

# Circuits of Compassion: The Affective Labor of Uganda's Christian Orphan Choirs


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**Abstract:** Uganda's touring orphan choirs engage in a form of charity that is dependent on the mobility not only of money, but also of people and sentiments. Boyd considers the moral economies that underlie this ongoing project of compassionate "circulation." If a key finding of the work on humanitarian affect has been how such "affective surpluses" mask inequalities between donors and recipients, this article considers how participants in charitable relationships conceive of dependency and indebtedness differently. These differences compel us to understand how moral and religious sentiments give shape to the inequalities inherent in dominant forms of global humanitarian "care."

**Résumé:** La chorale des orphelins en tournée en Ouganda s'engage dans un type de charité qui dépend de la mobilité non seulement de l'argent, mais aussi des personnes et des sentiments. Boyd considère les économies morales qui sous-tendent ce projet de « circulation compatissante. » Si l'une des principales conclusions du travail sur l'effet humanitaire a été la façon dont ces « excédents affectifs » masquent les inégalités entre les bienfaiteurs et les bénéficiaires, cet article examine comment les participants en relations de bienfaisance conçoivent différemment la dépendance et l'endettement. Ces différences pressent à comprendre comment les sentiments moraux et religieux donnent forme aux inégalités inhérentes aux formes dominantes d'aide humanitaires mondiales.

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**Resumo:** No Uganda, os coros itinerantes de órfãos dedicam-se a um tipo de caridade que depende da mobilidade não só de dinheiro, mas também de pessoas e de sentimentos. No presente artigo, Boyd analisa as economias morais que subjazem a este projeto de “circulação” solidária, presentemente em curso. Uma das principais conclusões da investigação acerca da afetividade humanitária foi a de que os “excedentes afetivos” escondem as desigualdades entre os doadores e os beneficiários, e Boyd analisa os modos diferenciados segundo os quais os intervenientes em relações de caridade concebem a dependência e o endividamento. Estas diferenças levam-nos a compreender que os sentimentos religiosos e morais dão origem a desigualdades intrínsecas às formas predominantes de “prestação de cuidados” humanitários a nível mundial.

**Keywords:** Uganda; Humanitarianism; child sponsorship; born-again Christianity; charity; dependency

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In December of 2016, I drove a few miles down the highway from my home to watch a choral performance by a group of children who had traveled to the United States from Uganda, a country where I have been conducting fieldwork for the past fifteen years. I knew the choir well, having seen them (or a version of them) perform in Kampala many times. But this was the first time I had seen the choir perform abroad, as they usually do, while on tour to promote the cause of Watoto Child Care Ministries, a relief program run by a Kampala-based Pentecostal church. The venue for this recent performance was a large, modern non-denominational church on the outskirts of Raleigh, North Carolina. The sanctuary resembled a theater, with the kind of high-tech lighting and sound system that is now commonplace in many contemporary American churches. The theatrical nature of the space heightened the drama of the show’s opening sequence, an introductory film titled “The Separation.” This short film traced the stories of four fictional Ugandan children as they were separated (in only one instance by death) from their parents or family members: one newborn is followed by the camera from behind as her mother furtively carries her through an urban slum only to leave her, wailing, by an open sewer drain; another baby is abandoned on a crowded taxi bus, left behind by a young mother apparently too overwhelmed to look after her. The film painted the picture of a society that is deeply broken, bereft of strong family and kinship ties, of children unvalued and unloved. It was an unsettling narrative, one that left many in the audience visibly upset. When the lights came on, the choir, a group of 14 young children in brightly patterned costumes, stood at attention, their uplifting and energetic voices providing a stark contrast to the devastating narrative of the film.

Watoto, which takes its name from the kiswahili word for “children,” was established in 1992 by a Ugandan-based Canadian pastor in response to

the growing AIDS crisis in the country, which since the early 1980s has left over one million Ugandan children orphaned or in vulnerable living circumstances (U.S. PEPFAR 2017:36).<sup>1</sup> Over the past twenty-five years, the ministry has built three large "villages" around Kampala where children are placed in family units consisting of a volunteer Ugandan mother and up to eight children.<sup>2</sup> While Watoto is the largest charity program of the church, it is almost entirely financed by foreign donations solicited during promotional tours abroad by the children's choirs. This is notable, given the size of Watoto's Ugandan-born congregation. Watoto has five churches in the capital city alone, and over 40,000 Ugandan congregants. And yet, despite the growth of the local congregation, according to a pastor at the church only a few dozen of over 5,000 Watoto-sponsored children have received financial support from Ugandan members of the church.<sup>3</sup> The church recruits nearly all its sponsors from abroad. At any given time, as many as four Watoto children's choirs are touring North America, Western Europe, Australia, and Asia, publicizing the child sponsorship project and recruiting potential donors.

My research on Watoto's child sponsorship program has been longitudinal and ethnographic, building on an interest in Ugandan attitudes about charity and humanitarianism that has run through my fieldwork over the last several years. I first became aware of Watoto during research I did in Uganda in the late 2000s, tracking the involvement of Ugandan churches in AIDS prevention programs (Boyd 2015). When I lived in Kampala from 2005 to 2007, working on that project, I attended Watoto church services and programs regularly and lived for a time with members of the church. Since then, I have observed Watoto choirs perform in Uganda numerous times, attended over forty services and events at Watoto churches in Kampala, and interviewed a Watoto pastor, several youth group leaders, musicians in the Watoto church band, and an adult choir leader who twice toured abroad with the children's choirs. On more recent visits to Uganda, I conducted interviews with an adult "volunteer host" who guided foreign volunteers during their visits to Watoto and a volunteer Ugandan father figure, a member of the church's "father's heart" program. I also visited the Watoto village in Bbira on two occasions in the company of that father-volunteer. And in 2016 and 2018, I observed four U.S.-based Watoto performances near my home in North Carolina.<sup>4</sup>

While this project began as an extension of my research on Ugandan Christian HIV/AIDS work, in recent years I have become increasingly drawn to questions about the structure of the humanitarianism relationships Watoto uses to sustain itself. Watching the choirs perform, it was impossible to ignore the ways emotional and affective labor is placed at the center of this humanitarian project; it is the proverbial conduit through which capital flows. The children's choirs train for months and then travel thousands of miles from home in order to tell a compelling, heart-wrenching story to foreign Christian audiences who, if so called, respond to the stated need of the children by donating their money and time. The productive

potential of emotional connection was not lost on the organization's officials. One adult choir leader told me, "Donors need to know more than the general scope of the orphan crisis; they need to know about *specific orphans-in-need*." Watoto performances are crafted to trace an emotional arc, from the crisis told in the film "The Separation" to the emotional resolution witnessed in the choir's exuberant songs and child testimonials.

For the choir's managers and musical directors, sentimental responses had the potential to translate into relationships that were long-term and personal, often generating repeat cycles of emotional-financial exchange between Watoto children and foreign donors. Immediately after shows, audiences are encouraged to buy Watoto merchandise, sold by the child-performers themselves, who encourage audience members to sponsor particular children. Children available for sponsorship have their biographies featured on colorful cards, laid out like an array of well-designed C.V.s to be perused and collected. Sponsor relationships are then facilitated by personal correspondence between children and donors, through which donors are encouraged to track the growth and success of their sponsored child. Finally, many sponsors choose to deepen their ties to Watoto by traveling to Uganda to visit the children's villages themselves, volunteering to build the houses in which children live—a practice Watoto readily encourages and facilitates, providing tour guides and local handlers and overseeing local travel arrangements. Donations to children are thus intended to be more than anonymous one-off gestures; financial ties are used to cultivate an ongoing relationship-driven circuit whereby emotional bonds generate a sense of interdependence, transforming feeling into material investment. Far from tangential to the humanitarian apparatus, emotional and personal connections are central to the ways Watoto financially sustains itself.

This article considers and outlines the consequences of this ongoing project of compassionate "circulation," whereby affective work on the part of aid recipients seeks to elicit emotional, personal responses from foreign Christian donors, sentimental connections which are eventually translated into material support. Sentimentality and compassionate care are often deployed in charitable relationships in ways that serve to mask and resolve the tensions of inequality that underlie humanitarian actions. For Western donors to Watoto, inequality is the impetus for their actions. Visible need stimulates compassionate responses, even as it generates a continual source of tension in the donor-recipient relationship. This is because the condition of dependency is marked as morally questionable by many Westerners, and the sense that one is sustaining the condition of dependency is disquieting for many donors. Compassion, and the emotional intimacy it creates, serves to elide this tension, marking charitable donations as "gifts" of care that are transformative, ideally obscuring the distance and difference between donors and recipients.

My interest in this affective work is in the ways that Ugandan recipients often perceive these relationships of care differently from the way they are perceived by donors. Although dependency is marked as morally

problematical for donors, hierarchical relationships for Ugandans have long been considered socially productive, providing benefits for both the givers and receivers of aid. A key problem with the circuit of compassion that sustains programs like Watoto is not simply that inequality persists despite these humanitarian efforts, but that donors and recipients consider the social and moral effects of this inequality differently, in ways that have consequences for recipients' sense of their own agency and influence within these relationships. This article is thus an effort to better understand the differing moral and social perspectives that parties to humanitarian relationships bring to projects of charity and compassionate care, projects that often posit emotional connection as a means to bridge, address, and sometimes mask, broad geographical, economic, and social divides.

The importance of affective labor has recently drawn the attention of scholars, including those who focus on Christian charitable aid. Melani McAlister has written about the ways the global projects of evangelical Americans are often propelled by a sense of emotional connection, their political commitments driven by a politics of affect or, to use the familiar American evangelical phrase, of "having a heart" for particular problems or communities abroad (2008, 2018). Humanitarian work focused on children has been especially shaped by this growing emphasis on sympathetic connection between "needy" children and donors. As Aviva Sinervo and Kristen Cheney note in their recent analysis of child-focused humanitarian work, the problems of vulnerable children are often transformed by charitable actors into simplified, heart-wrenching narratives that are easily exportable and commodifiable, used to generate financial support, but often at the cost of overly generalizing the problems children and communities face (2019:5).

Throughout this body of scholarship there is growing recognition that cultivating sentimental connections between donors and recipients, far from being an innocuous driver of attention and aid, shapes charitable relationships in particular ways. As the anthropologist Vincanne Adams (2013) has argued, disasters—such as Hurricane Katrina, or the AIDS orphan crisis in Uganda—generate an "affective surplus," whereby emotional responses to suffering circulate as key sources of market opportunity and profit, ultimately calcifying relationships of inequality rather than resolving them. One reason for this is that present neoliberal economic conditions increasingly demand the mobilization of voluntary labor to take the place of weakening state services. In the face of a retreating state, the language of compassion is important for the ways it strategically shifts the responsibility for social services onto the shoulders of volunteers, who are compelled to take charge of social problems themselves (Muehlebach 2013). Affective relationships of care become stand-ins for the anonymity of state services, and one's ability to draw the attention of others—to be a compelling, needy subject for other's aid—a necessary aspect of survival in a world defined by growing gaps between the rich and poor.

Although a key finding of much of this work on humanitarian affect has been how such “affective surpluses” tend to mask, and even perpetuate, inequalities between donors and recipients, my interest is in how participants in the Watoto charity relationship conceive of this inequality and indebtedness differently. The fundamental conundrum is how differing moral and social perspectives on inequality create an underlying tension within these relationships, with consequences for how donors and recipients each understand the kinds of agency afforded them.

For Western donors to Watoto’s projects, their compassionate response to children in need is viewed through the lens of the ideally equalizing and transformative effect of Christian compassion. Compassionate care, as an expression of God’s love, should alleviate differences between donors and recipients, transforming orphans into accountable Christians. From this perspective, inequality, while something that drives expressions of care, is also something that generates discomfort. Love for orphans is fueled by an unresolvable tension: it is generated in response to suffering, and yet finds the persistence of inequality deeply uncomfortable.

By contrast, for most Ugandans, inequality is rarely considered a morally or socially problematical state. To be dependent in Uganda is to be part of a broader social network of reciprocal relationships that is morally and socially valued (Hanson 2003; Scherz 2014; Boyd 2018). While dependency is a position rarely experienced without complaint, it is not viewed as a morally questionable position in and of itself. Moreover, dependents are rarely viewed as lacking in agency or as merely passive recipients of care. Rather, dependents are considered partners in relationships of interdependence that are necessary as well as socially productive. This perspective on inequality diverges significantly from most neoliberal, Western, and Christian views of the effects and moral consequences of charitable support.

For Watoto’s child-performers, the problem with these differing perspectives is rooted in how donors’ views of inequality tend to obfuscate and undermine the forms of influence and agency long considered inherent in the position of the dependent in Ugandan social worlds. Highlighting these differing perspectives allows us to consider what forms of social agency gain leverage when sentiment drives humanitarian work, and the consequences when “compassion” is positioned as the central motivation for Christian forms of transnational charity. Significantly, it is not the persistence of inequality, or even the demand for emotional labor, that troubles Watoto workers who participate in this humanitarian relationship. What troubles most Ugandans is the ways Christian compassion tends to undermine the agency of children, masking their productive labor and reimagining them as passive partners in a one-directional relationship of material support. To better understand the tension generated by these differing perspectives on charity and inequality, I begin with a discussion of the ways Watoto appeals to Western Christian audiences, largely by emphasizing the transformative power of donors’ own compassionate actions. I then focus my analysis on

Ugandan views of these relationships, and their perspectives on the condition of dependency more generally.

### **Equals among Unequals: The Compassionate Aid of American Evangelicals**

Watoto's performances feature dynamic and highly energetic songs and dances performed by well-trained children, all of whom live either in the villages for vulnerable children that Watoto has built on the outskirts of Kampala or, more recently, in a household headed by a mother who receives aid from Watoto's new "Neighbourhood" project, which supports single mothers living in poverty. The children train for months before going on tour, and their performances are engaging, professional, and technically proficient. The group's aesthetics are "African" in a general way, featuring costumes styled as hip, fashionable mash-ups that incorporate torn jeans, tightly tailored blazers, asymmetrical haircuts, and brightly patterned cloth—a look that appeals to their diverse audiences. Each year, Watoto's creative directors introduce new songs, short films, and themes around which tours are oriented, often emphasizing the transformational power of love, or a literal sense of movement and travel ("Here We Go!"; "Oh What Love! A New Sound by a Family of Orphans"). The performances are emotionally intense, with uplifting and stylized songs interwoven between testimonials by children and adult performers.<sup>5</sup> Testimonials are important parts of each performance, as these are opportunities for audiences to grapple with the reality of orphanhood. In one memorable testimonial I heard in Uganda (where the choirs often did dry runs of their touring shows) a child spoke about tasting bread for the first time—a story aimed to demonstrate the deprivation of the orphan, and the ordinary-extraordinary kind of material salvation Watoto could provide.<sup>6</sup> Sami K, a gospel musician who toured twice as an adult performer with Watoto, emphasized the power of testimonials when I asked him how audiences responded to the choirs. "Hearing stories from the kids about what God has done with their life, through the [Watoto] organization, that was really something for the audiences. When you go to America, you have to be convinced to finish up your food. It's just amazing that what you think is nothing for one society, is really something for another. That is what is really mind-blowing for them [the audience]."

If the abject loss of orphanhood is one message of the performance, it is always paired with a message of hope, of a childhood restored through the help of the organization and its foreign donors. This is a notable story line, given that Watoto and programs like it have faced the criticism that some of the children they serve are not, in fact, orphans, but rather are children placed in such organizations in order to access resources otherwise unavailable to their families (Sinervo & Cheney 2019:5). From this perspective, Watoto's emphasis on Ugandan children's abandonment (as depicted in the film "The Separation"), and their salvation at the hands of the

organization, is misleading, but it is nonetheless made central to the emotional arc that structures performances, and proves to be a deeply powerful way to appeal to foreign Christian audiences' faith in the effects of compassionate Christian love.<sup>7</sup> Many of the short film clips interspersed between songs during performances emphasize the transformative power of the Watoto experience. In one clip, a young boy leads the camera on a virtual tour of one of Watoto's villages, comically interrupting a class of children seated in an immaculate, orderly classroom and then running through a playground that features Western-style mass-manufactured play equipment (the likes of which is rarely seen in Uganda).

For American and other Western audiences, such images reinforce a sense of familiarity: children in the program are given childhoods similar to those donors recognize in their own communities. In another film clip, two children are featured on a split screen: on one side an Australian girl who has sponsored a Ugandan child, on the other the Ugandan girl she has sponsored. The two girls were shown doing the same activities in parallel: dressing in school uniforms, eating breakfast, walking to school. The Australian girl speaks to the camera about her own visit to a Watoto performance some years back, an experience that moved her to raise money to sponsor a child by selling cookies and soliciting pledges from friends and family. The emphasis was on her own agency, the effective power of her feelings of good will, a message that the audience with whom I viewed the clip audibly responded to, cheering the charitable "heart" and self-reliance of the young Australian.

Watching from the audience, I was struck by the radical argument this film made, one meant to appeal directly to Western viewers: a donor's gift had enabled the transformation of both the donor and recipient, and these transformations had made the two girls more alike each other, alleviating the tensions of perceived inequality. The Australian girl had come to understand the pain of a Ugandan girl far removed from her own daily life, while the Ugandan girl had been saved from a life of deprivation to live much as her Australian counterpart lives, a life seemingly dictated by the quotidian teenage rhythms of school uniforms and breakfast tea. In so doing, this gift of compassionate aid seemed to assuage the violence of poverty and misfortune.

The film's overarching argument, and the message of Watoto's performances more generally, highlights a broader Christian orientation to charitable exchange, and the idealized effects of Christian compassion. Christian compassion—an affective response to the needs of others, often less fortunate than oneself—is understood by many evangelical Christians to be a radical act of selflessness that demands a deep understanding of the vulnerability and need of others. Such acts of faithfulness are viewed as extensions and visible manifestations of God's love (Elisha 2011:166). Ideally, a demonstration of compassion is an unconditional act, given without the expectation of reciprocation. But gifts of charity are also understood as radical acts of sacrifice and devotion, a "sacralized mode of exchange" (Coleman 2004;



Harding 2000), whereby such gifts carry an expectation, or at least a hope, of transformation on the part of the recipient. So, while such gifts are given in a personally disinterested manner, what underlies them is the expectation that as expressions of God's love on earth, compassion should have demonstrable effects on recipients: recipients should become examples of the power of God's love.

For this reason, the evangelical gift of charity is animated by an underlying contradiction that shapes Christian compassion more generally: as an extension of God's mercy, gifts of charitable compassion should be given with no expectation of remuneration, and yet, like the gift of salvation itself, such charitable acts "invoke norms of reciprocity and indebtedness," a belief in the transformative effects of faith to make individuals more accountable, trustworthy, responsible Christian believers (Elisha 2011:156). As studies of humanitarianism have shown, these are sentiments that help to shape contemporary attitudes about economic development and relief more generally, as evangelical precepts of compassion animate neoliberal technologies of citizenship that emphasize the remaking of persons and communities through projects of personal empowerment, self-help, and responsibility (Cruikshank 1999; Muehlebach 2012).

The split screen of the Australian girl and her Ugandan counterpart seemed crafted to demonstrate just this very point: one teenager's own sacrifice had effected real, tangible changes in the girl she had sponsored, transforming that girl into a recognizable facsimile of her devoted Western "sister"—attending school, caring for herself, reading the Bible. Any change in the donor is rooted in the effects of her faith, the ways that Christian belief has enabled her to see and understand an orphan's plight. This is a perspective that emphasizes the one-directional nature of such a relationship: interpersonal understanding (compassion) effects changes in a needy child. But it also leaves the onus for transformation on the child herself, who is expected to demonstrate, and justify, such gifts by embodying the effects of compassionate care, while being presented as only a passive recipient of her donor's selfless "gift."

If one tension underlying this narrative is the way "selfless" compassionate gifts demand reciprocity in the form of the ideal behavior of recipients, another tension concerns the ways compassionate sentiments are thought to ameliorate conditions of inequality. In being transformed by the care of donors, recipients also become more like their donor-counterparts, more equal (in theory) to their donors. The issues of dependency and inequality are expected to be resolved in this narrative, their persistence masked by an emphasis on an orphan child's change and transformation. In another short film, three graduates of the Watoto program (adults who had been raised in the Watoto children's villages) are shown leading lives marked by the trappings of upper-middle class wealth. One woman works an office job in one of Kampala's banks, another is a stay-at-home mom filmed in her comfortable house while her children play outside and have their faces painted at a street festival. These are lives far different from that

of the average Ugandan (and exceptional even among Watoto graduates), but for audiences these are lives that seem familiar and recognizable.

Compassion, as a radically transformative affective state, characterizes donors as empowered, agentive, and impactful; it also has the effect of downplaying the aid recipients' own role in generating and perpetuating cycles of material support. Child recipients are thought to be transformed because of what they have received, in spite of their own social position (characterized as one of vulnerability and helplessness). Their continued status as vulnerable children and adults is largely erased by a public narrative that celebrates the apparent newfound autonomy and independence of children and adult graduates of the program. And, importantly, the child's own work within these circuits of compassion—to solicit aid, to demonstrate need—is obscured, their own agency and labor replaced by a narrative that characterizes charitable gifts as one-directional and unrequited, and of aid recipients as largely passive. This is particularly ironic, given the very visible *work* that child-performers do to sustain these cycles of compassionate care: touring for six months at a time, practicing for hours each day, shaking hands and smiling as they interact with audiences after shows.

While expressions of compassion are intended to address the injustices of poverty, heightening a sense of belonging and interdependence with others (which such relationships often do succeed in doing for donors), for Ugandans the effect of compassion is ultimately to undermine the agency and influence generally afforded dependents in Uganda. These effects seem to be driven by a deep disquiet among donors with the condition of dependency. One need look no further than American discourse concerning state welfare programs, and the “welfare queens” that benefit from them, to see that dependency is a status that is marked as morally questionable in the United States. Compassion is an appealing solution to children's need because it is understood to fundamentally transform orphans, who, in experiencing Christian love, will (theoretically) become responsible, independent youths. But by seeming to erase inequality and obscure the persistence of dependency, this narrative also works to undermine the very tools typically available to children to change their own circumstances.

### **The Agency of the Dependent: Ugandans' Alternative Perspectives on Inequality**

For Ugandans this double bind—to remain dependent, but to deny the persistence of dependency—is especially troubling, given the ways dependency is typically viewed by Ugandans themselves. Inequality and hierarchy have long been tools of social mobility and social reproduction in the parts of Uganda where Watoto operates. The perspective of Ugandans highlights broader differences in the ways children and donors consider the relationships they forge through charity—differences that have long-term consequences for how foreign Christians and others understand solutions to intractable problems such as poverty and economic injustice. If Westerners

wish to conceal inequality because of the moral discomfort it produces, most Ugandans tend to view dependency and inequality as morally productive states, which vest those in dependent positions with acknowledged forms of agency and status. A bigger problem with the compassionate response that provides the engine for Watoto's existence is not so much the way inequalities are reproduced, but more so the ways a state of dependency is reframed as morally questionable and disempowered.

Far from a passive state, dependency in Uganda has long been what James Ferguson (2013) has called a "mode of action." Dependents regularly use their relationships to those with more power as tools of advancement, behavior that is considered morally and socially productive (Scherz 2014:21). More than merely passive recipients of aid, dependent (lower class, lower status, younger) people in Uganda are considered to hold positions if not of power, at least ones vested with agency and moral standing. Those at the pinnacle of social hierarchies and those at their base are each considered important, productive members of society, whose relationships to each other are mutually beneficial. Even the work of asking for help has been described as a kind of valuable labor in sub-Saharan Africa, whereby such work is considered not personally diminishing but affirming of the personhood of both the giver and receiver of aid (Klaits 2011).

Child performers in Watoto are shaped by these cultural norms, and in this sense the work that they do to *ask* is, from certain perspectives, undiminished by the kinds of critical readings of dependency that Western audiences bring to the exchange. Apart from one instance, when a choir leader went off-script to note that American audiences never get to see the physical "beauty" of Uganda and are too often shown images of pain and poverty, I have never seen performers break with their Watoto-sanctioned script. I think this is, at least in part, because this is work that has value in Ugandan social spheres: to make connections to those more powerful, to celebrate donors, to ask for help well, are all honorable actions.<sup>8</sup> And yet, as much as Watoto's child-performers work to cultivate a sense of emotional and personal connection to donors, these are relationships that are largely managed and supervised by the organization and not by the children. The children have little of the agency typically afforded dependents in Uganda, to cultivate relationships in ways that would ultimately benefit them personally. For most Watoto children, their correspondences with donors are screened by the organization—as it is with most child sponsorship programs. There is little sense that once you create a personal connection with a sponsor that this connection could be used to benefit *you*, directly, or that you could manage such relationships independently. One young woman, the graduate of another child sponsorship program, once lamented to me the loss of contact she experienced with her sponsor—a common occurrence once a sponsored child "graduates" from the program—and wanted my help locating her. "Do you know Roberta Smith, in Milwaukee?" she asked me, out of desperation. What had become of this woman who had written her, taken an interest in her, and helped to pay her school fees?

Efforts by organizations to control the correspondence between donors and children seem to be designed specifically to manage when and how children ask for help, in ways that directly curtail the autonomy and agency of children in these relationships.

While donors often speak of the intimacy they feel with their sponsored children, the children themselves rarely have unmediated contact with donors. It is this erasure of intimacy, and the inability to make demands that such intimacies typically enable, that create problems for children. One exception to this rule was a young man I knew whose job it was to host and lead foreign volunteer groups during their one- or two-week visits to the Watoto program. He described to me his close relationships with these visitors, even calling one elderly couple his “*jajas*,” or grandparents. Over time he had cultivated that particular relationship in ways that seemed genuinely intimate, shaped by his own ideas of the kinds of relationships with patron-donors and elders that might be morally “good.” That is, he viewed the relationships as two-directional, and his own place within this relationship as one that, while unequal, was vested with a degree of agency that allowed him to make demands on, and seek a response from, the donor-couple. And in fact, the couple responded (to his initial surprise) as genuine kin, often sending him money to make ends meet. And he in turn celebrated them and spoke of them as his own elderly family members. It was this kind of relationship that typically characterizes dependency in Uganda, whereby those with less status have the ability, and even the right, to make demands on others who in turn have the moral and social responsibility to respond. In the process both parties are typically viewed as benefitting from such exchanges.

The problem with typical sponsor relationships is that children rarely have such direct, unmonitored contact with donors. That young man’s position within the organization was unique, allowing him to manage and interact with volunteers freely. His status as a highly educated young man (and, ironically, not an orphan), who spoke English fluently and who was also fluent in Western idioms and pop culture, heightened his ability to connect with visitors. For most children, their work for Watoto—bearing the burden of emotionally connecting with audiences, engaging and interacting with sponsors—is labor that generates profit not for them directly, but for the larger Watoto program, which funnels donations and profits back into the church rather than toward any individual child.

This dilemma of emotional connection in the absence of children’s acknowledged agency is clear in the ways the organization and its donors use the metaphor of “family” to speak of donor-orphan relationships. Sponsored children in Watoto often speak of their place in a “new family” at the organization, and of their relationships to donors as extensions of such a family. During one performance a young boy spoke of the “joy” he felt when he and his two triplet brothers were taken in by the organization and placed in a “new family” home. An adult performer who had been raised in the program spoke of how often she had reflected on the moment

when her sponsor “picked my card” from a pile of child profiles, thereby including her in a new extended family. A group of mothers sponsored by the “Neighborhood” program speak in a short film of finding familial “love” at Watoto for the first time in their lives. But, despite the seeming familial intimacy emphasized in these narratives, these relationships lack what is most fundamental to ideal social relationships in Uganda: the sense of moral standing and obligation between social dependents and their patrons or elders.

The problem with the family metaphor is that donors and children bring to it different expectations about what kinds of relationships and obligations familial intimacy might create. For donors, Watoto promises moral and social fulfillment—a sense of “doing good” in the world—coupled with the immediacy of personal connection to those whose lives the donor has changed. And these kinds of bonds are ones that the family metaphor heightens for donors. In one video shown during the most recent Watoto performance I attended, in Cary, North Carolina, donors spoke movingly of the kinds of intimate connections they had made with their sponsored children. Their motivations for becoming involved in Watoto often emphasized how their relationships with Watoto children alleviated a sense of family loss or absence that had long persisted in their lives. An older Asian woman who hosted Watoto children on tour in Hong Kong spoke of never having had children but of finding a family through Watoto. She said to the camera, “I am their [the touring children’s] mom now. I do not have a family, but I have one now because of Watoto.” An American couple described in even more emotional terms the ways Watoto had become a replacement or extension family; they spoke movingly about the death of their son and the ways the Ugandan girls the couple now sponsors are the “sisters he [their son] never had.” They were filmed visiting their sponsored children in their shared home in one of Watoto’s villages in Uganda, crying as they touched the picture of their son that now adorned the doorway of the girls’ cinderblock house.

In the stories donors tell, the metaphor of family—and the real sense of connection donors seem to have with Watoto children—reveals again how spiritual and familial love are considered transformative forces in the lives of both donors and the sponsored children. But it is a force that originates with donors’ actions and decisions rather than children’s. As I have noted above, this is a perspective that tends to mask the very real state of inequality that persists within this relationship, emphasizing the agency of donors while erasing the labor of children that creates and maintains these ties. In this narrative of the donor-orphan family, the transformation, fulfillment, and real agency and labor of sponsors is emphasized, while orphans remain passive, vulnerable children.

When I most recently visited Watoto in Uganda, in May of 2019, I went to a service at one of their churches in a Kampala suburb, a sprawling complex surrounded by manicured grass parking lots overseen by a team of friendly, organized attendants. The service shared many of the elements of

a Children's Choir performance—upbeat, professional, urban and hip, with computerized stage lighting and a well-rehearsed musical component. One striking aspect of this service, though, was that the sermon was delivered by video monitor—it had been recorded on some recent date, when a visiting pair of preachers from the United States had led a service at the downtown Kampala church. In the many dozens of services I had attended at Watoto churches over the years, this was the first to feature a pre-recorded sermon, which lent a sense of disassociation to the experience, a feeling compounded by the fact that these preachers were an American couple. Like the kinds of intimacies created in donor-child relationships, this was a service that privileged a one-directional bond, highlighting a kind of cosmopolitan “connectedness” at the expense of the congregation's own sense of belonging.

When I recounted this experience a few days later to my friend, the former Watoto host whose relationships with volunteers I described above, he told me he was not surprised. He had drifted away from Watoto in recent years, mainly because he felt that the church avidly sought connections “out there” in the global realm, especially in places such as the United States and Australia, but had lost its sense of having roots “here,” in Uganda. Services, always conducted in English (and never in vernacular languages), drove this home for him, especially after he returned from trips abroad and saw that American churches often held services in foreign languages such as Spanish. He felt the church was consumed by a project of creating a sense of globalized intimacy, one characterized by an effort to project a connection to, and a shared Christian culture with, Westerners, but at the critical cost of losing any sense of its own Ugandan culture. The effects on the child sponsorship project, he told me, were predictable: “I'm sure the [Ugandan] community can do something for these children, but they are not part of the solution that is empowered.” A familial intimacy with others—“over there”—was forged at the expense of potentially empowering Ugandan community members to connect with and care for each other. Such local connections might reveal the inequality and dependency that often characterize social and familial bonds in Uganda, but they would nonetheless be rooted in local solutions and experiences of shared obligation. This experience of watching a pre-recorded sermon seemed to drive home an underlying tension within Watoto's childcare project and perhaps the local church more broadly: what Ugandan perspectives on orphanhood, childhood, and kinship are lost at the expense of privileging a narrative of connection with foreign Christians?

If for Western donors the idea of a Watoto “family” appeals because it creates a sense of intimacy while obscuring the persistent inequality between donor and child, for Ugandans inequality, hierarchy, and dependency are often central to experiences of kin and family. Kinship ties are deeply meaningful and morally and socially central to life, even as such ties tend to be shaped by, and often help to reinforce, experiences of widening inequality in social life. Family, for most Ugandans, is rarely an unproblematic, or

universally positive, set of relationships. But family nevertheless typically provides fundamental networks of support and care, even as these same ties create conflicting demands of obligation, obedience, and dependency that highlight and emphasize differentials of power and status that run through and strain kin ties. As the anthropologist Peter Geschiere has noted in his work in Cameroon, kinship is rarely experienced solely as a bond of solidarity; rather, kinship is a set of relationships that increasingly becomes a lens through which people play out growing tensions over urbanization and economic inequality (2003). Family is an explosive combination of “intimacy and inequality” (Geschiere & Nyamnjoh 1998).

What this reading of kinship highlights is the ways inequality and dependency are deeply important frames through which most Ugandans understand their family. Children are taught to be obedient, mindful of the expectations of their parents, and, as they mature into young adults, increasingly beholden to and dependent on older, wealthier family members in an economy that offers few opportunities for economic independence. Even the category of orphanhood is typically understood in terms of this interplay of dependence and obligation that shapes most family relationships in Uganda. As Kristen Cheney has written of orphanhood, the category itself has no familiar vernacular equivalent in Luganda, the language spoken in central Uganda where Watoto’s headquarters are located. The Luganda translation of the word “orphan” means something akin to “left behind or abandoned,” a status that few children fully experience in a country where the loss of one or even both parents usually results in being raised by uncles, aunts, or grandparents. Cheney notes that most “orphans” are described using a wider range of Luganda terminology that emphasizes the nuances of different social delineations or situations of care, rather than the true loss of all family connections (2017:26–7).<sup>9</sup>

The status of being an orphan in Uganda—or “orphan or vulnerable child (OVC),” the term favored by NGOs—is not without difficulty or risk, of course. But a more situated cultural perspective on kinship highlights how the vulnerability generated by strained or overburdened kinship ties is usually coupled by the sense that children themselves have a degree of agency within these relationships: the ability to manage, to ask, to make demands or complaints. The negation of children’s agency—the characterization of children as vulnerable, passive victims—is pervasive within the broader world of development and aid, and at Watoto specifically. As Cheney writes, “childhood is depoliticized in the aid industry, despite the fact that both domains [childhood and aid] are rife with politics” (2017:31). Children are typically portrayed as objects of care rather than as agents of their own transformation. This is problematical because such depictions of children mask the continued vulnerability they experience, while at the same time negating any sense that these children have the ability, capacity, and right to make demands on those on whom they are dependent.

It is this last aspect of the donor-child relationship that I propose is most troublesome within the Ugandan context. To ask for help, and to do so with

finesse (as the children's choirs certainly do), is not a passive or questionable act for Ugandans. Rather, such actions are viewed as morally justified, empowered with a sense of social agency and productivity, and constitutive of broader social bonds and obligations that give shape to society.

Watoto's performances are moments when these tensions over agency within dependent relationships are often made explicit. In Uganda, performers have a long history of using their positions to "ask" in ways that redirect resources from those with more status and power to those with less. The value of a musician's labor—from the traditional court of Buganda's kabaka (Cooke 1996) to today's political rallies (Karlström 2003)—is related not only to the labor of musical production, but has also long been understood in terms of the ability of musicians to "promote" others (Pier 2015) and to use music to show respect in ways that solidifies relationships of reciprocity between those with power and those without. This is a perspective on performance that highlights the value and productive nature of dependency within Ugandan worldviews. Watoto's performers often seem savvy to this reading of their own labor and the power that they have to *ask* for help. Testimonies are tailored to celebrate the work of donors and to emphasize the transformative power and influence donors have. In the meet-and-greets that typically follow performances, the children move quickly from audience member to audience member in the church's lobby, assessing and catering to those who seem most willing to sponsor a child. Many of the children seem to be remarkably good at reading audiences and at navigating interactions, and all of the children seem preternaturally good at performing itself. The problem, of course, is that in the context of Watoto, foreign audiences do not respond to or read children's actions as they might in a Ugandan context. The audience's understanding of children's place within this relationship—as eager recipients of one-directional beneficence—differs from the ways a musician's labor is typically understood in Uganda: as productive of an unequal, but mutually valuable, relationship of reciprocity.<sup>10</sup> Unlike typical kin relationships, or Ugandan musician-audience relationships, the labor of the children is made invisible, their dependency marked as unproductive.

The limited agency and status afforded children is perhaps most keenly seen in the problems that plague teenagers and young adults in the Watoto program.<sup>11</sup> For those unable to earn a place at university, and for those who can't find employment, the Watoto program proposes few solutions. Unemployment for young adults in Uganda is astonishingly high, and it is a problem that many of Watoto's graduates cannot escape. In the absence of typical kin relationships, including the extended (though strained) kin networks to which even the most vulnerable children have access in Uganda, and removed from the kinds of patron networks that interactions with sponsors might otherwise provide, Watoto's young adults have few means of support and assistance. One adult Ugandan Watoto volunteer I knew (he participated in a program called "Father's Heart" and served as a surrogate father figure for a Watoto household



unit) spoke of this problem in terms of young people's lack of initiative. If they would only apply themselves and take seriously the effort to find a job, he told me, they would surely succeed. Such "self-help" rhetoric is commonplace in the church community and speaks more generally to the broader consequences of the circuit of compassion, where the problems of poverty are characterized as being linked to individual behaviors rather than to structural conditions.

The danger of affective forms of charitable care is in the way compassionate sentiment masks inequality while at the same time it undermines the moral status of the dependent. To remain dependent and needy once one leaves the program—as many of the children do—is to be marked by personal rather than structural-social failures. Further, the work of being a dependent is itself abstracted within the circuit of compassion, the child's labor redirected away from their own personal relationships and toward the service of the larger organization. This leaves children in particularly vulnerable situations, parties to long-term affective relationships with donors, but unable to access the moral authority and social status typically afforded dependents in Uganda.

### **Conclusion: The Injuries of Compassion in the Global Humanitarian Realm**

One key claim of this article is that affective labor is central to contemporary forms of both humanitarianism and capitalism: the market, a seemingly unsentimental realm, is nonetheless shaped by intensely emotional, interpersonal forms of exchange. Another finding is that such humanitarian encounters are often governed by different, often competing, moral rationalities concerning such exchanges. In the case of Watoto, Christian donors view their donations of time and money as compassionate gifts, given freely, though with the expectation that, as expressions of Godly love, such gifts will effect change (in communities and persons). Inequality is a problem to be resolved for donors (though such a resolution is, in practice, far off or impossible to achieve). The work of emotional connection seeks to defuse the inequality between donor and recipient: to make these parties appear equal, or at least adequately, visibly, transformed by the Godly gift of Christian salvation.

The circuit of compassion I have described works because sentiment drives a sense of obligation among Western Christian audiences: they are called to respond to a demonstration of need. An argument is made within these churches that there exists an obligation to connect—that God's work is a work of extending and demonstrating love, and that such love is transformational. But while interdependence emerges as an emotional and spiritual value, dependence remains a morally questionable state.

For Ugandans, this circuit appeals because, despite a narrative that characterizes children as being "in need of saving," such performances in fact enable children to claim a position that has long been considered

socially and morally redeeming in Uganda. Watoto's children and workers view the work they do to make their plight known, to connect to donors, and to demonstrate the transformative power of aid, as a kind of labor that is not passive or unimportant in Uganda. It is a kind of work considered socially valuable, and, moreover, a labor long associated with performers and musicians in Uganda. This gives at least a partial picture of why children and adults at Watoto often seem to genuinely enjoy doing this work, and why the choir is popular in Uganda despite the dire picture it paints of Ugandan culture. The uplifting nature of the performances, the children's stories of transformation, and the celebration of donors make sense in a Ugandan context that emphasizes interdependence between unequal social actors, and which values the labor involved in investing in and fulfilling relationships. But, despite this Ugandan reading, what the circuit of compassion tends to do from the perspective of donors is to conceal the power of this work, and to emphasize a narrative that positions donors, rather than recipients, as those with the agency to make transformative change.

The different readings of dependency on the part of Westerners and Ugandans are significant because they alter how the two groups understand the problems of poverty and affliction, as well as the best means for addressing these problems. Their different viewpoints also fundamentally shape different expectations as to how the other should act and respond to compassionate gifts of aid or attention. One of the most troubling things about Watoto is the way the drive to present a story about the transformative possibilities of Christian compassion obscures the productive labor of Ugandan dependents, whose own real work—as child performers, no less—is masked. These problems raise questions about the broader function of affective labor within the humanitarian apparatus, and the kinds of relationships the desire for emotional connection creates under the contemporary conditions of international aid.

The very real work of being a recipient of aid—labor that from the Ugandan perspective is usually recognized as being productive of social value—is under humanitarian conditions obscured. For Watoto beneficiaries, the labor of cultivating ties to others, of soliciting aid, and of being a dependent is not ultimately a problem in and of itself. The give and take of the circuit of compassion, the ways both donors and recipients work to create a sense of interdependence between the two, is a problem because only one party's agency is ever made visible.

From the perspective of child performers, the troublesome nature of these relationships is that the agency and moral standing of the children within this humanitarian circuit is undermined, an emphasis on true interdependence replaced with a perspective that views gifts as one-directional, and social transformation as the product only of the donor's labor. This is a dynamic that extends beyond the organization at hand to define broader issues with the sentimentality that increasingly defines humanitarian forms of labor.

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## Notes

1. Orphaned and Vulnerable Children (OVC) is the preferred humanitarian term for children whose family or living situation has been adversely impacted by the death of kin or by other circumstances. It has been adopted as a more inclusive term, replacing "orphan," because many affected children, likely including many of those in the Watoto program, have living parents or relatives who care for or about them. Kristen Cheney has argued both categories (OVC and orphan) are problematical in that they tend to distill the complex problems of child poverty and vulnerability and the lived reality of children's identity into a narrow box constructed primarily for Western donors (Cheney 2017:3).
2. The Watoto villages are constructed by the organization and are not integrated into existing communities. In addition to houses they typically include a church, a school, and agricultural projects all run by Watoto.
3. The number of children currently served by Watoto is about 3,000 (watoto.com). Five thousand is the number served since the program's inception. Donors come from a wide range of countries, and each donor pledges to give USD39 a month in support of a particular child. Specific data on donor origins was not available, but the organization has offices in Hong Kong, Australia, Brazil, Canada, the United States, the Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, Germany, and the United Kingdom (in addition to headquarters in Uganda). These offices

help coordinate tours in these regions, where performances are almost always in churches and where children are hosted by church members. (All of the foreign Watoto volunteer groups I met while in Uganda were from the U.S., Canada, or Australia, indicating, at least anecdotally, particularly strong ties with these three countries.) Every year four children's choirs are trained and put on tour in one of these world regions. Children in Watoto are usually expected to participate in one tour during their youth, usually in their late primary to middle grade years. Tours are six months long.

4. I have primarily relied on the ethnographic methods of participant-observation and qualitative interviewing to gather data over several years pertaining to Watoto specifically, and Ugandan attitudes about charity and humanitarianism more generally. For this article I have drawn on fieldnotes, formal interviews, and notes taken during informal conversations, as well as analysis of Watoto's media and publications.
5. Several trained Ugandan musicians travel and perform with the choirs. Each choir also travels with Ugandan technicians who oversee sound mixing and stage lighting.
6. It should be noted that the majority of Ugandan children— orphan or not—do not eat bread on a regular basis; its absence is not necessarily a sign of deprivation but rather of dietary choice and access. This was a testimonial crafted for a specifically Western audience.
7. Watoto's leaders seem to have become responsive to this criticism, though their public remarks and performances do not acknowledge that at least some of the "orphans" in the program likely have living parents and relatives. (One estimate is that worldwide 80 percent of children in such orphan sponsor programs have living parents. (Sinervo & Cheney 2019:5)). Evidence of their recognition of this issue is Watoto's newest program, "Neighbourhood," which is an effort to keep children with their birth mothers by paying impoverished mothers directly to supplement the care of children.
8. During this performance a choir leader interjected, following a short film that portrayed the plight and desperation of young mothers who spoke of the abuse they suffered at the hands of their families prior to seeking refuge with the Watoto organization, that audiences "don't usually get to see the positive side of Uganda. It is a beautiful country!" This was striking in that it seemed to intercede in what was a fairly uniform message throughout the performance: Ugandan families are broken; children and women are in desperate need of help. Positive images of Uganda were generally limited to portrayals of Watoto's direct effects on individuals and communities. This was the only time I witnessed a performer publicly questioning the typically negative portrayal of Ugandan families and values that characterized Watoto shows.
9. This local nuance is notable given the ways that Watoto presents the stories of its sponsored children through the lens of total abandonment.
10. This reading of musicians as productive of reciprocal social relationships has long been a subject of ethnomusicological work in Africa. Recent studies of the role of the musician in the modern state (Askew 2002) and as narrators of humanitarian need (Ndaliko 2016) have highlighted the kinds of agency that is still afforded African performers, including their ability to speak back to relationships of hierarchical power. In contrast, recent work on celebrity humanitarianism in Africa has criticized the ways Western artists (e.g., Bono, Angelina Jolie) tend to cast Africans as passive victims of poverty and crisis (Richey 2016).

11. Children age out of the program, usually leaving their Watoto homes, once they graduate from secondary school, though some maintain ties to the program (as workers, for instance) into adulthood. Some teenagers leave the program earlier if they do not adhere to strict guidelines for behavior. The organization claims it pays for tertiary education for all children and that no child should age out of support (Eggertson 2010). But in practice, as noted by the Watoto father-volunteer with whom I spoke, many teenagers and young adults find it difficult to qualify for continued support. In an interview with one Watoto employee, the period of youth was described as a “bubble” which the young adult would eventually have to leave, losing the sense of community and support experienced within the organization during childhood.