

CHAPTER 3

Biomediation and the #BringBackOurGirls Campaign

Making Suffering Visible

In the spring of 2014, #BringBackOurGirls was mobilized and quickly popularized by politicians; concerned citizens; celebrities such as Kim Kardashian, Angelina Jolie, and Whoopi Goldberg; and the first lady of the United States at the time, Michelle Obama. The articulated goal was the return of the more than three hundred Nigerian girls abducted from a school in Chibok, Nigeria, by Islamic militants in the Nigerian state of Borno—one of twelve states that instituted criminal sharia law in 1999. The support of a global network interested in protecting those victimized by the abductions led to a transnational mass mobilization in which governments and citizens committed millions of dollars in a short period of time to launch campaigns that would lead to the demand for and return of innocent girls to their families and to their dreams of postsecondary education.

To briefly recap the events that led up to the #BringBackOurGirls campaign: on April 14, 2014, Boko Haram, a militant Islamic group based in northern Nigeria, went to Chibok to kidnap girls boarding at the local school. The girls were staying there overnight before taking a national entrance exam to gain admission to postsecondary education. Boko Haram first attacked the village, then the local military base. Then its militants disguised themselves in official government uniforms and at 11:45 P.M. they entered the boarding school by announcing to the girls that Boko Haram vigilantes were going to attack the school and that they were there to protect them. They then abducted 330 Christian and Muslim (though predominantly Christian) girls ranging from fifteen to eighteen years of age.¹

A month prior to the abduction, the schools in the area had closed for fear

of terror attacks by Muslim rebels. But the boarding school in Chibok had reopened so that the girls could take their final exams. Witnesses say the girls were aware of the risks of seeking an education in an environment known to have denied that opportunity to girls, but because they wanted to pursue their education to one day become doctors, lawyers, and teachers, they took their chances to prepare for the national exam.

Boko Haram is an Islamic militant group based in West Africa whose name means “Western education is sinful/forbidden.” The group has been suspected of a range of attacks throughout Nigeria (and recently in Cameroon and Chad) since 2009, with the goal of establishing an Islamic state. With approximately six thousand fighters and control of over twenty thousand square kilometers of northeastern Nigeria, the group has emerged as a major force that has pledged allegiance to the Islamic state, also known as ISIS or ISIL. The militant group’s leader, Abubakar Shekau, claimed responsibility for the girls’ abduction, stating, “Western education should end. Girls, you should go and get married. . . . Western education should fold up. I abducted your girls. I will sell them in the market, by Allah.”²

Related sources said that the abducted girls were taken into neighboring Chad and Cameroon and sold as brides to Islamist militants for USD \$12 each. The militant leader said the girls were being held as sexual slaves. In response to the kidnapping and potential sale of the girls into sexual slavery, widespread condemnations circulated rapidly on Twitter. In a red-carpet interview, Angelina Jolie—Hollywood Academy Award winner and familiar symbol of ICC justice—confirmed her pro-prosecutorial justice position: “The important thing . . . is to understand that this happens because these men think they can get away with this and they can do this. . . . We have to start arresting people for this, we have to start bringing them to justice and we have to start making it an absolute crime that puts fear in these men so that they think twice about this kind of action.”³ Similarly, John Kerry, the US secretary of state at the time, spoke at a press conference in Addis Ababa, where he declared that the United States would support Nigeria’s efforts to find the missing girls: “The kidnapping of hundreds of children by Boko Haram is an unconscionable crime, and we will do everything possible to support the Nigerian government to return these young women to their homes and to hold the perpetrators to justice.”⁴

Yet supporting the Nigerian government in holding perpetrators of violence accountable has been complex. For while Nigeria’s then president Goodluck was publicly advocating retributive justice for the kidnappers, he was

privately negotiating amnesty for Boko Haram militants.⁵ And over the course of October 2016, the first batch of twenty-one girls who were kidnapped were released to the International Committee of the Red Cross through a prisoner exchange and payment of millions of dollars in ransom. To do this, Switzerland's government used funds from the \$321 million that it had been holding since Nigeria's former military dictator Sani Abacha's rule.⁶ The International Criminal Court began preliminary examinations of the situation of violence in Nigeria.⁷ And by early 2018, further negotiations by international agencies to recover more girls were underway, though not yet successful.⁸

In this age of Twitter, the news of girls being kidnapped and held as sexual slaves went viral through the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls. With millions of tweets within a twenty-four-hour period demanding the girls' release, the media coverage of African girls denied an education by militant Muslims led to the collection of electronic signatures and millions of dollars in aid from leaders, celebrities, and average citizens around the world. Activists in over thirty global cities—from New York and Los Angeles to London and Lagos—engaged in rallies demanding that their governments mobilize sufficient military support to arrest the “perpetrators” and return the girls. The messages were expressed succinctly and with great clarity. The sentiments emphasized compassion and focused on rights and entitlements communicated through a sense of collective responsibility to make a difference.

Over the past decade, scholars have explored the significance of the mobilization of affect for suffering subjects and have also explored the way that new forms of electronic and digital media, such as hashtag activism, are providing renewed platforms to defend injustice and domains for what Andrew Ross refers to as “viral expression.”⁹ This chapter demonstrates how in public activism emotional manifestations of human suffering have become decoupled from lived spaces through new practices of mediation. It shows how online activism can be seen as symptomatic of a more fundamental process of dislocation seen through the deployment of bodily and biotechnological advocacy. By detailing how messages communicated through large block letters and hashtag activism (rather than aesthetic visualizations of suffering children) are constituting affective justice, the chapter focuses on two interrelated themes. First, it examines how, by erasing the bodily representation of African girls and replacing it with justice messaging, the #BringBackOurGirls campaign built an international social movement in ways that exceeded empathy as the emotional basis for calls to protect African girls. Second, in an attempt to shape an anthropology of international justice, it explores what forms of racial and gendered imaginaries are

emerging in the contemporary period and what they tell us about the modes of seeing, engaging, feeling, and speaking about justice at this critical junction. I ask how those engaged in contemporary justice activism use biomediated activism through the decoupling of human suffering from their sites of violence and relocate them to the “international community” with the responsibility to protect. As a component part of affective justice’s technocratic knowledge form, biomediation involves redrawing the boundary of the individual self to include media and other electronic technologies.¹⁰ This approach to biomediation represents what I have called affective justice, for it is concerned with the biopolitical entanglements with the body—that is, how to understand it, how movements mobilize affects to save it, and how to manage its violations. The suffering body—materially or symbolically, or the body to be returned, to be liberated—as an analytic opens up a space for a robust interrogation of how new forms of mediation, in the form of electronic media technologies, are being used affectively for social justice mobilization. Through the redefinition of the biomediated body, we see how concepts and campaign demands as well as the tools that transport them are not just manifestations of the social body. They are, by extension, stand-ins for the individual body—our subjectivity, our power, the constructed essence of “the international community.”

In this chapter we see how affective justice, referenced through the body of those victimized by violence, is messaged and exported through digital media justice campaigns. In this case, advocacy groups, media outlets, celebrities, and publics on Facebook, Twitter, and various web networks harnessed their resolve to bring this issue to international attention, with the focus on pursuing, arresting, and demanding that Boko Haram correct their actions, and with young African girls at the center of the coordinated campaigns against sexual violence by those deemed terrorists. The tweets and hashtags needed only to combine a few words—“bring back *our* girls”—to assert the global cause of the violated female survivors and personalize the urgency of their return. The use of the possessive *our* highlighted the declaration of a shared humanity—that the girls belong to us and that we have a responsibility to protect them against their captors—while the imperative to bring them back suggested forceful, immediate retrieval by any means necessary.

The emotionally propelled narrative focused on the young girls who were victimized by Boko Haram. But the larger structural forms of victimhood caused by conditions of economic or political marginalization were relegated to the shadows; those impacted by the worst forms of structural violence—the indigent, the landless, those without access to water and health care, for

example—were obscured and folded into a discourse guided by the legal responsibility to protect survivors of physical violence, wherever they are in the world. As a form of *do-good activism* in which one can simply retweet a message or sponsor a child to support those victimized by violence, this type of advocacy highlights another set of discourses at play in the individualization of criminal responsibility and the belief that injustice can be pursued through legality.¹¹ It not only reasserted the urgency of ending impunity through its temporality of the now but also reinforced the construction of the “international community” as a significant subject of international law and as a critical contributor to the emotional and cultural sensibilities that shape the regimes that sustain its networks.

Anthropologists Richard Wilson and Richard Brown argue that the use of humanitarian narratives is critical for the mobilization of empathy.¹² They suggest that emotional engagement and guilt promote particular types of action, and survivors’ narratives are key.¹³ And while it is true that emotions are mobilized through humanitarian campaigns, and narrative is an important part of that, it is also true, as I will go on to argue, that new technologies, such as Twitter, and online campaigns are leading to the reconceptualization of suffering and are redrawing the body’s relation to other bodies. In considering the way that the imagery of a violated body is no longer necessary in global campaigns to enlist empathy and constitute support, we can see that today’s biomediated social movements can compel action through concepts and buy-ins to those concepts as a way of consolidating new human-technology-justice assemblages. It is the concept of the “victim” to be saved to which publics are becoming newly aligned or from which they are distinguishing themselves. And these nonspaces of biomediated connection are becoming sites for the formulation of ideological alignments and social positioning and not just the manifestation of humanitarian empathy.

The generative capacity of these types of justice campaigns is aligned with the foundations of contemporary capitalist logic, in which hashtag advocacy connects with expectations of consumer choice—the choice to support a cause, to demand a solution, to donate as needed.¹⁴ Not only are the images and the block-art posters used in ways that enhance people’s engagement with it, they also represent contemporary democratic values that tie the logic of freedom to the body to be protected. This body is increasingly being seen as a site of global action. In this merger of freedom (produced through technocratic and legal knowledge), the body, and new technologies that invigorate emotional responses, we see the packaging of transnational protest discourses

that stigmatize particular justice imaginaries. In this example, the stigmatization is articulated through emotional pleas using terms such as *barbarism*. And though I am not interested in defending violence, what is important to note here is how in the articulation of “the Other” against the innocence of the survivor of violence, the “victim” becomes not just the girls to be saved. The girls victimized by Boko Haram become the international community itself, represented in block art or hashtags displayed and deployed by celebrity citizens. They become each other—an extension of an international justice assemblage—whose component parts cannot be separated from the whole.

The most effective aesthetic representation no longer depicts the subject who has been violated materially; it is not the survivor around which we locate ourselves, but a set of relations. Thus, while these forms of do-good activism do indeed reflect the articulations of empathy that many scholars of humanitarianism, suffering, and social repair explain through the use of social narrative, it is critical that we extend that analysis to the rapidly changing technological modalities that are constituting new publics in postviolence contexts today.¹⁵ We have entered a new era when international justice assemblages have taken on new capacities and responsibilities focused on judicial solutions, especially in the Global South. This chapter, then, is concerned with why the #BringBackOurGirls campaign and its humanitarian logic was so compelling to its audiences, and what it tells us about the biopolitics of justice and the regimes within which they are circulating in the second decade of the twenty-first century.

Saving “Victims”: The Sentimentality of Empathy, Compassion, and Attribution

Two years before the Chibok girls were kidnapped and the #BringBackOurGirls hashtag proliferated, the #Kony2012 campaign was everywhere. The group known as Invisible Children produced and popularized a video titled *Kony 2012* that went viral. Within days, over 120 million had viewed it online, and household names like Bill Gates and celebrities such as Rihanna had retweeted it. Inspired by Jason Russell’s travels to Uganda, *Kony 2012* describes the country’s twenty-five-year-old war, its violence, and the consequences of that violence: the death and displacement of millions of Ugandans. The film connects Uganda’s mass violence to Joseph Kony, the leader of the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), and demands that, in keeping with the ICC’s warrant of arrest, he be held accountable judicially for the violence committed by the LRA. Russell’s narration describes Kony as heading “the Lord’s

Resistance Army, a Christian terrorist group which has reportedly abducted and forced more than 30,000 children to fight with them since their revolt began in 1986.”¹⁶ He then discloses that his commitment was inspired by a promise he made to Jacob, a young Ugandan boy whose brother was killed by Kony’s men. Russell vowed that he was “going to do everything possible to stop them.” The rest of the story is about how American political participation and stopping a single leader will rectify Uganda’s plight.

Russell opens the second story line with advice to his young son. “There are good guys and bad guys in Africa,” Russell says, and “the way to make Africa better is to stop Africa’s bad guys.” Russell’s simplistic words about the nature of African violence and the role of ordinary Americans are energized with a compelling narrative about the conditions by which justice can be procured through international participation. The message resounded clearly and mobilized a social movement: by donating money through a simple click of a mouse, and buying a kit that would help fund Joseph Kony’s arrest, every American could also be part of the solution to help poor Ugandan survivors. In addition to the twenty-nine-minute documentary, Russell launched a campaign called Cover the Night. It was a call to post around global cities various images of the LRA indictee, Joseph Kony. Russell conceptualized the event as a moment in time when millions would engage in posting the image of Joseph Kony throughout their various communities.

The simplicity of the *Kony2012* message seemed compelling and suggested that Africa can be transformed by *our* philanthropy, through our willingness to save Ugandans. The campaign was one of a series of philanthropic, humanitarian, and justice-seeking gestures communicating that capturing a single commander, a “perpetrator” responsible for mass crimes, will solve one of Africa’s most endemic problems: violence. The campaign’s aesthetics centered the name and image of the individualized perpetrator, Kony, and used symbolism that depoliticized support for his capture.¹⁷ The imagery employed suggested that regardless of our political leanings (represented by the Democratic donkey and Republican elephant), we can come together in agreement that Kony is culpable and achieve peace (symbolized by the white dove holding the laurel).¹⁸ It also seems to be specifically enlisting US activist consumers in its use of the Republican and Democrat symbols. Other invocations of the activism to stop Joseph Kony insist that the international community should “stop at nothing” to apprehend him.¹⁹

The campaign was successful in motivating people—from high school students to teachers, parents, and celebrities—to circulate that message in the

name of the survivor. Through the invocation of global publics invoking the force of the law, the predominant message was that through the arrest of the perpetrator we will end impunity. However, though profoundly resonant with new justice formulations, the campaign's message was not powerful in and of itself. It was effective in its mobilizations because of its alliance with particular cultural sensibilities that are sustained by time horizons that work through the force of law. With these senses of agitation shaped by particular temporalities of justice, the #Kony2012 campaign contributed to the construction of an individualized "perpetrator" (or in this case, a handful of individuals belonging to political rebel groups) whose alleged crimes aligned with the ICC's post-2002 threshold for temporal jurisdiction, a time determinant that I refer to as legal time. Furthermore, through the attribution of guilt to an individual for violence committed by groups of Ugandans over long years of social unrest, this popular campaign highlighted the workings of retributive justice through a particularly sentimentalized discourse that arresting Joseph Kony would put an end to the war. This is key to the way that those who see themselves representing the "international community" engage in social mobilizations to demand juridical solutions.

The biomediated #Kony2012 campaign prefigured #BringBackOurGirls, in which a similar use of social media unfolded around a globally significant cause in Africa. #BringBackOurGirls began as a local Nigerian movement and was propelled into the international arena through the emotive advocacy of unrelated activist constituencies similarly committed to social change but from different social locations. The social media campaign was initiated on April 23, 2014, during the opening ceremony of a UNESCO event honoring the city of Port Harcourt, when Obiageli Ezekwesili urged Nigerians to support the attempts to return the girls.²⁰ She encouraged everyone not only to tweet but to actively participate in mobilizing efforts to "bring back our girls." In response to Dr. Ezekwesili's call, Ibrahim Abdullahi, a Nigerian attorney from Abuja, created and tweeted the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls. It was quickly retweeted ninety-five times, including by Dr. Ezekwesili, who had 125,000 followers on Twitter at the time.

On April 30, Nigerian protestors called for action by marching on Parliament in Abuja, which led to further mobilizations around Nigeria and other cities around the world. In Nigeria, the forms of mediation and emotional invocations included the embodied images of girls who were missing, dramatic figures of suffering, and images that produced the terms for not only empathy but also sympathy.



3.1 Nigerian #BringBackOurGirls campaign poster.

This type of imagery represents the classic depictions, by justice and human rights activists in Africa and beyond, of the bodily suffering of those victimized by violence. And yet such images, following Roland Barthes, represent a particular type of horror in which we observe suffering from the standpoint of our own ontological freedom:

[The] horror comes from the fact that we are looking at it from inside our freedom. . . . Because the creator of the photograph has overconstructed the horror he is proposing . . . we can no longer invent our own reception of this synthetic nourishment. . . . This adds to the reading of the sign a kind of disturbing challenge, sweeping the reader of the image into an astonishment less intellectual than visual, precisely because it fastens him to the surfaces of the spectacle, to his optical resistance, and not immediately to its signification. . . . The literal photograph introduces us to the scandal of horror, not to horror itself.²¹

Such an image, then, is part of the interplay between the image, the conditions that shape our reading of the image, and its alterity—the hyper-resemblance of the original.²² It is the materiality of suffering that both movements indexically reference. In the case of the US-based movement, the advocacy had a different aesthetic.

The story of the girls and the protest movement captured the attention of Ramaa Devi Mosley, an American commercial, music video, and feature and documentary film director based in Los Angeles. She actively promoted the social media campaign to create national awareness in the United States, creating a Facebook page that received more than 43,000 likes by early May



3.2 #BringBackOurGirls logo.

and 230,000 likes by July.²³ On May 7, 2014, CNN interviewed her to discuss the abduction of the Nigerian girls. Her campaign caught the attention of many US and international celebrities, who helped to propel the message further.

Designed by Mosley and other US-based digital activists, this campaign was characterized by a different aesthetic of victim suffering that involved a specific form of biomediation. Though they used the same hashtag, #BringBackOurGirls, as the Nigerian-based campaign, the message and imagery of the international call to social action were both depersonalized and celebri-tized. Using email, Twitter, and various online formats, they developed four steps for activist mobilization: (1) establishing the brand and posting it on the main website, (2) articulating the mission and goals on the main website, (3) determining the tools for communicating the message (websites, Face-book, Twitter, Instagram), and (4) developing actions/advocacy (rallies, no-tification of target group, letter writing, petitions, vigils, commercial sales, production of materials, fund-raising). The Twitter and email campaigns were only minimally coordinated. Activists only needed to insert their association's location and their particular details—date and time of march/rally, contact email information—and the networks of alliance could easily grow without prior knowledge of the particularities of the issues. Regardless of their loca-tion or affiliation, those interested in advancing this cause were able to access the same official informational templates, use the same block art or petitions, and adopt the same formats.

This imagery uses bold statements in white block letters on a bright red background instead of evocative pictures of the suffering African child. The

red calls our attention and signals a visual alarm of danger; the contrasting white letters in all caps, commonly understood to indicating shouting, alert us to the missing girls and their need to be rescued. The red also emphasizes the imperative to return the girls in the name of fairness and signifies passion: the conviction and love that drives the call for action. The use of white, as described by social movement activists, also signifies the innocence of the girls who risked their lives for educational knowledge and personal advancement. These color and design aesthetics articulate a transforming relationship in international justice organizing between the signifier and the signified. They are the aesthetics of a new mobilization strategy being made relevant through the communication of an ideological message that is actively constituting the contemporary “international community.” That message is that there is an international commitment to freedom, liberty, and a pro-education democracy in which “no child” is to be “left behind,” and we, the “international community,” have a responsibility to protect those victimized by exclusions from such universal rights.²⁴ The visual symbolism of representing the kidnapped girls as an idea—a hashtag message, a red poster with block letters—has taken on new significance in this period: the poster art with its relentless demands, the hashtag and its centering of the person posting it, the petition as a representation of democratic participation. Here, the temporal urgency of a worsening problem, as emphasized in the Twitter messages I discuss below, is reflected in their appeal for action and in the campaign imagery.

The campaign was catapulted to international significance once Michelle Obama joined the cause in May 2014. She tweeted a photo of herself holding a sign with #BringBackOurGirls written on it and through the symbols of her power—African American, woman, wife of the president of the United States of America—her buy-in propelled significant support. This practice of sign holding is a common way for people to publicize their personal feelings about an issue or event on social media. The meme spread, with celebrities from Malala Yousafzai to Ellen DeGeneres posting pictures of themselves holding similarly handwritten signs.

These images should also be seen as an example of a certain type of biomediation in which the sign holder mediates the message of those victimized by mass atrocity violence with her own body, instead of that of the girls. In Michelle Obama’s case, in foregrounding her own black (American) body, we can read an attempt to make an emotional appeal by subjecting her body to the cause. Her expression is stern yet concerned; the image is seemingly simple yet powerful. Michelle Obama wears symbolically American red, white, and blue



3.3 Michelle Obama, former First Lady of the United States of America.

3.4 Ellen DeGeneres, on the *Ellen DeGeneres Show*.

flowers that bloom hope. Showcasing her straightened hair swooped in big, bountiful, and performatively feminized curls, makeup and manicured nails, a wedding ring, and large silver earrings, the photo, taken in one of the White House sitting rooms, depicts a performance of freedom and liberty, leisure and power. Such a replacement of the suffering girl's body represents a fetishization of the "victim." Here we can see how this type of visual, biomediated advocacy can highlight Western agency over the cause of those victimized. The decentering of those victimized by violence and the recentering of those supporting the cause has led to a radical form of justice encapsulation in which affective

justice of the contemporary period is as much about publicizing one's emotional alliances as it is about demanding action. This was clear through their creation of emotive expressions such as "Me too," or "I'm with her." For example, the photo of Michelle Obama displaying the #BringBackOurGirls hashtag was taken on the day that she delivered the president's weekly address, just a few days before Mother's Day 2014 in the United States.²⁵ Her recorded address began with a sentimental condolence to the families who lost their girls in the Chibok kidnapping: "Like millions of people across the globe, my husband and I are outraged and heartbroken over the kidnapping of more than 200 Nigerian girls from their school dormitory in the middle of the night. This unconscionable act was committed by a terrorist group determined to keep these girls from getting an education—grown men attempting to snuff out the aspirations of young girls."²⁶

She continued by reassuring the world of the president's resolve to intervene. "I want you to know that Barack has directed our government to do everything possible to support the Nigerian government's efforts to find these girls and bring them home." As an act of empathy and a complex form of both racial and universal solidarity, she likened the girls to her own, to the daughter of any human. "In these girls, Barack and I see our own daughters. We see their hopes, their dreams, and we can only imagine the anguish their parents are feeling right now. Many of them might have been hesitant to send their daughters off to school fearing that harm might come their way. But they took that risk because they believed in their daughter's promise and wanted to give them every opportunity to succeed." As a call to action, she ended her address by emphasizing themes of resilience, bravery, and hope.

Right now more than 65 million girls worldwide are not in school. Yet we know that girls who are educated make higher wages, lead healthier lives, and have healthier families. And when more girls attend secondary schools, that boosts their country's entire economy. So education is truly a girl's best chance for a bright future not just for herself but for her family and her nation. . . . These girls embody the best hope for the future of our world and we are committed to standing up for them not just in times of tragedy and crisis but for the long haul.

The humanitarian message—sentimentalized through a Western mother's pain—tells us how critical it is for any child to have a Western education in order to have social mobility in a capitalist democracy contingent on social connections and market competition. This education reflects the liberalist dreams

of objectivity, fairness, and a diversity of approaches in ways that emphasize agency, autonomy, and individual power. But this message erases the particularities of the education that is on offer and deemed a girl's birthright. It does not highlight that it is a particular Western (read: universal) education that is assumed, in which other knowledge forms and the inequalities embedded in them are obscured. For example, the idea that the Chibok girls represent the "best hope for the future of our world" is actually incongruent with the Obama girls, for whom the possibility of realizing hopes and dreams of Western education represents a gold standard. Her message also carries unspoken stereotypes of the Nigerian north as backward and irrational while validating tropes of "Muslim girls needing to be saved" or girls having to be "brought back to the West," all made viable through the demand for the return of the kidnapped and uneducated girl as "the victim."

Once Michelle Obama posted the photo on her Twitter account, a range of celebrities rallied around the social media movement—from Angelina Jolie to Mia Farrow, Alicia Keys, Ellen DeGeneres, and so many more—and tweeted messages with similar themes. For example, on the importance of education, Whoopi Goldberg posted, "Fear of education 4 girls in any country condemns the future of that country. WHY HURT YOUR OWN FUTURE #BringBackOurGirls."²⁷ Ian Somerhalder focused on hope: "Empowering our youth through education is the TRUE key to hope—let's use our voices, innovation&collective power to #BringBackOurGirlsNOW!!!"²⁸

Expressions of outrage, tragedy, and demands for immediate action, often in the form of arrests, pervaded these celebrity tweets, as this abbreviated sampling attests:

- Mia Farrow: "A serious search for Nigeria's stolen girls has taken way too long"²⁹
- Iman: "Let's not forget them! Pls repost #bringbackourgirls"³⁰
- Reese Witherspoon: "Sending prayers to Nigerian families who are missing their daughters. It's time to #bringbackourgirls"³¹
- Gina Carano: "Let's bring awareness to the #BringBackOurGirls campaign to get these girls back to their families."³²
- Rashida Jones: "#BringBackOurGirlsNOW"³³
- Kim Kardashian: "Heartbreaking! Let's all raise awareness! #BringBackOurGirls"³⁴
- Cara Delevingne: "Everyone help and raise awareness #regram #repost or make your own!"³⁵

- Kendall Jenner: “This is heartbreaking. please help raise awareness! let’s #BringBackOurGirls”³⁶
- Kerry Washington: “Amen. ‘@ABCWorldNews: Michelle Obama joins #BringBackOurGirls movement on Twitter”³⁷
- Naomi Campbell: “#BringBackOurGirls!!! President GoodLuck do something !!!”³⁸
- Paula Abdul: “200 girls still missing 2 weeks after being abducted. Keep this in the news #BringBackOurGirls”³⁹
- Queen Latifah: “Its time 2 #BringBackOurGirls & put a stop 2 violence!”⁴⁰
- Mary J. Blige: “President Obama addresses kidnapping of Nigerian girls. See what he had to say: #BringBackOurGirls”⁴¹
- Daisy Fuentes: “This an outrage & a tragedy. The world must demand immediate action.”⁴²
- Stacey Dash: “Why the hell does it takes 3 weeks and a trendy hashtag to get world’s ‘leaders’ to care about 300 kidnapped girls?! #BringBack OurGirls”⁴³
- Chelsea Clinton: “more girls have been kidnapped in Nigeria on top of 200+ schoolgirls already missing. They need our voice.”⁴⁴
- Ellen DeGeneres: “It can’t happen soon enough #BringBackOurGirls”⁴⁵

In these tweets and demands for international action, we can see how new publics are forming around the concept of “the victim”—“our girls”—as opposed to the black suffering body. These assertions, articulated not only through our social agreement that every child should be free from violence but by the idea of freedom itself, highlighted by a shift from the emphasis on an embodied materiality of victimhood to the importance of justice as law (communicated through ideas tied to justice—democracy, entitlements, rights).

The act of replacing visible African bodily suffering with embodiments of digital social protest movements highlights yet another way that the category of the victim is being encapsulated in the contemporary period. In these new international justice formations, association with the helpless is subverted; the material representation of suffering is no longer necessary to compel sympathy. Increasingly, justice no longer depends on our association with bodily suffering and our acts of pity. Today, the rise of this form of judicialization of justice can be seen through the way that we, the “international community,” become proxy “victims” through hyper-embodied representations by celebrities, activ-

ists, lawyers, and judges. This formulation requires our agency to demand the immediacy of solutions and to create solidarities through the idea of suffering. Because of the encapsulation of the *victim to be saved*, there is no need to highlight abject suffering and othering. Rather, the resignification of abjection is accommodated by the need to affectively attribute new values and bring our girls into our fold. The idea of “our children” and Michelle Obama’s acceptance that the kidnapped girls could be her girls, our girls, represent this shift.

In responding to what online protesters saw as human trafficking of the worst kind—sexual violence against women—select celebrity #BringBackOurGirls tweets about Boko Haram’s violence highlighted what they saw as the barbarism of the girls’ abduction:

- Jessica Biel: “This is barbaric. Human trafficking needs to end now”⁴⁶
- Teresa Palmer: “Take a stand with me! #BringBackOurGirls it’s absolutely barbaric and inconceivable that over 200 woman have been kidnapped whilst at SCHOOL in Nigeria. Sadly this apart of a worsening problem.”⁴⁷
- Poppy Delevingne: “I can’t believe we live in a world where this happens . . . #bringbackourgirls”⁴⁸

Here we see how the idea of the control of females by radical Islamic men is made real through the sentimental plea for freedom from sexual violence. With sexual freedoms at the backdrop of women’s rights to life and education, the social grammar of anti-impunity activism went beyond legal accountability. Rather, tropes of barbarism were deployed, and international law’s civilizing function took center stage with social media mobilizations against extreme forms of human trafficking and sexual violence. The materiality of the suffering African child or the girl to be saved is overturned, and what we get is the repackaging of humanitarianism through the agency of an activist-consumer making choices about principles they can rally around—justice for women and girls, sexual and educational freedom for women, freedom from sexual violence. These principles are made recognizable through words, block art, a hashtag, and so on (see figure 3.2), rather than earlier aesthetic visualizations of the suffering child, girl, woman, or boy (see figure 3.1) that once required our empathy. Today, by replacing suffering with an aesthetic resignification of victimhood, we see how people see barbarism as the opposite of abject suffering.

Various American celebrities, with their moral influence on social media, began to mobilize support based on empathy for the violated girls, but that quickly transformed into the hyperembodiment of “the victim” popularized

through the symbolic resignification of suffering through Western bodies. If we can see that these contemporary justice-for-victims discourses produce illusions (or fetishes) that compel people, then the issue articulated as simply “our girls to be saved” should be seen as fictions that blind them and allow them to construct Boko Haram as the *Barbaric Other* and the girls as *Ours*, thereby erasing other relations.⁴⁹ What we see, following Hernandez Reguant, is that the aesthetic repackaging of suffering produces it as a condition to be overcome—in which their victimhood is symbolically also our suffering, social suffering. Through clicktivism, using the technological tools of the capitalist order to go online, as agents of change, we can make the decision to support a cause. This modality of humanitarian aid works through the temporality of the now and the imperative to make those demands, not simply in the name of democracy articulated through the international community, but also through the backing of the military-industrial complex. In the case of the latter, the responsibility to protect those victimized by violence has become a legal responsibility of the state and actionable through its citizens. Yet this new form of justice exists within deep inequalities. When designations of barbarism are deployed to comment on practices that are perceived to transgress civility, they reinforce a hierarchy in which particular discourses, such as ending the impunity of Boko Haram violence, emphasize the consequences of violence over the realities of the colonial and postcolonial condition. However, as I will go on to show, it is important to acknowledge how postcolonial inequalities in the Muslim North have shaped contemporary Islamic radicalism today and are thus central to the underlying conditions of violence being obscured by such popular expressions of affective justice.

Histories of Islamic Inequality in Nigeria, an ICC Situation Country

The spread of Islam, predominantly in northern Nigeria, but later in the southwestern region, began a millennium ago. The creation of the Sokoto Caliphate in the holy war of 1804–1808 brought most of the northern region and adjacent parts of Niger and Cameroon under a single Islamic government. However, it did not encompass the Kanem-Bornu Empire, where most of the Boko Haram–related violence has taken place. The extension of Islam within the area of present-day Nigeria dates from the nineteenth century and resulted in the consolidation of the caliphate, and competition over governance of that region continues to be at the heart of Boko Haram’s demands.

During the creation of the Sokoto Caliphate, the steady trade of slaves across

the Sahara Desert and the Atlantic Ocean (approximately 3.5 million people) accounted for tremendous social strife. Between 1650 and 1860, a steady stream of slaves was held by the Sokoto Caliphate as well as among the Igbo and the Yoruba, which resulted in the creation and sustenance of their ethnic empires. With slave raiding, ethnic and religious distinctions became more pronounced as a form of protection against being sold based on identifiably different associations, such as various types of scarification to distinguish group belonging in particular ways. Conversion to Islam and the spread of Christianity was intricately associated with slavery and efforts to promote political and cultural autonomy through the reinforcement of ethnic and class hierarchies as well as the emergence of various forms of gender dominance. With the encroachment of warring forces from the north and the consolidation of military might from the coast, the British annexed land and eventually colonized the increasingly fragmented region. These distinctions further embedded the seeds of structural violence.

After British conquest in 1903, the consolidation of the northern and southern territories into the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria led to Nigeria's amalgamation in 1914. As a colony under British rule, the new Nigeria was reconstituted through the goal of resource extraction. Out of 250 to 400 ethnic groups and languages, three dominant ethnic groups—the Hausa in the north, the Yoruba in the west, and the Igbo in the east—emerged through such imperial processes. These three regionally dominant ethnic groups would later become the basis for state organizational logic and public policy. Despite attempts to solidify such heterogeneity into homogeneity, these processes further concretized tensions and divisions that cross-cut concerns about religious values, governance, and resource distribution.⁵⁰

British colonialism contributed to the production of deep structural inequalities that shaped the changing forms of political power in various African polities.⁵¹ Though it lasted only sixty years, colonial rule in Nigeria contributed to rapid change, ranging from the development of extraction economies to the expansion of agricultural products and consumption patterns and the production of particular cultural and moral orders, which grew alongside new educational formats aligned with a modern form of capitalism that distorted economic growth. The creation of new territorial boundaries and the development of roads, laws, and new forms of political order that reinforced British colonial interests led to the emergence of deep regional inequalities within the colony. Those in the south and the east in closer proximity to extractable resources, in particular oil, developed greater intimacies

with British rule and benefited from its ideologies of Western capitalist order. After independence in 1960, minimal attention was given to developing state institutions and equalizing them between the north and the south. A highly centralized federal body with little to no accountability formed to replace the colonial administration and further reinforced the development of late twentieth-century structural violence. This pattern was repeated across the continent. Over the years the Nigerian south has benefited from local resources, infrastructure, and general economic development. To this day, the north lacks the type of economic resources, the infrastructure, and the administrative and social institutions enjoyed by the south.⁵²

It is these structural inequalities between the Nigerian north and south that have produced the conditions in which the radical Boko Haram freedom fighters emerged. As an Islamic militant group based in West Africa, Boko Haram has led violent attacks against both the state and ordinary people as part of what its members believe to be a divinely guided war for Islam. Since 2009, military attacks by Boko Haram in Borno State and military incursions in neighboring Niger, Chad, and Cameroon have contributed to the uprooting of more than 2.5 million people in the Lake Chad region. Boko Haram's tactics of plunder and pillage have inflicted widespread suffering and reduced large swaths of population to utter poverty. Visible as they are, the atrocities perpetrated by Boko Haram forces against local populations have become the object of widespread condemnation in popular and academic discourses. On the other hand, the systematic ways in which ordinary Nigerians are harmed or otherwise disadvantaged by social and political arrangements that are rooted in the country's long history of disparity between the north and the south are far less visible. Though it works in subtle fashion, structural violence is no less effective in the way it puts individuals and, in some cases, entire populations in harm's way.⁵³

The postcolonial Africanist literature has detailed the way that tropes concerning the rejection of Western education have been articulated through discourses of civility versus backwardness by those engaged in the formation of colonial education. This form of colonial education was meant to craft citizens of the state to reproduce colonial governance. To that end, such forms of colonial education reproduced discourses of primitivity and backwardness and fueled the epistemic violence that eventually became characteristic of Islamic militancy in contemporary Nigeria. These narratives made their mark publicly in the early formation of the Nigerian nation-state through early missionary writing and colonial arguments about the native savage.⁵⁴ And their

effects—the assumption that Islam is backward, antirights, antifeminist—continue to circulate in the contemporary public sphere through electronic technologies, videos, talk shows, nightly news captions, and congressional hearings, where through the invocation of legality they are further concretized in a world deemed secular and without religious bias.

In sum, colonial rule created extreme forms of inequality. Coupled with the creation of a cash economy, a corresponding development infrastructure, the development of religious categories and alliances, and dependence on a national state, the new Nigerian state struggled to meet the demands of statehood, its citizenry, and membership in an international community. As a postcolonial state, Nigeria is, thus, an invention of the modern era whose roots reflect histories of violence, difference, and disparity between the north and the south. The result has been the persistent construction of the people of the northern region as ideologically backward—especially in relation to women and girls. Viewing the kidnapping of the Chibok girls and the related violence inflicted by Boko Haram in the context of the differences between the southern and northern parts of Nigeria, as well as Boko Haram's edict about Western education, reveals the present absence of politics in judicial and social mobilization language. Highlighting these erasures points to the fetish manifested in the figure of the victim. For not only does its demand for instantaneous action preclude the possibility that different forms of politics could be worked out, but it leaves the constituted “international community” with the moral authority to act in particular ways and not in others. Therefore, short-term action—such as signing petitions in order to mobilize government, donating ten dollars, coordinating bake sales and fundraisers—becomes the basis for actions deemed appropriate, as opposed to longer-term structural reorganization, boundary discussions, and shifts in the types of educational values we agree are appropriate for contemporary global citizens.

In the aftermath of violent situations like the abduction of the Chibok girls or the displacement of Ugandans by the LRA, the emergence of the figure of a “victim” to be saved and the “perpetrator” to be held accountable has complicated the way that many in the anti-impunity movement understand the value of lives worth protecting. The discourse then becomes one of rights, freedoms, and rescuing a girl's future. Empathy may be deployed performatively—as a way of inciting us to feel the girls' pain. However, it is the Chibok girls' rights—meaning bodily rights and educational entitlements—demanded by the international community that are presented as the immediate solution.

Yet when our lens for justice is the interruption of an emergency, or the pursuit of arrests or a trial, then justice is possible only through the achievement of those demands, and structural inequality can persist. In other words, if the Chibok girls were all brought back and saved, there would still be no justice per se, as it would not solve the other forms of structural and exceptional violence. Here I am not justifying Boko Haram's violence. I am suggesting that erasing the enabling histories of violence disconnects the plight of the girls from other histories of struggle and instead undermines those politics through the call for the liberal dream of equality and education for all. It is our recognition of a social harm and our sense of that harm as our responsibility to address within particular moral and juridical platforms that compels the idea that we can be and are the agents of immediate change. According to this social justice imaginary, it is irrelevant that Boko Haram's violence is related to the historical struggles between Nigeria's predominantly Muslim north and Christian south.

Through declarations such as "Bring Back Our Girls" that speak to the unity of victimhood, we see the effect of erasing the conditions that produce structural violence. These forms of mediation rely not only on intermediaries who articulate and internalize new signs and symbols, but also on codes and perceptions that shape the meanings that are evoked through brief, emotionally infused Twitter utterances. Through these formats, the declarative demands preclude complex understandings about the nature of inequality and align particular practices with sentimental declarations of abhorrence. Through these speech acts, not only are hierarchies of acceptability established, but the nature of their logic is disassembled from the political conditions and histories that constituted this logic in the first place.

Yet the postcolonial struggles that unfolded in Nigeria following independence did not simply reflect the problem of radical Islamic violence begetting more violence, as one would think in relation to the mobilization against Boko Haram. The discovery and extraction of natural resources like oil, diamonds, and gas has compounded situations of armed conflict across the African continent. Following the discovery of oil and a related brutal civil war, Nigeria was plagued with military coups between the north and the south to control the economic power at the center of the federation. The country experienced ten successive military coups beginning in 1966, just a few years after independence and immediately following the discovery of its oil reserves. The struggle to control Nigeria's government has always been in large part a struggle to control its resources. Minimal attention was given to developing

state institutions and equalizing them in the north and the south. Instead, a highly centralized federal body with little to no accountability formed in its place. This pattern has repeated across the continent. So it is not surprising that the race for political control in many African countries has led to extreme forms of violence, military coups, or rebel groups vying for political influence to control various extraction industries.

The ultimate erosion of state capacities to build viable economies for citizens, to command and regulate access to resources in the domestic economy, and to build innovative mechanisms capable of incorporating indigenous cultural traditions to direct future action all represent a more tragic set of realities related to the actual violence of inequality.⁵⁵ These postcolonial realities call into question modes of liability for violence and question what justice might be if we overlook its fetishes and explore not just the forms of narratives that are deployed but the changing technologies through which new moral formations are taking root. These new strategic modes of mobilization that invigorate emotional strategies in the pursuit of justice are critical for making sense of how the process of encapsulating justice with legality makes structural inequality unintelligible. As a result, the conditions that produce the need for legality—such as structural inequality and spheres of colonialism, imperialism, and racism—are pushed to the margins and erased, while new forms of social alliances are made possible through technologically propelled messaging. This disappearance of a particular type of politics has made Boko Haram leaders' contestations of Western encroachment on northern practices inconceivable.

The #BringBackOurGirls mobilizations have taken shape in response to the symptoms of violence. The use of digital technologies to facilitate changing spheres of protest and engagement clarify how in new advocacy non-spaces, such as hashtag mobilizations, new social commitments are being mobilized. Emotions that connect liberal sensibilities of equal gender rights, sexual freedoms, and the importance of Western education reflect that. I conclude, then, by suggesting that the rise of the construction of an “international community” committed to immediate solutions to social issues has produced a particular constituency motivated by gender justice that is not unrelated to the war on terror—Nigeria's Boko Haram network being a part of the larger deployment of such international war offensives and thus tied to the White House's military interests in the region. Given these alliances, it is important to see such social movement formations not simply as innocent forms of contemporary activism but as reinforcing particular ideological commitments to Western democratic liberal values that are not always shared by all.

Biomediated Alignments and Contemporary Justice

Thus far, this chapter has explored the way that everyday people, celebrities, and activists are working with networks of advocacy groups to mobilize social action around rights discourses. By examining the role of popular practices in mobilizing social action, we see how concepts such as freedom for kidnapped girls or the education of all girls can be invoked as a solution to a much deeper problem. We see that what is articulated as the real work involves enlisting ourselves, as actors, as agents of change. As I have been developing in these early chapters, the “victim to be saved” has become a critical fetish that serves as the basis for contemporary justice. That imagery is not only symbolic and ahistorical but, depending on its alliances with particular publics, can also elicit affective responses in ways that generate social action. It compels our convictions and motivates our compassion. The relationship between our solidarity in defending the vulnerable and our agency to demand the immediacy of resolutions through the pursuit of those deemed criminally culpable is a reflection of the power of contemporary emotional regimes, our technocratic knowledge domains, and the role of technological practices. The consolidation of these component parts constitutes new publics through the articulation of particular moral positions that bind groups of otherwise unrelated people to each other. The portability, immediacy, and rapid circulation of digital technologies have given rise to this proclivity and require that we remain analytically vigilant in our assessment of the alliances that take shape around suffering. We must make sense of when, under which conditions, and who invokes bodies that require our sympathy and when mass mobilizations around biomediated imagery are deployed and how.⁵⁶ We also must look at how the suffering body is being displayed and why, how, and when bodies disappear and are sublimated to ideas about our social norms.

The #BringBackOurGirls movement and the actual declaration “Bring Back Our Girls” propelled a discourse surrounding our legal responsibility to act, to defend, or to threaten military action as a key component of international justice. This call for action is a discursive mechanism through which contemporary meanings of justice are being conflated with legality. As a result of these twenty-first-century, technologically driven, affective justice mobilizations, international rule of law and humanitarian circles are calling into question the relevance of empathy to describe the nature of public expressions. Instead, from shifting narratives of suffering and images of bodily dismemberment, new mainstream publics are being enlisted to rally around liberal-

ist values. These developments are shaping global justice advocacy around rights and entitlements and are becoming as much about the emotional expressions of protection of those victimized by violence as they are about the nature of contemporary international assemblages in online nonspaces.⁵⁷ Attending to these formations allows us to think about how the idea of suffering can exceed itself and become something else. In this case, the something else expands to become a larger idea around individual entitlements and rights through which new publics are brought into international relevance. And this is critical to how we understand the emergence of international justice in the contemporary period—a site for the deterritorialization of suffering and its relocation in the interest of social change.

By considering these formations in the construction of the international community and the role of the individual engaged in the immediacy of protection as a modality of politics, new online campaigns have become another way to use reattribution to conflate justice and the body with legality. This chapter demonstrates how the legal encapsulation of the victim and perpetrator has successfully created an international community that has internalized the responsibility to protect, but the problem remains that the type of community of action that this generates is rooted in the temporality of the now. The effect of this is a new form of justice in the twenty-first century that negates the relevance of inequality embedded in much deeper histories of violence, and instead focuses on justice demands as urgently actionable and facilitated by new digital technologies as sites for new domains for deterritorialized technocratic knowledge—in this case, biomediation.