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[160] Marilee Mifsud, "Rhetoric as Gift/Giving," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 40, no. 1 (2007), 89.

[161] Ibid.

[162] May, "Introduction," xx-xxi.

is certainly the case with Compassion International's sponsorship model, as will become

clear through this chapter's sections on the visual and economic discourses of the

sponsorship platform.

<center>Visual Sponsorship</center>

As I move forward with a discussion of the visual construction of Compassion

International's website, I would like to again acknowledge the vast importance that the

medium of the Internet plays in understanding the rhetorical significance of Compassion

International's visual presence. Like any form of media the Internet is textured in ways that

are both unique and standardized, and as such I suggest that it is only possible to understand

the totality of the visual discourses at play in Compassion International's rhetoric after some

key elements of the technology itself are discussed.

First, it is important to recognize that the technological interface created by the

combination of computer, Internet connection, and website imposes its own specific logic on

both the data presented and the user engaging with it.[163] The website itself is a collection of

online "pages," which Lev Manovich defines as rectangular surfaces "containing a limited

amount of information, designed to be accessed in some order, and having a particular

relationship to other pages."[164] Indeed, pages are composed of numerous layers—both

present and hidden to the user—that construct the final product presented to those who access

the site in question.[165] Thus, when critiquing specific organizations' websites, it is necessary

to recognize that the order of pages and the layout of the information on them are determined

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[163] Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001), 117.

[164] Ibid., 74.

[165] Robert Burnett and P. David Marshall, *Web Theory: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2003), 81.

both by the platform of the Internet itself as well as by the organization (or, to be more precise—whomever coded the website). At the same time, however, these online pages are typically constructed so that they are still navigable by the user with a wide sense of control.

On the other hand, I suggest that it is also necessary to take note of the physical borders of the medium itself, as embodied by the computer screen through which users experience and navigate through the website. Indeed, screens function "both as a window into an illusionary space and as a flat surface carrying text labels and graphical icons."[166] I will focus on both elements of the medium, and again wish to reiterate the importance of taking note of the physical, as well as the digital, borders, limitations, and openings brought to the user by the website.

As such, it is by dealing briefly with the idea of the "screen" that I will begin to situate my discussion of the visual layout of Compassion International's online sponsorship platform. The screen itself, as a displayer of various media, is certainly not new. However, with the advent of computers and associated technologies like the Internet and Wi-Fi access to it, screens have taken on a much more dynamic role as the primary visual connection point between user and the wide spectrum of images, text, and other information accessible online.[167] Unlike the static screens of yore (think paintings, cinema screens, etc.), today's computer screens function to present multiple levels of information at one time via overlapping windows and massive, seemingly infinite networks of hyperlinks.[168] As such, the

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[166] Manovich, *The Language of New Media*. 90.

[167] Ibid., 94-95.

[168] Ibid., 96-97.

user is no longer able to rely solely on one image or stream of information, but is instead forced to take in information more holistically.[169]

Thus, it is essential to unpack the various visual elements that are presented to the user. It is not sufficient to dissect the website itself as a broader entity. Instead, a more thorough analysis of the visual framework of the website's various parts is necessary before moving on to other discussions. So, in the coming section I will highlight the various influences of some of the different constitutive parts of the sponsorship platform as they are visually presented to the potential sponsor. I will discuss the importance of shape, color, juxtaposition with text, and layout, and how they all converge to construct a powerful visual foundation upon which Compassion International's sponsorship model operates.

Upon first glance Compassion International's main website is very aesthetically appealing. The homepage contains a plethora of information for the prospective sponsor and is fairly integrative and easy to understand. Visually, the website is laid out in a professional, accessible fashion, complete with easy-to-read headlines, banners, and a user-friendly color scheme. As is the case with most every other advertising platform, consumers' first impressions are, of course, very important online. Persuasively, Compassion International's visual aesthetic is not only clear, but is specifically tailored to suit its target audiences.

Indeed, it is clear that Compassion International has a specific "brand," and as a consequence, a "consumer base" that they are targeting. As was alluded to in the introduction of this project, this brand is aimed primarily at the evangelical wing of the Protestant Church. While not surprising considering the level to which the Internet has infiltrated contemporary society, it is still necessary to take note of the demonstrated neoliberal influence and power at

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[169] Ibid., 97.

play within the Internet. Robert Burnett and P. David Marshall have called the Internet "the new agora," and this term, in many ways, hits the nail squarely on the head. They note that the relatively short history of the Internet over the last two decades has been scripted by the rise of heavily influential economically-driven capitalist websites like eBay, Amazon, and the like.[170] Indeed, they suggest that very quickly the Internet became a location for "the selling of every possible product manufactured."[171] This digital agora, then, is "noisy" and "crowded," and is thus certainly in need of additional critical interrogation.[172]

Compassion International's success as a humanitarian organization is due in large part to its web presence. I argue that Compassion International's website visually borrows from other similar websites (both other humanitarian websites and other economically-driven websites like the aforementioned eBay). As such, I turn to Michele White's work on eBay in order to begin to discuss the specific visual elements of Compassion International's website. In her work on the visual aesthetics of eBay's website, White argues, "visual images are an important part of the site and the ways eBay produces its mythos, brand community, users, [and] organizational logic."[173] I suggest that the same is true of Compassion International. As an organization, Compassion International's web presence is, arguably, its primary means of interacting with potential sponsors. As such, the visual images, the aesthetic layout, and depictions of children all function to construct a space for potential sponsors to interact with potential children to sponsor and, ideally, to commence and complete the act of sponsorship.

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[170] Burnett and Marshall, *Web Theory*, 105.

[171] Ibid., 106.

[172] Ibid.

[173] Michele White, *Buy It Now: Lessons from* eBay (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 13.

There are three main visual aspects of Compassion International's homepage that I will focus on in the coming analysis: (1) a graphic asking website viewers to "Sponsor a Child;" (2) a supplementary series of search boxes that allow prospective sponsors to search Compassion International's "catalog" of children;" and (3) the shopping cart link on the top navigational bar. Each is central to the construction of a "safe space" for potential sponsors in which they feel comfortable and emotionally-charged. Both are important to persuading potential sponsors to complete the act of sponsorship, and both will be further articulated in the next chapter's discussion of Compassion International's affective economy. These visual aspects each construct an important pillar upon which the economic thread of the model operates. Each combines visual aesthetics, bold colors, and strategic juxtaposition of words and images in order to produce effective and persuasive visual presentations for the sponsor. From the outset, then, Compassion International's website is rhetorically constructed so as to persuade and inspire potential sponsors to begin the sponsorship process.

The largest aspect of the homepage is the graphic asking potential sponsors to "Sponsor a Child." The graphic is not static, and is presented in various iterations. These "banner advertisements" are fairly common element in contemporary websites.[174] Each iteration, however, contains shared visual and linguistic characteristics. For example, please see figure 1 on the next page:

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[174] Burnett and Marshall, *Web Theory*, 86.

Figure 1. Sponsor a Child Screenshot #1. Taken 16 May 2013.

Source: Compassion International Homepage. http://www.compassion.com

Figure 1 was taken as a screenshot directly off of the Compassion International website. To put this image into perspective, upon accessing the homepage it takes up about a third of the screen vertically, and about half of the screen horizontally. It is positioned directly under the website's two navigational bars, and as such it is placed so as not to be missed by anyone accessing the page.

The colors of the image are particularly significant. The image shown above is a mix of warm, inviting colors. Radiant, the background colors of the image blend together, rising from a darker red hue in the bottom right hand corner to a brilliant yellow in the top left hand corner. This spectrum of color, I suggest, invokes a luminosity that calls forth thoughts of the sun rising. While only the background of the image, I argue that the color palette chosen for this image, as well as the symbolic resonance that it provokes, is indicative of a concerted effort to construct the website as contemporary and "fresh." This idea is expressed in other visual elements as well and it speaks to Compassion International's attempt to brand itself as an organization with purpose—one that is moving forward and is, quite literally, looking to a future full of bright days to come.

Also central to the rhetorical power of this banner is the use of a child's image. As is clear in figure 1 above, the use of Ailton's picture seeks to provide an immediate visual

connection between potential sponsor and the organization. The specific elements of Ailton's image are particularly insightful in illustrating this connection. For example, the picture is a straightforward, cropped portrait of the child. Rather than a portrayal of Ailton standing, playing soccer, or doing any number of other things that would be expected of a child his age, Compassion International has purposefully chosen an image in which he is facing the potential sponsor directly. This allows the potential sponsor to engage one-on-one (so to speak) with Ailton. Because of the closeness of the image, the potential sponsor is even able to distinguish particular aspects of Ailton's facial expression. He has a blank stare, as if he is lost and in need of help, guidance, or support. This is compounded by his lack of a smile. Ailton's facial indifference is juxtaposed against the brightness of his t-shirt and the color of the background door. Vivid yellow and pale blue, respectively, both work together to directly contrast the emotional indifference of Ailton's facial expression. These visual elements depict Ailton as an emotionless child perched against a bright backdrop. Situated left of the call to "Sponsor a Child," this depiction serves to invigorate the linguistic plea for sponsorship and to present a complex, vivid image for the potential sponsor to engage with.

This is compounded by the text below the call to "Sponsor a Child." This text reads, "Make This Child's Birthday Wish Come True!" Placed next to a picture of a carefully crafted and decorated birthday cake with a #5 candle on top, this plea for assistance completes the visual call for sponsorship. The layout of these images and texts is equally significant. Of particular note is the way in which these items are placed so as to fit within the standard Western frame of viewing text/images from left to right and top to bottom. The potential sponsor first sees that it is Ailton's birthday (there are a ribbon and tag in the top left hand corner), then proceeds to simultaneously read and engage with the image and

"Sponsor a Child" call, before finally reading the more specific plea for sponsorship. All of these elements combine to present a visually pleasing, captivating argument for the potential sponsor to do one of two things. Ideally, the potential sponsor will have become emotionally invested in the humanitarian mission enough to sponsor immediately. Or, the potential sponsor has become sufficiently engaged, intrigued, and curious, and is willing to explore the website more fully. Thus, the "Sponsor a Child" banner plays an expected role—that of a "welcome sign," of sorts. It is, I suggest, quite effective as the opening salvo of visual and rhetorical arguments presented to potential sponsors.

This segways quite seamlessly into the series of search boxes and other options presented for potential sponsors to "browse" through the aforementioned "catalog of children." The former is placed immediately to the right of the "Sponsor a Child" banner. This box is quite similar to search boxes of thousands of other websites in that it offers users the opportunity to mold their search and to actively construct the results they would like to see. Here, it is crucial to recognize both the structural opportunities and limitations imposed by the pre-determined search tools of the website. It is not uncommon for users of online websites to be directed by the site to select from predefined menus or search bars.[175] The primary importance here is that it not only makes the website more efficient for users, but also that it helps "users feel that they are not just consumers but 'authors' creating a new media object or experience."[176] This is key, and will be a guiding framework for rest of this chapter's discussion (particularly as it applies to the economic framework of the platform).

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[175] Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 124.

[176] Ibid., 124-125.

Compassion International grants website users three parameters to guide their search for potential children to sponsor: (1) location, (2) gender, and (3) age. At first glance, the visual of these drop down menus, a scroll-bar, and a search button seems genuinely innocuous. I argue that they appear to be almost standard, a natural part of the website's platform. The normalization of such structures will be discussed more thoroughly in the upcoming section on economic influences. For now, though, I would like to discuss the importance of the visual presence of the search box itself.

Visually, the search box provides potential sponsors with a continuation of the comfortable "safe space" first constructed by the "Sponsor a Child" banner. The simplicity of the box itself is of central importance, as it offers an easy user access point to the "catalog" of children. Surrounded by the blue background of the homepage itself, the search box is a white square that is presented to the potential sponsor in a direct, unobtrusive way. This unobtrusiveness is key. Unlike the bold colors of the "Sponsor a Child" banner and other elements of the homepage, this box almost fades into the background—as if it is waiting for potential sponsors to simply come across it (or be led to it by other aspects of the website). While not inviting in the same sense as the banners and slogans, this search box—visually— has an immensely valuable role in the overall construction of an effective online platform layout.

Indeed, all a potential sponsor needs to do to begin the search process is to click on the "Search Now" button. By doing so, the potential sponsor is taken to a new page full of their requested results. The search results page offers a visual smorgasbord of images, text, and other information. The two navigation bars at the top of the page remain the same as the homepage, but most everything else changes. The page is titled "Sponsor a Child Today,"

and from the outset it is clear that there are thousands of children available to be sponsored. Not unlike search results of other non-humanitarian websites, Compassion International's platform acknowledges that its search results page is showing potential sponsors only the first 20 of nearly 2,500 children waiting to be sponsored. Below this, the results show these 20 children's images, complete with attached name, location, and birthdate information. In addition, each image is connected to a yellow button labeled "Sponsor Me" as well as a small hyperlink that allows potential sponsors to "Learn More" about the child. Please see figure 2 below for an example of one of these search results.

Figure 2. Search Result Screenshot. Taken 17 May 2013.

Source: Compassion International Search Results Page. http://www.compassion.com

As is clear from the image of Fredi above, the images chosen by Compassion International are striking in their simplicity. The child's image in figure 2 is very similar to the one used in figure 1. Both images depict children with straightforward expressions and indifferent—even resigned—faces. Against a bright green background, Fredi's expression is rendered all the more vivid in the eyes of the potential sponsor. Furthermore, the image is juxtaposed against the clarity and brightness of the yellow "Sponsor Me" button. The button is quite large; it is easily a third the size of the image itself. This is not all that surprising, as the goal of the

search process is sponsorship. Thus, it makes sense that the necessary link would be bright, clear, and direct.

The significance of the image shown in figure 2 cannot be understated. Here, I would like to return to the idea of how visual images can function as "windows" that was discussed in chapter one's discussion of humanitarian discourse. In her work on ultrasound technology, Lisa M. Mitchell argues that images—especially those presented via technological mediums—can function as interactive spaces through which people can engage with distant and disembodied figures.[177] In her discussion it is clear, of course, that the distant and disembodied figure is the unborn fetus. Disembodied, in this case, does not employ a ghost-like quality, but rather an incorporealness—a lack of a fully formed body through which parents can truly engage.

With the ultrasound, only medically trained nurses and doctors are able to interpret the image. Without the knowledge and interpretation of the nurse/doctor, the image would—conceivably—remain an abstract blur. While the fetus may still be growing and developing, parents and doctors are able to engage and interact with the fetus via the imaging of the ultrasound machine. Mitchell suggests that, without the interpretation of the nurse/doctor, the ultrasound image nonetheless still conveys a powerful emotional response. Indeed, she contends that these interactions typically occur without a full (or even close to full) recognition of the contours of the image itself. I suggest that, from the perspective of the sponsor, a similar result is at play with the visual aspects of Compassion International's search results.

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[177] Mitchell, *Baby's First Picture*, 6.

This is illustrated by returning to figure 2. Fredi is depicted as a face, a blank stare against a paradoxically bright, yet inconspicuous background. Upon first glance it is impossible to discern much about Fredi. Potential sponsors know that he is in need—as he has shown up in their search results—but they do not necessarily know why. The distance between Fredi and potential sponsors is amplified by the generalized naming of his location—El Salvador. El Salvador, for most Western sponsors, presumably exists as a disparate location far outside of their comfort zone. It can be argued that this is the nature of humanitarian enterprises. However, why are potential sponsors able to connect with the image? What, in the end, makes these images so powerful as "windows" into the heart of the humanitarian and spiritual crises Compassion International is working against? How do they function as rhetorical tools of affective persuasion?

As Mitchell notes in her text, I suggest that it is the *awareness* brought forth through the "window" of the image that is particularly important to Compassion International's enterprise.[178] Up until the point of accessing the website itself and the search results, the sponsor has not directly engaged or seen the many faces of the poor, the impoverished, the uneducated, the *unsaved*. While they may be aware of such issues in an abstract sense, it is only through the rhetorical act of viewing the images and seeing the faces that potential sponsors begin to feel the full weight of the sponsorship process. It is through the presentation of the children via Hesford's human rights spectacle, then, that potential sponsors become emotionally attached to the various children. This act of rhetorical viewership, I suggest, is an example of humanitarian *phantasia* through which potential sponsors are not only persuaded to give, but are *rhetorically transported* from mere

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[178] Ibid., 9.

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consideration of mission work to a more powerful and dynamic sense of spiritual *commission* to give.[179]

The "windows" of Compassion International's search results render the unseen seen and in doing so they construct a digital space through which potential sponsors are able to more freely engage with potential children and to connect with them emotionally. These windows exist within the contours of *phantasia* in large part because of their digital nature. Returning to Hawhee's conception of the term as a faculty "activated when viewable matter is not immediately at hand and must be otherwise conjured," I argue that the Internet platform upon which these search results are visually presented functions as a rhetorical mechanism through which potential sponsors can phantastically "conjure" frameworks through which to spiritually give.[180] Not unlike the dreams and memories cited by Hawhee, these results are similarly fleeting and filtered through a source—Compassion International's search engine—not directly connected to the sponsor. These images, then (and, indeed, the holistic visual apparatus of the website itself), are of critical importance as they are some of the primary pillars upon which potential sponsors will continue to make sense of the act of sponsorship long after the browser window has been closed.

The key takeaway from the discussion of the visual aspects of Compassion International's sponsorship platform is that the aesthetics—the layout, the color schemes, the juxtaposition of images and text, etc.—rhetorically constructs the organization within a problematic binary. The aforementioned discussion of the visual points to the straightforward, more superficial, level of this binary. This is the aesthetic level, the

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[179] Kennerly, "Getting Carried Away."

[180] Hawhee, "Looking into Aristotle's Eyes," 142.

framework for the organization through which potential sponsors directly engage. The sponsor is first connected to and rhetorically transported into a state of commission via these images. Here, the organization is presented as a friendly arbiter of Christian com/mission that is simultaneously uniquely positioned to cater to children in need. However, there is a second, deeper, level of this binary that is constructed as well. This, I suggest, is the subtle, more interwoven neoliberal framework. Shrouded by the bright and persuasive aesthetics of the website itself, this layer is exposed through various cracks in the platform's foundation. These cracks, however, are just the beginning. As I will show in this chapter's final section on the economic themes of the sponsorship platform, there is a wealth of neoliberal discourses, images, and other aspects of the platform worth examining.

<div align="center">Economic Sponsorship Online</div>

With terms like "My Cart," "checkout," and "billing information," woven throughout its sponsorship rhetoric, it is clear that much of Compassion International's humanitarian platform is constructed upon an economic framework. This, in and of itself, is not all that noteworthy. What is important to recognize, though, are the ways in which this economic framework is (like the previously discussed visual appeals) similarly produced via the technological medium of the Internet. In a world increasingly predicated on digital accessibility, it is necessary to take note of the ways in which humanitarian organizations like Compassion International have made quick use of digital technologies to increase their aid and sponsorship bases. Thus, by examining the economic elements of Compassion International's digital framework, I aim to highlight how the sponsorship model itself—while digitized—still relies heavily on problematic historical neoliberal structures, metaphors, and

discourses.[181] These structures, metaphors, and discourses, I argue, have been rewired, so to speak, for a digital age, yet—like a wolf in sheep's clothing—they continue to represent the corruptive ideals of the long-entrenched historical woes of oppressive neoliberalism.

As is the case with other humanitarian organizations such an economic framework is, to a point, necessary for Compassion International's sponsorship model to succeed. Because of the nature of monetary sponsorship, it is inherent within the model that potential sponsors enter financial data in order to commence the act of sponsorship. As such, the central purpose of my interrogation here is not to suggest that all financial elements be removed from Compassion International's sponsorship platform. Rather, I seek to more closely examine the neoliberal and market frameworks upon which such interactions have been rendered normative in the eyes of potential sponsors. In doing so, I suggest that the primary implication of this neoliberal normalization is the construction of a distinct rhetoric of "Christian consumerism" within the organization's broader rhetoric of "spiritual gift-giving" that is directed at, and perpetuated by, potential sponsors. I argue that this discourse of "Christian consumerism" functions as the corrupting, competing force against this rhetoric of "spiritual gift giving" upon which Compassion International's model is foundationally constructed.

The idea of Christian consumerism, as I employ it here, is not an altogether new approach to the influence of neoliberalism on contemporary Christianity. Alister E. McGrath, for example, argues that there is a clear line of this sort of consumerist mentality within the last few decades of American Protestant Christianity.[182] Particularly, McGrath's framework

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[181] Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 88-89.

[182] Alister McGrath, *The Future of Christianity* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 46.

is helpful due to his conclusion that today's Christianity has come "to be thought of as a commodity or product which must be marketed in order to attract audiences."[183] Furthermore, in discussing consumerism as it operates within a contemporary neoliberal power structure, I wish to frame this discussion in the argument that, while certainly pervasive and perilous, this supercharged brand of consumerism is not inevitable. It is, instead, a construction reproduced by choices and normative discourses of organizations and institutions like Compassion International and Christianity, respectively.[184] I hope to offer an extension of this conclusion by suggesting that not only has Christianity itself become further commoditized in the digital age, but that this commodification has become so entrenched that it is almost second nature for contemporary, wired, Christians.

How, though, is this most readily exemplified in Compassion International? As illustrated in the previous section on the visual elements of the sponsorship platform, I suggest that the technological foundation for much of contemporary Christian humanitarian work is a primary site through which to interrogate problematic constructions of Christian consumerism today. Indeed, in doing so I invoke William E. Connolly's understanding of capitalism as an ever-evolving system. Capitalism, and the acts of consumption upon which it operates, are thus being redefined and reinterpreted online.[185] I argue that the cumulative construction of an economic framework throughout the sponsorship process results in an implicit argument to potential sponsors that aims to persuade them to "purchase"

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[183] Ibid., 48.

[184] Gary Cross, *Time and Money: The Making of Consumer Culture* (London: Routledge, 1993), vii.

[185] William E. Connolly, *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 9.

impoverished children in order to fulfill potential sponsors' missionary covenant—their commission—from God.

Compassion International's sponsorship model, as visually and linguistically framed on its website, constructs children as objects of globalized systems of capitalism. Not only are children portrayed as inanimate objects for purchase, but they are also framed in this way in order to fulfill a neoliberal consumerist binary between "consumer" and "commodity." In defining this idea of "consumer," I turn to Ellen Rose, who argues that modern day online consumers have come to "regard objects as the means of fulfilling desires which have been restructured, via various marketing strategies into needs—the things one simply *must* have in order to be happy and successful [emphasis in original]."[186] This definition of consumer is a specific interpretation of the term. However, I argue that this is clearly the case with any number of highly popular online shopping websites. For example, one need look no further than the recent rise of Cyber Monday as one of the most lucrative shopping days of the year for online retailers like amazon.com and ebay.com to see that this mindset has very clearly become a norm in contemporary American culture.[187]

I argue that Rose's pinpointing of "modern day *online* consumers" is of particular significance. The accessibility, directness, and relative ease of modern technologies like the Internet more broadly, PayPal, and credit cards, have resulted in a process of normalization that has obscured the negative impacts of neoliberal power structures from view. Indeed, I suggest that the triad of convenience mentioned above exponentially compounds what Rose

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[186] Ellen Rose, *User Error: Resisting Computer Culture* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2003), 91.

[187] Blake Ellis, "Cyber Monday Sales Reach New Record," *CNN Money*, November 27, 2012, http://money.cnn.com/2012/11/27/pf/cyber-monday-sales/index.html

calls the "insatiable desire" of contemporary consumers to purchase and devour the objects for sale around them.[188] This furthers the neoliberal binary in that contemporary American consumers—now supercharged with an arsenal of PayPal accounts, stored 16-digit credit card numbers, and ever-present Wi-Fi and 4G access—have the relatively easy ability to purchase an almost infinite number of goods and objects with just a few clicks of a mouse and a few strokes on a keyboard. Such ease, I suggest, has amplified this neoliberal desire to purchase to a level that is not only unprecedented, but that is also so great that it has—paradoxically—become invisible.

The digital aspect of this neoliberal framework must not be overlooked. Thus, I seek to respond to Mary Queen's call for increased interrogation of digital sites of oppression and dehumanization. She writes, "feminist rhetorical studies must extend their analyses to examine how the modes of digital circulation matter in the mediation of relations among groups, communities, and nations, because this digital circulation often constructs and reinforces binary oppositions and rhetorics of superiority."[189] I agree, and with this section's focus on neoliberal constructions of Christian consumers and commodified children I aim to articulate precisely how digital technology functions as the primary mechanism through which neoliberalism has normalized dehumanizing practices of sponsorship via Compassion International's missionary platform.

To begin, it is crucial to conceptualize Compassion International's platform as a technological marketplace. Much like the "new agora" mentioned by Burnett and Marshall in their work on economic platforms online, I conceive of the sponsorship model in a similar

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[188] Rose, *User Error*, 91.

[189] Mary Queen, "Transnational Feminist Rhetorics in a Digital World," *College English* 70, no. 5 (2008): 471.

way as some of the primary online retail websites that are popular in American culture today. While not exactly the same as amazon.com, ebay.com, and etsy.com (to name a few), I do contend that there are multiple similarities that render this comparison quite apt. For example, Compassion International—like each of the three sites just listed—employs a series of search options for sponsors to target specific demographics of children. This is not unlike the ability to limit one's search on ebay.com to only books or only DVDs. Likewise, as discussed previously, Compassion International makes direct use of the shopping cart feature made popular by sites like amazon.com. Finally, the sponsorship model is completed through a financial transaction process labeled "Checkout" that includes the entering of billing information and credit card or bank account numbers, which is a standard transaction process for most any online retail website.

The online catalog is, as was alluded to in the section on visuals, the beginning of the sponsorship process. Prospective sponsors start this process by selecting a child from Compassion International's online listing of children in need of sponsorship. After inputting whichever search parameters are desired potential sponsors are then directed to a results page. In addition to its visual rhetorical importance, the online catalog is an important site for further interrogation because it acts, in many ways, as a primary gatekeeping mechanism through which potential sponsors engage with the website and the sponsorship model itself. It is a series of cursors, hyperlinks, and images, and functions as a door through which the potential sponsor can begin to commence the economic act of sponsorship. It is here, I argue, that the children that Compassion International strives to provide financial, spiritual, and educational help to are, actually, first rendered as dehumanized, commodified objects.

This gateway is one that is interactively managed by the potential sponsor her/himself; it is the sponsor that is in control of the search. To illustrate, consider the following two figures below. The first is taken from amazon.com, and the second from Compassion International's web platform.

Figure 3. Amazon Search Parameters Screenshot. Taken 22 May 2013.
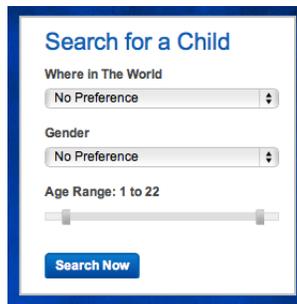
Source: Amazon.com Homepage. http://www.amazon.com.

Figure 4. Search for a Child Screenshot. Taken 17 May 2013.

Source: Compassion International Homepage. http://www.compassion.com

Both of the figures above show the ways in which the user of the given website is given a sense of control over the filtering of search results. In figure 3, amazon.com shoppers are able to narrow their searches for books, in this case, according to a variety of different sub-categories in order to make their search for the desired object to purchase as easy as possible. This same process is at work in figure 4. While the visual importance of these search

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parameters was previously discussed, it bears reiterating that the three options presented above offer potential sponsors an inordinate spectrum of possible divisions of Compassion International's sponsorship pool.

Not only are users able to sort children by location, gender, and age, but there are also multiple options for both the former and latter. Sponsors, for example, can limit their searches to only six year olds, or only male children under the age of three. Adding this level of customization and control for potential sponsors is a very important aspect of making them feel comfortable, invested, "safe," and actively involved with the sponsorship process itself. Furthermore, such search options, I suggest, play perfectly into the idea of sponsor as consumer as they allow those sponsors with pre-conceived ideas about the "type of child" that they wish to sponsor to very readily filter their search.

Not unlike searching for the newest edition of a textbook or home supplies made exclusively by Martha Stewart, the highly customizable search options made available by Compassion International begin to frame children as objects that can be readily sorted and easily categorized. Like books, DVDs, kitchenware, and so on, Compassion International's platform conceptualizes them as items that can be filtered according to a spectrum of user-defined criteria. Ultimately, I suggest that this process is, by itself alone, not a directly clear indication of the oppressive effects of neoliberalism. It is, however, a stepping stone and a key harbinger of the more clearly articulated neoliberal discourses that appear later in the sponsorship process.

Proceeding through the sponsorship platform, potential sponsors are directed by the "catalog" previously discussed to select a child to sponsor. Once this is completed, the most vivid neoliberal mechanism of the platform comes into focus. After a potential sponsor

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selects the yellow button labeled "Sponsor Me," s/he is taken to a checkout screen. As this occurs, the sponsorship platform simultaneously places the chosen child into the "My Cart" portion of the website. This happens behind the scenes and is not immediately apparent to potential sponsors. Again, this is not unlike the process that occurs with other retail websites, but is nonetheless, a neoliberal act that is of prime concern when it concerns children.

The shopping cart area of Compassion International's sponsorship platform is located on the top bar of links, and is readily accessible from any page on the website. The cart is labeled "My Cart," which is a unique difference from other online economic transaction platforms. When compared to websites like amazon.com, ebay.com, and etsy.com, Compassion International's use of the personal signifier "My" is significant. This lends an additional sense of ownership to the potential sponsor, and further illustrates that the construction of sponsor as "consumer" is a dominant rhetorical force in the sponsorship platform. For example, please see figures 5 and 6 below and on the next page, which compare Compassion International's shopping cart label to those of amazon.com (left), ebay.com (center), and etsy.com (right).

Figure 5. Shopping Cart Icon Screenshots. All taken on 22 May 2013.

Source: Amazon.com Homepage, Ebay.com Homepage, and Etsy.com Homepage.
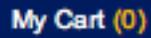
http://www.amazon.com, http://www.ebay.com, http://www.etsy.com.

My Cart (0)

Figure 6. Compassion International Shopping Cart Icon Screenshot. Taken 22 May 2013.

Source: Compassion International Homepage. http://www.compassion.com

As is clear in the figures above, Compassion International's use of "My" constructs a very different framework for the transaction to come. The three icons in figure 5 are all very similar. While a sense of "ownership" is implicit within each of these icons, it is certainly noteworthy that none of the three secular icons go as far as Compassion International's to render this implicit ownership in such an *explicit* way.

The sense of ownership implied by the "My" is thus critical. By continuing the rhetorical construction of potential sponsors as "consumers," the specific use of the possessive pronoun constructs the first level of a problematic neoliberal perspective through which potential sponsors' acts of sponsorship are seamlessly processed. It is safe to say that much work has been conducted on the importance of pronouns and the ways in which they signify possession and ownership of various kinds. For example, linguist Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald categorizes linguistic possession (as signified by nouns) into three different definitions: (1) ownership (of property), (2) whole-part relations (e.g., relationships of the body), and (3) kinship relations (e.g., familial relationships).[190] These distinctions are helpful, and I suggest that they offer a more detailed framework through which to examine the rhetorical significance of the possessive signifier used by Compassion International.

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[190] Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald, "Possession and Ownership: A Cross Linguistic Perspective," in *Possession and Ownership: A Cross-Linguistic Typology*, eds. Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald and R.M.W. Dixon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 3.

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Inherent within the definitions outlined by Aikhenvald is the idea that their meanings are subjective and based on listener interpretation. This is not all that surprising, especially when one takes into account the pervasiveness of pronouns—as they are some of the most routinely used (and, I suggest, glossed over) grammatical forms in the English language.[191] Indeed, John Wilson argues that English pronouns are fundamentally "mediated by a range of social and personal factors producing a range of possible uses and interpretations."[192] To understand these various interpretations, then, it is necessary to dig deeper by interrogating some of the possible rhetorical relationships embodied within the linkage of the possessive pronoun "my" and the signifier "cart." In what ways is the cart connected to the potential sponsor? To what level do they possess some level of ownership over it and its contents?

I argue that the use of the pronoun "my" constructs the potential sponsor as the active possessor of whatever objects are placed within it. Of the three definitions outlined previously, I suggest that Compassion International's sponsorship platform constructs both direct relationships of ownership *and* relationships of kinship (definitions 1 and 3 above). This is perhaps best observed through an analysis of the highlighted page made available to the sponsor after clicking on the "My Cart" hyperlink, as shown in figure 7 on the next page.

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[191] Martha Kolin, *Rhetorical Grammar: Grammatical Choices, Rhetorical Effects* (New York: MacMillan, 1991), 57.

[192] John Wilson, *Politically Speaking: The Pragmatic Analysis of Political Language* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 45.
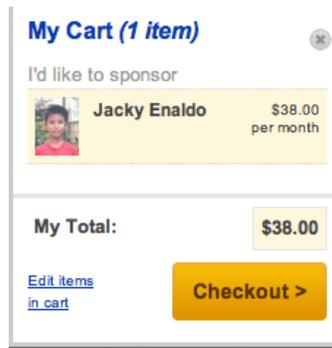
Figure 7. "Screenshot of 'My Cart' Page." Taken 23 May 2013.

Source: Compassion International Homepage. <http://www.compassion.com>

As seen in the image above, Jacky, an 11-year-old child from the Philippines, has been placed into the shopping cart. The possessive pronoun "My" is carried through to this page, further signifying sponsor ownership over the child. This is compounded by the relatively large size of the font (it is the largest font on the page) as well as its placement as the first text a potential sponsor is likely to read. The construction of sponsor ownership is also furthered by the use of the first-person singular pronoun "I" within the phrase "I'd like to sponsor" above the name and picture of the child. Here, Compassion International has purposefully constructed the shopping cart so as to produce a sense of direct connection between a singular sponsor and the selected child.

What is most troubling about this construction is the way that it is juxtaposed against some of the other text on the page. Indeed, perhaps the most pervasive neoliberal element of Compassion International's platform is the descriptor of the child placed immediately to the right of the "My Cart" title on the page. As shown in figure 7, Jacky is labeled an "item." This rhetorical act of signification is a direct illustration of the neoliberal framework upon which Compassion International's sponsorship model is rhetorically presented to potential

sponsors. As opposed to being labeled as a person or a child (or, perhaps, not being labeled at all), Jacky is instead rhetorically constructed as an object—a literal item available for purchase and future consumption. It is here, I suggest, that the completion of the neoliberal binary between consumer and object that was discussed earlier is fully realized.

This linguistic description is reproduced again at the bottom of the page ("Edit *items in cart*") and is further supplemented by an economic designation of the monthly financial contribution given by the sponsor. The children of Compassion International, then, are constructed both as objects within a Christian capitalist framework, as well as pawns within a neoliberal power structure normatively dressed in the guise of a humanitarian organization. Returning to the binary between consumer and object, I suggest that the designations woven into the "My Cart" feature of the sponsorship platform construct potential sponsors—whether they are conscious of it or not—as *spiritual consumers*. It can be assumed, based on the mission of Compassion International, that most potential sponsors enter into the act of sponsorship with some level of moral and religious desire to help impoverished children. Indeed, it can be further presumed that most of these potential sponsors are, to some degree, entering into the sponsorship process to fulfill some level of expected missionary work and to respond to the aforementioned "commission" of the Christian faith. While this is achieved through the act of sponsorship, it comes, I argue, at quite a hefty price.

This price is the rhetorical dehumanization of the children that potential sponsors are working to sponsor. Labeled and rendered voiceless by the dominating gaze of the neoliberally-infused "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" of the platform, children are categorized as inanimate objects—as if they were books, clocks, window treatments, or any number of other seemingly random material goods that can be readily purchased online. The

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act of spiritual and missionary commission upon which Compassion International's

sponsorship model is founded, then, is rhetorically co-opted by neoliberalism. Due to the

normalized economic templates of contemporary market-place websites, the problematic

constructions of the checkout screens, the shopping cart, and the catalog go unchecked and

unnoticed by potential sponsors.

Speaking on this dominating power of technology, Adrienne Rich writes that

technology's swath and influence is perpetually accelerating, leading to an increased ability

to "generate ever more swiftly obsolescent products for consumption, [and] ever–more

wondrous connections among the well-connected."[193] This is certainly the case with the

neoliberal power entrenched within Compassion International's sponsorship framework. In

an age of high-speed and effortless digital connections made possible with the click of a

button sponsors are readily able to assist children, but in doing so they (both sponsors and

children) become coopted within an ever-evolving system of digital commodification. I

suggest that these acts of rhetorical injustice occur unnoticed in large part due to the

widespread culture of technological liberation in which Western society lives today. Albert

Borgmann argues that we—as first-world, technologically dependent Americans—are

liberated from external pressures like disease, poverty, and oppression due to the

technological tools at our disposal.[194] He argues that we live now in a "technological

culture," one that I suggest has become blinded by the lights of our monitors, iPhones, and

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[193] Rich, *Arts of the Possible*, 163.

[194] Albert Borgmann, *Power Failure: Christianity in the Culture of Technology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003), 7.

tablets to the institutional oppressions of neoliberalism that are, ironically, reproduced and perpetuated through these very devices that we cling so tightly to everyday.

Indeed, because of the pervasive interests of capital, neoliberalism, and economic marketing, the subtleties of Compassion International's humanitarian rhetoric become difficult to recognize to the point that they all but disappear. More importantly, the power dynamics associated with these forces remain unchecked and, as a result, the neoliberal and dehumanizing practices of Compassion International's sponsorship platform are rhetorically constructed in ways that do not seem problematic to the Christians who engage with them. In fact, they are constructed as normal—just additional examples of technology being put to good, moral, Christian use in the name of God's Great Commission.

So, as I move into the next chapter I would like to briefly return to a question posed in the introduction of this project. Early in this thesis I asked if Christian mission has become easy. I return to this question here as a lens through which to begin to address the positional arguments embedded within Compassion International's spiritual gift giving rhetoric. Thus, returning to May's categorization of gifts is helpful. Of the four categories (May's original three plus my one addition), sponsors are thus primarily focused on providing only one—money—directly. Indirectly, they are providing both goods (shoes, clothing, food, etc.) and spiritual gifts as well. What they are primarily *not* giving, however, is time. This is indicative of one of the primary flaws brought on by the digital platform of sponsorship. In tandem with the neoliberal implications of the sponsorship model, potential sponsors are also being constructed as—ironically—passive missionaries. As embodied through its mission statement and depiction of the financial sponsorship model itself, I argue that Compassion International's platform is, from the outset, presented in a way that constructs Christian

mission as troublingly passive. This construction, I argue, is a shift in the traditional sense of missionary work that moves away from the idea of "commission" that Compassion International attempts to work within. Instead, I suggest that through the digital framework of the sponsorship platform itself that mission is actually constructed as a passive gift—another click of a button and another line on a sponsor's online credit card statement.

Chapter Three

Global Caretakers:

Digital and Spiritual Borderlands

Introduction

A borderland exists "wherever two or more cultures edge each other."[195] This

statement appears early in Gloria Anzaldúa's oft-cited book, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The*

New Mestiza. As the previous chapter's analysis suggests, I argue that this edging process is

certainly at play within Compassion International's sponsorship platform. The hybrid digital

space created between the first-world, American, educated, evangelical sponsor and the third-

world, otherized, impoverished, child, is one that certainly looks remarkably like the various

borderlands imagined by Anzaldúa herself. Blurry, full of domination, and highly normative,

the spiritual, digital borderland created by Compassion International's website both

engenders a host of highly charged positionalities, and reproduces neoliberalism and racism

through an affective economy of familial, philanthropic, and spiritual love. Thus, this chapter

charts the ins and outs of this borderland space. Through an exploration of the racial,

geopolitical, and religious positionalities embedded within this borderland space, this

discussion seeks to draw a map in order to offer an analysis of the rhetorical implications of

the existence (and perpetuation) of this hybrid digital space.

Anzaldúa's use of the descriptor "edge" when describing the innately inchoate space

of the borderlands is a necessary starting place for this chapter's discussion. Borderlands are

often thought of in two distinct, yet interlocking ways. There is, of course, the physical

borderland that quite literally exists in an actual space where two geographic and/or

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[195] Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 3rd. ed., (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2007), Preface.

geopolitical locations edge together and coexist—often quite turbulently. The prime example that Anzaldúa uses to illustrate this concept is the natural border between the United States and Mexico that lies in the southwest corner of the North American continent. A fitting example, the border is geographically marked by the Rio Grande, which winds between the two countries. Its twists and turns serve as the location for much of the geopolitical border between the nations (both marked and unmarked by various checkpoints, fences, etc.). Here, two cultures, two peoples, and two nations meet, and a physical borderland space is created. On one side, El Paso, on the other Ciudad Juárez. Within the physical borderland of these two locations cities, streets, and homes literally edge against each other. Topographically, then, the physical borderland exists as a blurred space in which two (or more) places co-exist.

Simultaneously, Anzaldúa's concept functions within a more cultural and sociological framework. In much the same way that the Rio Grande creates a topographical borderland between the United States and Mexico, various societal frameworks and institutions can construct blurred spaces between various races, socio-economic groups, and religious sects. A fairly recognizable example of this sort of borderland space is the GLBTAQ community, in which members are routinely trapped in a murky space bounded by the heteronormative ideal of white, male, heterosexuality. As shown in this example, sociological borderlands are the result not strictly of geopolitical or geographic borders (though these can and do still retain an influential power), but rather as a result of societally produced power structures like laws, economies, and religions. These blurred sociological spaces are also uncomfortable and hostile environments for residents. The results of institutional power structures like racism, neoliberalism, and patriarchy, sociological borderlands offer a troubled, othered existence for their residents.

As will be discussed elsewhere in this chapter, I argue that Compassion International's sponsorship platform creates a digital borderland space in the same vein as those just discussed. Influenced both by geopolitical borders and sociological institutions, Compassion International's sponsorship platform constructs a borderland that continuously resituates and redefines sponsor and child positionalities through the act of financial, spiritual, and familial sponsorship. This digital borderland is a space in which neoliberalism, racism, and religion come together, and in their apex reproduce an affective economy of love through emotional appeals to sponsors' senses of family, philanthropy, and faith. Through this reproduction the very act of missionary service itself is also redefined—rendered passive through the construction of the digital borderland space.

Fittingly, to launch into this chapter's analysis of the various sponsor and child positionalities redefined within the digital borderland, it is necessary to return to the ever-present "My Cart" page of the website. Building from chapter two's discussion of the visual and economic implications of this page, I contend that the shopping cart is further indicative of a unique space in which multiple actors edge against each other, and in doing so signify the existence of a digital borderland space. These three actors are as follows: (1) the child, (2) the potential sponsor, and (3) Compassion International itself. Each brings a different set of positionalities and perspectives to this borderland space and as such, each is implicated within the "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" and other institutional systems of domination discussed in the previous two chapters. As such, each actor will wind its way through the rest of this chapter's discussion, as each has a pivotal role to play in the construction of Compassion International's borderland economy of love.

Compassion International's Affective Economy of Love

The affective economy upon which Compassion International's sponsorship model is founded is one centered squarely on love. To understand the intricacies of the specific brand of love used, it is prudent to discuss at length the various emotional appeals made to sponsors to entice them to "release" children from poverty through the act of sponsorship. There are, I argue, a number of blended conceptions of love that create a powerful rhetorical foundation for Compassion International's persuasive appeals. To begin to break these down, I first will offer some definitions of the three primary forms of love that I believe are at play in the affective economy perpetuated within the sponsorship platform.

I contend that the implicit conception of com/mission used by Compassion International results in a broad rhetoric of *compassionate love*. Built from a blend of multiple types of love, this brand is one of the key pillars upon which the sponsorship model operates. Returning to some of the Greek understandings of the different forms of love is helpful in delineating the specific elements of this brand of *compassionate love* as it is woven into Compassion International's sponsorship platform. The first is φιλανθρωπία (philanthrōpía), which can translate to "a friend of humanity," which is centered on the noble idea of "treating them [humanity] with the respect (benevolence) that befits each one being created in the image of God."[196] This sort of philanthropic love is an "affectionate" or "friendly" form of love, and is perhaps the most directly present form as it underscores the missionary aspect of the sponsorship process directly.[197]

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[196] *Strong's Concordance,* Bible Hub, "philanthrópia," accessed July 14, 2013, http://biblesuite.com/greek/5363.htm.

[197] *Strong's Concordance,* Bible Hub, "John 21:16," accessed July 15, 2013, http://biblehub.com/text/john/21-16.htm.

The second is derived from the Greek word φιλόστοργος (philostorgos), which translates to "tenderly love," and is more commonly used in reference to the love shared between family members.[198] It is, in short, a familial brand of love. There is certainly a familial aspect to the sponsorship process, as will be discussed in this chapter's section on digital adoption. Third is ἀγάπη (agápē), which can (among many other understandings) be translated as "God's love."[199] For example, if one looks to Romans 5:5, which reads, "And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us" this understanding of ἀγάπη (agápē) becomes clear.[200] Agápē is also used as the translation of choice for love in biblical passages such as Christ's conversation with his disciples in John 21.[201] The translation of this passage defines ἀγάπη (agápē) as the proper understanding of God's love. Each of these terms is central in understanding the affective economy of love upon which Compassion International's emotional appeals to potential sponsors are founded, and each will be discussed at length in this chapter's full analysis.

Expanding upon the previous chapter's discussion of the relationship between mission and commission, Sara Ahmed's idea of an affective economy takes on a powerful new meaning. The combination of familial, philanthropic, and spiritual love results in a series of emotional appeals to sponsors that attempts to fully propel them into the perspective of

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[198] *Strong's Concordance,* Bible Hub, "philostorgos," accessed July 14, 2013, http://biblesuite.com/greek/5387.htm.

[199] *Strong's Concordance,* Bible Hub, "agapé," accessed July 14, 2013, http://biblesuite.com/greek/26.htm.

[200] *Strong's Concordance,* Bible Hub, "Romans 5," accessed July 15, 2013, http://biblehub.com/niv/romans/5.htm.

[201] *Strong's Concordance,* Bible Hub, "John 21:15," accessed July 15, 2013, http://biblehub.com/text/john/21-15.htm.

active missionary and spiritual savior. A primary example of this sort of appeal is present in Compassion International's primary slogan, "Releasing children from poverty in Jesus' name." The implicit meaning here is that the first-world, everyday Christian—through the act of sponsorship—has the power to step into the savior role and function as the Christian servant, the missionary who can create positive change in the world from the comfort of his or her home. This act of sponsorship is certainly rhetorical and, as such, it is laced with the emotional residues of the multifaceted brand of love offered by Compassion International.

Sara Ahmed argues that emotions such as love are innately powerful. Specifically, she suggests that human emotions—in all their expressiveness—"are not simply 'within' or 'without' but that they create the very effect of the surfaces or boundaries of bodies and worlds."[202] Emotions, she argues, shape how both nations and individuals within nations perceive of themselves and themselves in relation to others.[203] Extending this argument, I suggest that emotions too help organizations like Compassion International to situate themselves. Indeed, emotions such as love help to shape the very borderland space upon which Compassion International's sponsorship platform rests. Most importantly for this analysis, Ahmed makes an argument about the constitutive power of emotions within the realm of the ordinary. She suggests that emotions like hate and love (among others) have the rhetorical power to redefine the ordinary subject into one that is "fantastic."[204] The ordinary subject, she writes, can become mobilized by the emotional force of love, hate, etc.[205] This is,

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[202] Sara Ahmed, "Affective Economies," *Social Text* 79, no. 22 (2004): 117.

[203] Ibid.

[204] Ibid., 118.

[205] Ibid.

I argue, precisely what is occurring with the sponsor from the perspective of Compassion International's missionary platform.

Within Compassion International's framework this mobilization results in the creation of a digital borderland space in which first-world evangelicals are able to transcend geopolitical borders. Through the act of sponsorship, sponsor positionalities are recast through the few clicks of a mouse that it takes to complete the sponsorship process. What results is the construction of a digital borderland in which the missionary act of the sponsor casts him/her as the global savior of impoverished children. Paradoxically, however, this sponsorship act is also filtered through the digital platform itself—resulting in a *passive* brand of missionary service. Combined, then, these contradictions speak to the troubled nature of the digital borderland space through which Compassion International's sponsorship platform operates. Cast through a rhetoric of digital adoption, this borderland space reinscribes and redefines sponsors as global caretakers and saviors of children that possess the innate capacities to edge against preexistent geopolitical, racial, and spiritual borders while sitting in the comfort of their homes.

<p style="text-align:center">The Gray Market of Digital Sponsorship</p>

To properly begin to discuss Compassion International's affective economy it is pivotal to start with a discussion of race. Race has certainly been implicit within this project's analysis of Compassion International thus far. As such, much of what is to come in this chapter's discussion builds upon and extends the analysis made in the previous chapter. In talking about race online, there are a few broad ideas that are helpful to highlight as guiding lights for the rest of this analysis. Most importantly, I suggest, is Lisa Nakamura's argument

that "The Internet is a place where race happens."[206] Straightforward, yes, but Nakamura's point makes quite clear that the Internet—while a comparatively new medium for the conveyance of discourse—is certainly a space for the construction of various rhetorics of race.[207] Next, building from this perspective, I suggest that these constructions of race are routinely invented out of the dominant ideologies regarding race in today's society. As such, this analysis will touch on some critical theories of race, with a particular focus on extending previous discussions of domination and invisibility by filtering this analysis through a conversation about "digital whiteness" via the perpetuation of normative portrayals of global parenthood.[208] Finally, each of these aforementioned discussions will be filtered through Gloria Anzaldúa's aforementioned concept of *borderlands* as a theoretical frame through which to make arguments about the positional implications of Compassion International's sponsorship platform.

One of the more prevalent aspects of Compassion International's sponsorship model that functions to construct positionalities of race is the idea of a "specter of foreignness."[209] Writing on this concept, Leilani Nishime suggests that racialized figures that exist outside of the normative ideal of whiteness in Western societies are typically portrayed in various media platforms as the other. Situated as a mirror image of the idealized white, socio-economically stable, first-world, Western figure, the "foreigner" is marked as the "alien" on the periphery. As such, the "specter of foreignness" certainly fits within Anzaldúa's concept

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[206] Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2002), xi.

[207] Ibid., xiii.

[208] LeiLani Nishime, "Aliens: Narrating U.S. Global Identity Through Transnational Adoption and Interracial Marriage in *Battlestar Galactica*," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 28, no. 5 (2011): 451.

[209] Ibid.

of the borderlands.[210] This is, in and of itself, not that surprising of an assertion considering the centuries of racism wedded to the history of the West. Nishime pushes this argument, though, by suggesting that the media channels used by those in positions of power in the West—in her case, television—create a rhetorical spectacle in which the racialized figure is depicted as not only foreign, but as an outsider, as an other who represents a direct challenge to the ideals of normative society.[211]

This idea of the "specter of foreignness" also fits well within Hesford's argument about the rhetorical significance of the human rights spectacle. Within Compassion International's sponsorship platform, the repeated images of third-world children—desolate, despairing, and alone—represent not just the aforementioned human rights spectacle, but are indicative of a clearly racialized "specter of foreignness" as well. Immediately upon accessing Compassion International's homepage users are presented with a series of racialized images. It is impossible to navigate through the website without being confronted by the spectacle of the weary, blank, *dark* faces of children waiting to be sponsored. Indeed, there is not a smile to be seen or a laugh to be heard. These children are clearly living in the periphery—where exactly is irrelevant—and Compassion International's use of photographs paints them as foreign, as something to be viewed, accessed, "clicked on," saved, and released from their poverty by the stable hand (and checkbook) of the normative, idealized sponsor. I suggest that this notion of foreignness does begin to point to the innate otherization that occurs between potential sponsors and the children of Compassion International within the sponsorship platform's digital borderland space.

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[210] Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 42.

[211] Nishime, "Aliens," 452.

Pushing deeper, I return to the previous chapter's discussion of the sponsorship process's use of a digital catalog to sort through the vast pool of children for potential sponsors to select from. This search process has wide repercussions for the ways in which both the sponsor her/himself and the child are racially constructed. It is important to recognize here that while access to the complete racial, ethnic, and cultural identities of the potential sponsor are, of course, unknowable for the context of this analysis, it is arguable that such knowledge is irrelevant as the institutional power of organizations like Compassion International in conjunction with the rhetorical force of the Internet as a technological medium construct specific images of race online regardless of the identity of the user.[212] What, then, are these specific images of race, and what are the rhetorical implications of their construction via humanitarian sponsorship models like that of Compassion International?

Race is implicitly presented to potential sponsors almost immediately upon beginning the act of selecting a child to sponsor. Using Nakamura's suggestion that search options, such as those seen in figure 8 on the next page, exist so as to provide a sense of needed order for the user, I argue that Compassion International's initial framing of categories paradoxically achieves both a necessary sense of geographic location for the user while also severely limiting potential sponsors' understanding of race and the implications that it has as a positional marker for the sponsorship process.

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[212] Nakamura, *Cybertypes*, xii.

Figure 8. "Geographic Search for a Child" Screenshot. Taken 18 Jun. 2013.

Source: Compassion International Homepage. http://www.compassion.com

As is shown above, Compassion International's website makes a concerted effort to demonstrate the wide range of geographic locations available for potential sponsors to send their financial support. Categorized by continent/region into three groups, "Africa," "Asia," and "Central America & Caribbean," this option presents website users with a straightforward and relatively easy mechanism through which to narrow their search results. Unfortunately, users—if they choose to narrow by location—are only able to select one of the 26 locations offered. So, for example, a user may wish to simultaneously view children from both Ghana and Sri Lanka, but would be unable to do so within the current interface. I argue that this seemingly innocuous interface limitation is one of the first signs of Compassion International's reproduction of normative perceptions of racial identity as singular—rather than multiple.

As is hinted through the previous dropdown menu, children are repeatedly constructed as others due to their location on the geopolitical periphery. This is evidenced by the image in figure 9 below.

Figure 9. "Biographical Information" Screenshot. Taken 14 July 2013.

Source: Compassion International Homepage. http://www.compassion.com

As shown in Amy's image, Compassion International's sponsorship framework is tailored so as to provide potential sponsors with just enough biographical and geopolitical data for them to situate children like Amy on the global periphery. Amy, for example, lives in the Dominican Republic. For those sponsors who are unfamiliar with the geopolitical location of the Dominican Republic, Compassion International makes a point to inform sponsors that it is in the "Central America and Caribbean" region. This, however, is the extent of the geopolitical and racial information that is textually presented to sponsors. Thus, through the act of forcing potential sponsors to fragment results via one location only, Compassion International's interface denies child intersectionality. This reification of singular identity functions to recreate a particular kind of normative racial reading that is carried throughout the rest of the sponsorship process.[213]

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[213] Ibid.

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The primary rhetorical mechanism through which this normative conception of race is perpetuated is through what I will henceforth refer to as Compassion International's rhetoric of "digital adoption." Though never expressed using the term "adoption" itself, the act of digital sponsorship in many ways directly mirrors discourses of trans-racial and trans-national adoption that have been quite prevalent in both public and academic spheres over the last decade. Indeed, when filtered through the previous chapter's argument about the commodification, dehumanization, and consumption of children through the sponsorship model, the racial undertones of Compassion International's rhetoric of "digital adoption" take on an even greater significance.

Like most any rhetorical arena, there are very specific characteristics of adoption discourse worth highlighting here, particularly as they have been produced over the last decade of increased international adoption to the United States. Existent within historically parallel strains of globalization and imperialism, today's adoption discourses are inherently racialized.[214] Built upon a highly problematic legacy of Western racism, these rhetorics are certainly embedded within a continuously reproduced discourse of normative whiteness. As such, this racialized adoption framework is certainly a central pillar upon which the humanitarian rhetoric of Compassion International is predicated as well.

Historically, public acceptance of international adoption has grown over the last half of a century, and is due in large part to the successes of various social movements in the United States during the 20th century (most notably the Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Liberation Movement).[215] Discourses surrounding adoption have evolved over the

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[214] Pamela Anne Quiroz, "From Race Matching to Transracial Adoption: Race and the Changing Discourse of US Adoption," *Critical Discourse Studies* 5, no. 3 (2008): 249.

[215] Ibid., 249-251.

years, of course, with terms like "foreign" being replaced with "international." Generally, a more "politically-correct" lens has been superficially applied to most adoption texts—both online and elsewhere.[216] However, despite these positive moves, much of contemporary adoption discourse continues to be influenced by lingering ideologies of whiteness, xenophobia, and neoliberalism. Indeed, I suggest that the "specter of foreignness" very much remains, as will be discussed in the following pages.

The primary issue at play with contemporary discourses of adoption has to do with the power differential that is produced between adopter and adoptee as it concerns constructions of race. Pamela Anne Quiroz has argued that a clear asymmetry exists between these two parties, especially when the process involves international adoption. Due to the aforementioned ideologies at play in the construction of these discourses, it is common for the "adopter" to be rhetorically constructed as a possessor of property, privilege, and power who is situated in the center, whereas on the other hand the adopted child is constructed as an "other" that is "acted upon" by the adopter—situated on the global, racial, and spiritual peripheries.[217] As this analysis will show, Compassion International's sponsorship platform provides a digital mechanism that reproduces these power differentials within both missionary and humanitarian contexts.

In Quiroz's work one of the clear sites where this is at play in contemporary adoption rhetoric is online and, as such, her discussions provide a useful (and easily adaptable) framework for offering a similar interrogation of Compassion International's rhetoric of

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[216] Ibid., 253.

[217] Ibid., 254.

"digital adoption" via sponsorship. Quiroz argues that the discourses of such adoption

websites shape the identities and racial constructions of children, especially through the

racial hierarchization of children that are most appealing to potential adopters.[218] This results,

ultimately, in the reproduction of international children on the margins of society and the

reification of whiteness as the normative racial model for contemporary Western society

through the placing of the first-world sponsor in the position of power.[219] The primary

mechanisms by which this sort of racial hierarchization is occurring within Compassion

International's sponsorship platform are through the commodification of children through the

online shopping cart (as discussed in the previous chapter), as well as via the perpetuation of

a rhetoric of adoption based in the positioning of sponsors as global parents and global

missionaries.

Sifting through the various layers of the rhetoric of adoption perpetuated by

Compassion International's sponsorship platform, one begins to notice a corrupted model of

race that is continued through the reification of what has been historically referred to as the

"black market" for children. Historically, the black market for adopted children arose in the

mid-to-late twentieth century. This occurred during a period in which children began to be

sentimentalized after the rise of child labor laws in the United States. As a result, an adoption

market for "good quality" children came into being, with over 5,000 babies sold each year in

the United States (as of 1975), with some fetching as much as $25,000 at the time.[220] The

paradox that was created, then, is one in which children are proclaimed as priceless and

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[218] Ibid.

[219] Ibid., 262.

[220] Viviana A. Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 201.

emotional, while at the same time they were literally *purchased* by affluent families.[221] This straightforward black market model, through which children were literally sold "under the table" for five figure sums, is certainly a troubling bit of adoption history in the United States.

What is equally—if not more troubling—is the existence of what Viviana Zelizer calls the "gray market" for adoption. The "gray market," she argues, is the subtle, more inchoate marketplace created by the rise, and contemporary perpetuation, of adoption fees charged to adoptive parents for medical expenses, supplies, and other logistical costs.[222] While not as directly problematic as the bluntness of the black market, the gray market is, in many ways, troubling in its own right due to its perpetuation of subtle, normative, capitalism that still constructs children as commodities to be purchased. This, I argue, is the adoption model perpetuated by the shopping cart model used within Compassion International's sponsorship platform. Through this digital framing of the sponsorship transaction, Compassion International has taken this framing of adoption online through the use of subtle rhetorical cues that render it normative for potential sponsors.

Zelizer further suggests that, in the long run, the black market "[was] unacceptable because it treat[ed] children in the same impersonal, economizing manner used for less sacred commercial products."[223] I agree, and argue that the gray market being perpetuated today online should be thought of in the same vein, and is thus a worthy site for continued analysis here. Practically, Compassion International's use of the "gray market" for

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[221] Ibid.

[222] Ibid., 203-204.

[223] Ibid., 203.

sponsorship is filtered through a rhetoric focused on the idea of sponsors as "global caretakers." Blended with a sense of Christian mission, this rhetoric reproduces historical strains of globalization through the reification of racial and socio-economic hierarchies between the first-world sponsor and the impoverished child.

Global Caretakers, Parents, and Missionaries

I suggest that one of the ways that Compassion International's rhetoric of "digital adoption" has become so pervasive within the evangelical strand of the Protestant Church is due to its sponsorship model being advertised and branded as a "fashionable" method of missionary work, discipleship, and service to God. Using Raka Shome's recent article on global motherhood as a guide, I argue that one of the more pertinent arguments that can be made about Compassion International's sponsorship model is that it reproduces a sense of normative whiteness through the perpetuation of "fashionable" missionary work founded on an affective economy of compassionate love.

Shome argues that the logic of global motherhood is one in which it has become "commonplace and even fashionable to see white Western women saving, rescuing, or adopting international children from underprivileged parts of the world, and rearticulating them through *familial* frameworks that recenter white Western (and especially North Atlantic) heterosexual kinship logics [emphasis in original]."[224] Global motherhood, Shome suggests, must be situated within the institutional discourses of neoliberalism and globalization that undermine much of contemporary American society.[225] It is important to

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[224] Raka Shome, "'Global Motherhood': The Transnational Intimacies of White Femininity," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 28, no. 5 (2011): 389.

[225] Ibid.

note that Shome's argument is not that adoption is inherently bad, but that it becomes

problematic when filtered through the celebrity-infused capitalist perspective of the well-

known, fashionable, rich, white women that she cites in her article. Indeed, she argues that it

is crucial to interrogate the ways in which racial and class positionalities are co-opted by

neoliberalism's creation of unequal threads of global capital and international systems of

exchange.[226] I agree, and I contend that Compassion International's reproduction of a gray-

market system for the sponsorship of children certainly illustrates this type of economically

normative familial framework.

Within Shome's discussion there are two primary elements that I would like to apply

to my analysis of Compassion International's sponsorship platform. Shome argues—at

length—that Western society has lauded a number of figures that take on the persona of

either "global caretaker" or that of the matriarch of a "global family." Both, I argue, are at

play within Compassion International's sponsorship platform, and both further highlight the

subtlety with which racialized discourses of family and children can pervade seemingly

innocuous humanitarian platforms like Compassion International's missionary model.

Shome argues that a number of prominent women (from Angelina Jolie to Princess

Diana of Wales) have taken on this sort of "global caretaker" role.[227] Focusing on Diana, she

suggests, "no other white woman in history has been visualized as a site of global

intimacies—of love, care, desire—to the extent that Diana has been."[228] Indeed, "just to think

of Diana is to think of her with children of the world."[229] This same model is clearly at play

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[226] Ibid.

[227] Ibid., 392.

[228] Ibid.

[229] Ibid.

with Compassion International's sponsorship platform. Throughout the website—from the aesthetics to the various steps of the sponsorship act itself—Compassion International is, I argue, reproducing a strikingly similar brand of global compassion and love. From the perspective of the sponsor, the organization is offering a pathetic argument based in familial, philanthropic, and spiritual love that works to construct the sponsor not just as an ordinary person working to do some philanthropic good in the world, but also in the same vein as Angelina, Madonna, and Diana, and in the same vein as Christ himself and the countless missionaries that have served him since the rise of Christendom.

It is important to note, however, some of the key differences between idealized figures like Diana and Angelina and the sponsors using Compassion International's missionary platform. First, and most obvious, figures like Diana and Angelina are international celebrities. Their faces and bodies were (and still are) emblazoned on magazine covers, their histories are very-well documented, and their actions have made (and continue to make) significant differences to people around the world. This is certainly not the case for most Compassion International sponsors. Indeed, quite the opposite is true, as Compassion International's system is tailored to the everyday, middle-to-upper class, seemingly *ordinary* American evangelical. Second, then, is the fact that unlike Diana and others, Compassion International sponsors do not—presumably—have the capabilities to "globe-trot" around the world, nor do most have the capacities to legally adopt children from around the globe. So, in this sense, they are not strictly "global caretakers" in the same way that is discussed in Shome's article. Nonetheless, I do contend that while these differences are ever-present, Compassion International's sponsorship model does still redefine sponsor positionalities

through a "missionary caretaker" role that not only fits within Shome's perspective, but is also consistent with the long legacy of Christian missionary work.

One of the primary mechanisms through which Compassion International offers forward such a rhetoric is through a pathetic appeal to sponsors' senses of philostorgos and parenthood. Regardless of the actual familial situation of potential sponsors, Compassion International's sponsorship framework certainly constructs the act of sponsorship as one based in the parent/child relationship. For example, please see figure 10 below.

Figure 10. Sponsor a Child Screenshot #2. Taken 13 July 2013.

Source: Compassion International Homepage. http://www.compassion.com

The image above (a version of which was previously discussed in chapter two) takes on a new meaning when filtered through rhetorics of adoption and global parenthood. Here, Rene is represented as a child in need of sponsorship. Just one out of thousands of children, he has been placed on Compassion International's homepage because the day in which the screenshot above was taken was his birthday. Complete with a gift ribbon and an 8th birthday cake this image is, I argue, a direct appeal to potential sponsors' senses of parenthood and *familial love*. The ribbon and cake combine to create a powerful emotional appeal that lingers in the minds of potential sponsors long after they have left the homepage.

Returning to the concept of *phantasia*, I contend that the birthday appeal is a purposeful rhetorical move made by Compassion International to entice potential sponsors to

explore through the website and sponsor children. The images of the ribbon and the cake, in conjunction with the spectacle of the child himself, combine to construct an image that, I argue, strongly lingers in the minds of potential sponsors. More powerful, though, is the discursive potential that this appeal has to rhetorically transport potential sponsors from one identity to another with a single banner on the website. Returning to Michele Kennerly's work on rhetorical transport as a guide for my analysis of this image, I suggest that the rhetorical power of this banner lies in its innate capacity to take something previously unseen—Rene—and to bring it to light for a viewer. This occurs by transporting the sponsor from thinking of her/himself as simply a potential *sponsor* to a construction of her/himself instead as both an *adoptive parent*, of sorts, for the child, as well as a "global missionary" in the same vein as Princess Diana or Angelina Jolie, and (as will be discussed in the coming pages) as *Christ himself*.

Indeed, enthymatically, the image invokes an idea that through the act of sponsorship the potential sponsor can, through financial support, be the bearer of things like the birthday cake, the ribbon, and the happiness of a child that is loved. While seemingly a positive rhetorical message upon first glance, I suggest that the deeper meanings embedded within this adoptive appeal is that of the problematic "global caretaker" discussed by Shome. Primarily at play is the ideal of the previously discussed "affective economy" in which sponsors' emotional heartstrings are pushed, pulled, and prodded as part of a persuasive appeal used to produce a sense of deep need for sponsorship.[230]

Shome argues that a hallmark of the "global caretaker" discourse is the creation of a hierarchy through which the idealized whiteness of "global motherhood" (or in the case of

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[230] Ibid., 402.; Sara Ahmed, "Affective Economies," 117.

Compassion International, global *parenthood*) is juxtaposed against the "deprived children of the global south."[231] While not as striking as some of the examples given in Shome's piece, the various images on Compassion International's website certainly represent a continuation of the sponsor-as-parent enthymeme, as evidenced by figure 11 below.

Figure 11. Sponsor a Waiting Child Screenshot. Taken 13 July 2013.

Source: Compassion International Homepage. http://www.compassion.com

In this image, five young children are presented to the potential sponsor. Lined up, their faces reflect the struggles of global poverty. Juxtaposed against the pathetic appeal of the caption, "Sponsor a waiting child. Some children wait six months or longer to hear *'You have a sponsor,'"* the image of the children offers a visual glimpse into the horrors of child poverty for the potential sponsor.

It is important to recognize that this image is, indeed, simply that—*just a glimpse*—as Compassion International's appeal to sponsor pathos must be subtle and cautious, so as not to over-guilt or over-burden potential sponsors with more emotionally visceral images of child poverty. What results, then, from this cautious appeal to pathos is the creation of a subtle

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[231] Shome, "Global Motherhood," 396.

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hierarchy coated in the institutional dynamics of racism, patriarchal Christianity, and

neoliberalism. On the one hand, you have the poor, deprived children of figure 11. The five

children are presented in a line, and in doing so this almost resembles a "family photograph,"

of sorts. What's missing, again, is the parent: the father, the mother, *the sponsor*. The

completion of the photograph, then, occurs through an appeal to the idealized, normative,

stable parent in the form of the sponsor.

Digger deeper into the implications of this sense of "global caretaker" as "global

missionary," I suggest that it is helpful to return again to the Gospels. Luke 18:15-17, for

example, focuses specifically on Christ's relationship with children, and is arguably an

implicitly understood part of Compassion International's appeal to an evangelical audience.

The passage reads, "People were also bringing babies to Jesus for him to place his hands on

them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. But Jesus called the children to him

and said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God

belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God

like a little child will never enter it."[232] This passage is one of the more well-known,

commonly alluded to and referenced passages in evangelical Protestantism. The passage is

often used as a springboard for arguments about mission work and general Christian

"service" to the poor. Though it does not appear directly on the website, it is certainly a

helpful space through which to discuss some of the underlying Christian frameworks for the

ways in which the sponsorship process redefines what it means to "sponsor children."

"Releasing children from poverty in Jesus' name," is—as has been discussed—

Compassion International's primary slogan. This, combined with the rhetorics of adoption

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[232] Luke 18:15-17 NIV

and parenthood previously discussed, points to a redefinition of sponsors as "global missionaries." Compassion International's sponsorship platform allows sponsors to digitally "step into" the shoes of previous caretakers and missionaries. By clicking the "Sponsor me" button, sponsors are persuaded that they are actively serving as missionaries. Not unlike Christ's disciples, or indeed Christ himself, sponsors are constructed online as the saviors of the "little children." I suggest that Compassion International's aforementioned emotional appeals work to structure this act of "release from poverty" as one of influential digital missionary service.

<div align="center">Spiritual & Digital Missionary Borderlands</div>

Through this framing of sponsorship as missionary service, Compassion International prides itself on attempting to break down the geopolitical, racial, and spiritual borders between the impoverished poor children of the Global South and the well-to-do sponsors of the first-world. This is best evidenced by the organization's purposeful mention of the fact that it has "touched the lives" of more than 2 million children in over two dozen nations around the globe.[233] What is at play here is an appeal to a spiritual, humanitarian thread of globalization—one in which economic, racial, and spiritual barriers are torn down through the act of digital missionary service that Compassion International offers. This is what Compassion International claims it is offering. What is actually happening is, I argue, another story completely.

As I have alluded to throughout this chapter, I contend that Compassion International's sponsorship model is, in actuality, constructing a borderland space in which both children *and* sponsors have become trapped. This, I suggest, occurs through the

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[233] "Where We Work."

<div align="center">126</div>

aforementioned creation of racialized hierarchies and the perpetuation of blended rhetorics of adoption and affective love. This borderland is one comprised of two parallel forces: religion and technology. On the one hand, the infusion of Compassion International's focus on evangelism certainly holds sway in the ways in which both sponsors and children are positionally situated. Simultaneously, the digital platform itself has a powerful role to play in these constructions as well.

For help in beginning to map out the contours of these borderland spaces, I return to the work of Gloria Anzaldúa. When defining the difference between borders and the *borderlands*, she argues that "borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*." "A border," she writes, "is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge."[234] Borders at play within Compassion International's sponsorship model, for example, include everything from the geopolitical borders of the 26 countries within the model to the digital borders of the computer screen and website, as well as the actual platform that is made available to potential sponsors. A borderland, on the other hand, is a "vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants."[235] Through its rhetorics of adoption and love, Compassion International's sponsorship model is redefining these geopolitical, spiritual, and racial borders, which is resulting in the construction of a murky borderland space where sponsors and children reside together— connected through the act of sponsorship yet caught within a series of dominating institutional frameworks.

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[234] Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 25.

[235] Ibid.

A borderland, within Anzaldúa's framework, cannot exist without situating itself against (or, indeed, across) one or more pre-defined borders. Both the digital and spiritual areas of Compassion International's borderland are such places of confusion and contradiction. More than these, though, they are places for forced change—for spiritual and digital *redefinition*. Embedded within Compassion International's argument is the idea that the act of sponsorship can overcome the problems imposed on the world by problematic geopolitical borders. This idea fits squarely within Wendy Brown's argument that humanitarians (among many others) regularly "fantasize a world without borders."[236] The primary example of this aspect of Compassion International's borderland space is the cooptation of evangelical mission work by the forces of capitalism and neoliberalism discussed previously. What results, then, is a brand of Christianity predicated on seemingly authentic rhetorics of love that is ultimately redefined as an extension of neoliberal power.[237]

Compassion International's act of sponsorship claims to "release a child from poverty in Jesus' name." Certainly, through financial sponsorship children selected for sponsorship become better situated financially. They are provided with shoes, with clothing, with education, and with food. These humanitarian acts are not anything to shrug at, as they are certainly helping to make a difference in the actual, lived existences of these children and their families. Alongside these gifts, sponsored children are also brought into the body of Christianity. What is problematic, though, is the way in which this sponsorship act is actually placing children into a murky borderland space. Connected to the sponsor as a sort of "parent figure" or "missionary figure," children are simultaneously aided, yet denied voice. Reduced

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[236] Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (New York: Zone Books, 2010), 20.

[237] Ibid., 23.

to photographs and biographical information, they are rendered objects for spiritual consumption. While they may be "released from poverty in Jesus' name," they become caught in a neoliberal, dehumanizing hierarchy as a result.

There are a number of acts of redefinition that occur to those who find themselves caught between their computer screens and the "reality" of society. The most prominent example of this is, again, the rendering of children as *items* for purchase. Such acts of commodification are—historically—fairly common heralds of the existence of a borderland space. Anzaldúa, for instance, argues that Western culture has routinely objectified people and things through the creation of artificial distance. These acts of objectification are inherently violent, and they result in the splitting of reality. As a result, "people who inhabit both realities are forced to live in the interface between the two, forced to become adept at switching modes."[238] I argue that this is precisely what is occurring within Compassion International's sponsorship framework. As a result of the neoliberal cooptation of the sponsorship model, sponsors are forced to do just this—switch modes, switch roles, and cater to a series of troubling artificial personas perpetuated by Compassion International's rhetorical appeals. Through the "purchasing" of children in the name of Jesus, sponsors are forced to artificially create a distance between themselves and the children they sponsor. Reduced to "items" in a shopping cart or images on a webpage, sponsors construct a borderland reality in which children are "sold" rather than "adopted."

As such, existence within this borderland proves to be to be difficult for those who become trapped by the dominant forces of neoliberalism, patriarchal Christianity, and racism. Borderland residents are routinely classified as "alien," they are scripted as other, and their

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[238] Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 59.

voices and experiences are denied in the name of normativity. This is occurring within the borderland space constructed by Compassion International's website. Primarily, I suggest, Compassion International's children are—as discussed in the previous chapters—otherized via the dominating scripts of market neoliberalism. Expanding on what was alluded to previously, children's voices are denied due to their status as "items" within a digital binary between the actions of a potential sponsor and Compassion International as an organization itself.

Returning to the actual act of sponsorship helps to further illustrate this point. When the potential sponsor decides to commit to a child, s/he is—due to the sponsorship platform itself—engaging primarily with the *brand* of Compassion International. When s/he clicks the "Sponsor Me" button they agree to a financial contract, of sorts, that stipulates a monthly "gift" of $38 to the child and organization. While words and images *about* the child abound, at no point is the sponsor actually communicating with the child. While this can occur after the commencement of the sponsorship process, what initially occurs is the denial of the child's voice within the sponsorship transaction. As such, the child is placed within a borderland zone. Not fully part of the sponsor's life or family, and no longer strictly a resident of their own country or family, Compassion International's rhetoric of adoption through sponsorship actually places the children in a vague digital space where they exist not as fully-fleshed out human beings but instead as images and dollar signs on a screen and code within a digital system.

Also of great importance is the way in which the act of sponsorship commences the creation of the aforementioned digital missionary borderland space. As discussed previously, the sponsorship platform is predicated on the creation of a hierarchy between the

impoverished child—depicted as the other—and the first-world sponsor—depicted as the parent figure. By sponsoring a child, the first-world, presumably American, sponsor transcends racial and geopolitical spaces through the act of mission service. In doing so, I suggest that the act of sponsorship not only recreates problematic racial constructions, but also simultaneously redefines a sense of Christian mission work in a problematic fashion.

I argue that the digital platform for Compassion International's sponsorship platform works to construct mission work within a sort of transcendent globalization. Unsurprisingly, over the last decade the Internet and associated digital technologies have become one of the central mechanisms for globalization.[239] Unlike historical technological systems, however, the Internet has paved a slightly different path for our understandings of the institutional power of globalization. For instance, Kajsa Klein writes that when taken online, globalization can be thought of as "cyberglobality," a term that refers to not just globalization as it has been historically understood, but also refers to various "local manifestations" like individual websites that function as spaces for the production of contemporary discourses of globalization.[240] This sort of local manifestation is important as I suggest that Compassion International's sponsorship platform functions as a digitally localized space that compresses the geopolitical, racial, and spiritual contours of traditional missionary service into a tight, confined, digital box. What results, then, is the perpetuation of a murky borderland space in which sponsors are simultaneously working within traditional systems of globalized mission work, while also caught in the digital space of the website. What results is the fragmentation of reality discussed by Anzaldúa.

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[239] Kajsa Klein, "Cyberglobality: Presenting World Wide Relations," in *Digital Borderlands: Cultural Studies of Identity and Interactivity on the Internet*, eds. Johan Fornäs et al. (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 146.

[240] Ibid., 146-147.

Compassion International offers the promise of active missionary work, yet this sense of active missionary work is reduced to a very *passive* model due to the compression of missionary service via the digital medium. A series of mouse clicks, keystrokes, and webpages, Compassion International's sponsorship platform offers a service only branded as active missionary work. Words and phrases like "sponsor" and "releasing from poverty" connote a very active sense of mission service. When placed into the long history of evangelical missionary service, however, I suggest that this model ultimately represents a sense of "digital corruption" in which Christian missionary work has become overshadowed by the digital platform itself. What results from this is a fragmented sponsor positionality in which sponsors are simultaneously constructed as global caretakers, global parents, and enthymematic substitutes for Christ, all while sitting from the comfort of their homes. This is emblematic of the troubled existence of Compassion International's borderland space. Both spiritually and digitally bounded, this space redefines sponsor and child positionalities, and offers a missionary rhetoric based in an affective economy of love that further situates the act of sponsorship within problematic systems of racism and neoliberalism and recasts missionary service as normatively passive.

Conclusion

Redefining Com/mission

Primary Conclusions

Much has been said in this thesis relative to Compassion International's sponsorship platform. Shopping carts have been discussed, pictures have been analyzed, and hidden voices have been uncovered. There are a number of claims that have been made, and the analysis offered here points to several different lines of research still yet to be explored. Questions, though, remain and, most importantly, the full potential for practical, political, on-the-ground change has yet to be discussed. In drawing this project to a close, I seek to not just summarize, but to push forward, to call for change, and to fight for the continued unmasking of normative systems of oppression such as Compassion International's corrupted sponsorship platform.

It is clear that Compassion International's sponsorship model is being articulated through a neoliberal, dehumanizing rhetoric. Framed around the connection of first world sponsors and impoverished, needy global children through a monthly "gift" of $38, Compassion International's sponsorship platform is nothing short of a paradox. Masked as a missionary enterprise through which ordinary Christians can "do their part," the sponsorship model is actually indicative of a much wider problem within contemporary Christianity—that of normative neoliberalism. As touched upon throughout this project, examples of this rhetoric include the placing of sponsored children into online shopping carts, the labeling of these children as items, and the use of affective appeals to sponsors' senses of love, family, and morality.

In making these arguments about Compassion International I do so because the ways in which philanthropy, sponsorship, and mission are articulated matter. How Christians talk about missionary service is important, and how Christians actually commence the act of missionary work is even more important. Relatively untouched within rhetorical studies, these discourses vividly highlight power structures in need of continued analysis and interrogation. Thus, I would like to briefly summarize some of the instrumental ways in which these rhetorical articulations and practical acts portray, redefine, and perpetuate corrupted systems of com/mission.

It matters how sponsors are pushed to think of children as objects. Whether conscious of it or not, Compassion International's framework conceptualizes impoverished children as others. Without voices, Compassion International's website frames these children within a space that they cannot escape. Pictured as defenseless, despairing, and alone, these children are depicted as items. They are commodified as objects for purchase within a missionary system built on a neoliberal axis that articulates the sponsor as the buyer and the child as an object to be bought. This situates Compassion International within a long line of scholarly work on neoliberalism, and highlights just how important it is for rhetorical scholars of Christianity to push back against and interrogate systems of power like neoliberalism as they are articulated within the contemporary—and historical—artifacts and institutions we study.

It matters how these children are displayed as a spectacle. Exemplary of previous scholarship completed on the human rights spectacle and the specter of foreignness, Compassion International's aesthetic, rhetorical, and theological foundations point to a vivid and troubling conceptualization of poverty, race, and Christianity's position relative to each. This touches on scholarly research on everything from visual rhetoric to the rhetoric of race.

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Filtered through an affective economy predicated on appeals to historical senses of Christian missionary service, love, and family, this spectacle is, I argue, quite purposeful. Pictured alongside birthday cakes, bright and persuasive text, and arguments about biblical commission, Compassion International's website constructs these children as a missionary spectacle for all potential sponsors to partake in. Presented so as to appeal to sponsors' senses of empathy, Compassion International's model makes pathetic appeals to sponsors that are not just persuasive but are, in the end, indicative of a highly powerful and problematic system of positional *redefinition*.

It matters how sponsors think of themselves relative to these children. It can be presumed that most of Compassion International's sponsors are first world, Western, and Protestant. Situated within the higher echelons of privilege in Western society, Compassion International's sponsorship model reifies historical strains of whiteness, globalization, and otherization. Compassion International's aesthetic, economic, and emotional appeals construct sponsors as digital saviors. Electronic missionaries, sponsors are asked to release children from the bounds of poverty through a few clicks of a mouse and a few keystrokes at their home or office computer. These acts define sponsors as global caretakers, and reproduce troubling discourses and hierarchies of adoption, race, and commodification.

It matters how missionary and humanitarian work are framed online. Compassion International frames sponsors as missionaries with a purpose. While I do not necessarily disagree that there are benefits to the act of sponsorship, I contend that this framing comes at a hefty price. In the case of Compassion International, sponsors are constructed as missionaries through a passive framework. This framework perpetuates a neoliberal- and racially-tinged hierarchy in which sponsors are portrayed as the savior, the parent, and the

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caregiver of the other. This creates a digital borderland space in which the act of philanthropy—the act of mission—blurs and ultimately redefines the ways in which sponsors think of themselves as missionaries. It constructs mission work as something that can be done passively, without much of a second glance. This, I argue, fundamentally changes the ways in which we think about missionary work, and speaks to the ways in which this analysis of Compassion International speaks to ongoing scholarly work on borderlands, technology, and humanitarian work.

Finally, *it matters how, in the end, Compassion International's website and sponsorship model reproduce systems of domination*. The ultimate claim being made with this project is that Compassion International's sponsorship model rests upon—and reifies—a corrupted mission model. Filtered through blended systems of neoliberalism, globalization, and racism, Compassion International is a striking example of how institutional power has infiltrated and become *normative* within contemporary Christianity and contemporary mission work. Compassion International's model denies children a voice and robs them of their humanity online. This is a clear sign of the ways in which mission has become corrupted, and points to the innate need that Christians and, indeed, all humanitarian organizations have to rethink, re-conceptualize, and redefine how they articulate their missionary, philanthropic, and other charitable platforms online.

Future Research and Questions

How we talk, think, and theorize about issues of domination is incredibly important. This project, as has been discussed throughout my analysis, situates Compassion International within a series of different, yet interlocking, scholarly conversations. Operating from a feminist rhetorical lens, this project has aimed to combine different theoretical

approaches ranging from neoliberalism and globalization to Christian theology and rhetorical studies on visuality and technology. Working to uncover the children lost in the digital manifestation of Compassion International's sponsorship model, this project has focused explicitly on scholarly issues involving neoliberalism, racism, patriarchy, globalization, and technology. While the discussions offered in this project point to a number of different claims and insights, there are a number of remaining directions for future research questions to be answered.

To address the former, there are many different ways in which this project has the potential to serve as a springboard for future research. First, and perhaps most prominently, this thesis speaks only to one Christian organization—Compassion International. There are dozens of other, similar organizations—both secular and religious—that are ripe for a similar type of analysis. For example, future scholars might consider completing a rhetorical analysis that situates Compassion International relative to another Christian organization like Holt International, for example, that specializes not in child sponsorship, per se, but in missionary work more directly tied to an idea of global adoption. This is just one of many such examples and, as such, I suggest that the theoretical and analytical frameworks I have offered and employed with this project might be well equipped for analyses of similar websites, sponsorship models, and humanitarian platforms.

Another possible direction for research would be to explore how similar systems of missionary work are functioning within other denominations of Christianity. This project has focused squarely on the Protestant, more evangelical wing of the Church. While certainly one of the bedrocks upon which Christian missionary work has been (and continues to be) built, there are certainly other strains of the faith and denominations doing mission work that

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would be ripe for an analysis such as the one I have offered with this project. For example, other research might venture into studies of Catholic organizations doing similar work abroad and their online platforms. For that matter, future research might also examine the ways in which charities of other faiths—Islam, Judaism, etc.—are implicated (or not) within the same systems that Compassion International's platform has fallen victim to.

Indeed, future research might also work to connect this analysis more directly to Christian theology on commission and mission. This is research that I, personally, would very much like to undertake moving forward in my scholarly career. While certainly a pivotal aspect of this project, I think a more interdisciplinary approach—one that more directly encompasses scholars working on the Bible, Christian theology, theory and history, and so on—to questions of commission and mission might be in order. For example, an infusion of work devoted directly to studies of Christian doctrine—particularly those of the early Christian faith—would be highly informative relative to this project moving forward. Moreover, a study that situates Compassion International as a contemporary example of mission work alongside the centuries of evangelical mission work on the ground would, I think, be quite compelling.

In terms of other research directions, this project has certainly spawned a number of new areas of inquiry for me moving forward. Among them, I am particularly interested in pursuing discussions of love and com/mission as they are related to our understandings of ancient Greek. One of the primary directions for my dissertation work—as of this point—is an exploration into the linguistic foundations for biblical uses of concepts like love. Furthermore, this research has also helped to solidify an interest in the rhetoric of children and parenthood, more broadly. Having worked on a very contemporary manifestation of

these issues, I hope with future research to explore more historical rhetorical artifacts—particularly those of the ancients. There are numerous directions that my future research with this project can go, and I am wholeheartedly excited to pursue these issues in the coming years.

That said, there are a number of questions that remain as I write these final pages. Most directly among them are two questions I posed at the onset of this project: Is Compassion International's sponsorship model inherently flawed and, if so, should sponsors participate in it at all? I still think that there are redeeming qualities to Compassion International's missionary enterprise, but I am wondering how Compassion International might better rhetorically frame these good qualities and push them to the forefront. Essentially, how does an organization like Compassion International redefine itself—and its sense of com/mission—so as to better exist outside of the institutional forces of power discussed in this project? Can it escape neoliberalism's influence? What about racism's? Globalization's? Is it even possible to escape such systems of domination?

Indeed, how should Compassion International move forward from here? Should it disband its online sponsorship model completely, or should it be revised? How should Compassion International work around the unique limitations (and strengths) of the Internet as a discursive and practical platform for com/mission work? How should Compassion International frame its mission to sponsors so as to not reproduce troubled positionalities? As I move forward with this research and push to craft this thesis for publication these are some of the principal questions that I hope to respond to.

In closing, it is clear that Compassion International's articulation of children through the neoliberal, racist, and technologically-troubled rhetorics discussed in this project is

indicative of ongoing issues facing contemporary Christianity. From shopping carts to birthday cakes, Compassion International's sponsorship model is vividly operating within a corrupted sense of com/mission. Digitally, Compassion International has redefined God's commission to humanity through a neoliberal lens. This has silenced children's voices, otherized them, and perpetuated hierarchies of whiteness. Continued research and interrogation of similar practices must continue, and it is my sincere hope that this project helps to continue these acts of unmasking, uncovering, and redefinition.

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