

Jones, Joanna M. M.A. In Search of an Ethical Cross-Cultural Philanthropy: A Postcolonial Rhetorical Critique of Melinda French Gates' *The Moment of Lift: How Empowering Women Changes the World*. (2025)  
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This thesis proposes to analyze Melinda French Gates' *The Moment of Lift: How Empowering Women Changes the World*, a book that positions itself as a primer for the reader from a high-income nation unfamiliar with the globalized feminization of poverty. Through close textual analysis, I will examine French Gates' cultural, racial, rhetorical, and material privilege and interrogate how she retells women's stories from low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) and offers solutions to problems she has not experienced firsthand. This work is significant in demonstrating how white, Western voices tend to speak over marginalized women, thus perpetuating marginalization even when drawing attention to those women's struggles or offering material aid. Using the tools of postcolonial studies, rhetorical studies, and research ethics, I will investigate how French Gates discusses women's need for contraception in LMICs while reinscribing her own position as a wealthy, white outsider. This thesis will demonstrate how French Gates interacts with individual women and communities and then uses her privileged position to speak on their behalf and to share their stories of suffering in ways that do not benefit them. This work has powerful implications for public health policy, private and public philanthropy, mainstream and academic discussions of extreme global poverty, and a general understanding of how to increase the agency of marginalized women living in LMICs.

IN SEARCH OF AN ETHICAL CROSS-CULTURAL PHILANTHROPY:  
A POSTCOLONIAL RHETORICAL CRITIQUE OF MELINDA  
FRENCH GATES' *THE MOMENT OF LIFT*:  
*HOW EMPOWERING WOMEN*  
*CHANGES THE WORLD*

by

Joanna M. Jones

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Dr. Danielle Bouchard  
Committee Chair

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to all the people who taught me how to read and write. This list includes my mother, Nita Medlin, who taught me the alphabet from a T-shirt, filled our home with books, and always let me read the cereal box at breakfast; my kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Allen, who always let me read in my free time; Teresa Pierrie, my 12<sup>th</sup>-grade AP English teacher who gave me a blueprint for writing academic work that continues to serve me well AND who taught me to remove the passive voice with a vengeance; Christopher Hodgkins, my UNCG undergraduate English professor who taught me how to read Shakespeare's plays and poetry and recommended me to NC State's graduate program in English; Leila May, who introduced me to feminism and served as my NC State thesis advisor; Heather Adams and Jen Feather, who helped me develop my own scholarly writing practice; René M. and Nicole S., whose support as writing buddies helped me get through the hard parts; Stephen King, whom I've never met but whose advice to "kill your darlings" rings constantly in my head – I have a graveyard of beloved prose to go with every project I write; and the Raleigh Mennonite Church Book Club, who invited me to join them on Zoom and to read outside my comfort zone. Thank you to the Wake County Public Library system, which has been a home away from home for all my life. Thanks to anyone else who has recommended a book or otherwise encouraged my love of reading and writing for all these years.

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challenged systems of power, tradition, and patriarchy in ways that invited both personal action and spiritual transformation in whatever ways were available to me.

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APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by Joanna M. Jones has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Danielle Bouchard

Committee Members

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Risa Applegarth

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Jennifer Toller Erausquin

November 17, 2025  
Date of Acceptance by Committee

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Date of Final Oral Examination

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES .....	vii
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Conceptual Frameworks, Methodology, and Brief Literature Review .....	11
Summary of French Gates' Rhetorical Positionality in this Book .....	21
A Metatextual Analysis of <i>The Moment of Lift</i> .....	23
CHAPTER II: POSTCOLONIALISM.....	33
"The Problem of Speaking for Others" .....	36
Challenging Cisheteronormativity by "Searching for Silences" .....	43
Deconstructing Capitalist Imperialism's Role in Dehumanizing the Other .....	46
Postcolonial Approaches to Communication and International Law .....	48
"The First Priority for Women" .....	49
CHAPTER III: ETHICS AND PHILANTHROPY .....	55
Healthcare and Listening in Marginalized Communities.....	61
Capitalist Philanthropy and "The Politics and Antipolitics of Care" .....	63
<i>Regarding the Pain of Others</i> .....	67
Political Subjectivity, "Ethical Listening," and "Refusing Research" .....	74
A New Form of Philanthropy? .....	76
CHAPTER VIII: CONCLUSION.....	79
WORKS CITED.....	80
WORKS CONSULTED .....	86

## LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 1. Cover of *The Moment of Lift: How Empowering Women Changes the World* by Melinda [French] Gates, [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).

## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In April 2025, to launch her new memoir titled *The Next Day: Transitions, Change, and Moving Forward*, Melinda French Gates created a Facebook Reel that compared this new book with her previous book. She says, “In 2019, I wrote my first book called *Moment of Lift*. Since that book, in that time, so much in the world has changed. And for me, I’ve had a lot of personal changes: I’ve turned 60. I became a grandmother. And left the foundation I helped create to start a new chapter in my philanthropy. In my first book, I really talk about the places in the world that I’ve traveled with the foundation and the worldwide work that we were doing.” Other things have changed as well: she divorced Bill Gates, the COVID-19 pandemic upended life as we know it, the *Dobbs* decision overturned *Roe v. Wade*, and the United States both paused funding to the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and withdrew from the World Health Organization (WHO) in Donald Trump’s second presidential term. These changes continue the themes of her personal life, women’s reproductive health, and the precarious positions of countless women around the world which French Gates first introduced in *The Moment of Lift*.

Six years after its publication, a Google search yields a variety of online bookstores still selling this first book. On Goodreads, almost 63,000 readers have rated the book, where it averages 4.27 stars out of 5. On Amazon.com, over 8,600 readers have rated it, with an average of 4.6 stars out of 5. Inexplicably, Bill Gates’ 5-star review is the first one you see on Goodreads; he says the author “combines her mastery of data with her ability to tell powerful stories about individual women she has met.” Similarly, the first Amazon review, written by Kat Ryker and also giving 5 stars, calls French Gates “a well traveled woman who uses her storytelling ability to show us the women she’s met in her travels.” Other reviews call the book “hopeful and inspiring,” “heartbreaking and moving,” and “life changing.”

Despite such positive reviews, NPR's Lily Meyer's book review title, "*The Moment of Lift* is More of a Whisper than a Call to Action," offers a challenge to the idea that the book offers practical things for its readers to do. Reviews centering admiration of the author's personal qualities or strong emotional responses to the book fail to acknowledge the readers' need to act if they care about the difficulties of women around the world. If the purpose of the book is to make people feel good about French Gates, her philanthropy, or the feel-good brand of feminism she espouses, it has succeeded. If the purpose is to help the reader learn more about women's problems so they can engage in activism or philanthropy themselves, the book has failed. Making readers feel inspired yet complacent is not enough to change women's lives.

Meyer first calls the book "equal parts memoir and mission statement, inspirational slide deck and social critique," then asks, "What is the book trying to achieve? For much of *The Moment of Lift*, it's impossible to tell." Meyer summarizes the book's style by saying, "[French] Gates goes long on heartwarming anecdotes, short on argument. She writes often about lifting women up, but it can be difficult to tell how she expects readers without tech fortunes to do so." Meyer points out how the book's purpose seems unclear, especially since readers cannot contribute directly to the Gates Foundation's work. Ultimately, Meyer decides the book's focus is to draw awareness to the ongoing need for contraceptive access, which is increasingly endangered in the United States. However, Meyer says, "Her rhetoric seems designed to worry readers, or to incite them to take action," but it fails to name the Trump administration as the one constraining access to abortion and contraception. Because of this oversight, Meyer notes that "*The Moment of Lift* seems designed to raise awareness, but not to make waves. It's hard to fully respect this choice. It seems much too quiet to be effective, a problem exacerbated by [French] Gates' reluctance to assign blame." Furthermore, Meyer asks,

What would [French] Gates lose if she pointed out that one major barrier to women's health is the Mexico City policy, the policy through which every Republican administration since Reagan blocks U.S. aid for international nongovernmental

organizations providing abortion services or referrals? Or if she mentioned that the Gates Foundation works primarily in countries where Western colonialism created countless barriers to economic development? It seems condescending in the extreme to imagine that [French] Gates would have lost her readers' sympathies if she'd offered a paragraph's worth of history or policy.

This careful sidestepping of both history and policy ultimately renders the book toothless. Meyer says, "If [French] Gates had fully owned her goal — writing a book that would strengthen some readers' abortion-rights convictions, and open other readers' minds to a women's rights argument — she would have turned her rhetorical question" about how we should fight gender bias "into a call for advocacy," the type of advocacy that does not depend on deep pockets but rather on the kind of work that average people can do, such as "advocat[ing] for egalitarian laws and support[ing] the candidates who will pass them. It's too bad [French] Gates didn't focus on that kind of lift." Ultimately, Meyer says, this book fails to educate about how women's lives became so precarious or what the reader can do to help. By reading this book, readers can feel aligned with French Gates' actions and can congratulate themselves as compassionate, informed moral subjects without having to engage in either direct action or the deeper work of reflecting on their own position in the world relative to that of women living in low- and medium-income countries (LMICs).

While I agree with what Meyer says, her criticism fails to examine the rhetorical and ethical work this book is doing, how it positions Western women as a specific type of moral subject concerned about the experiences of other women around the world, or how French Gates positions herself in relation to the women she helps. Through her work at the Gates Foundation at the time, French Gates works to understand women's health concerns so she can alleviate them, yet fails to name patriarchy or to challenge cisheteronormativity or to acknowledge how racism, imperialism, and capitalism simultaneously created the impoverished conditions in so many LMICs and allowed her to enjoy a privileged status based on her position

within the globalized structures that benefit high-income nations. In addition to her wealth, French Gates experiences other elements of privilege such as whiteness, United States citizenship, and the ability to speak in English to a wide audience interested in what she has to say. The power imbalances between her and the women she interviews reveal themselves throughout the book, yet French Gates does not acknowledge them at all. Instead, her tone throughout the book seems humble, compassionate, and deliberately inoffensive. She identifies as “an ardent feminist,” but does not criticize patriarchal institutions outright even as she identifies the damage they do to women and families (7). As a confessing Catholic, she challenges the official church position prohibiting contraception by explaining contraception’s value to women but fails to discuss abortion access in the United States or abroad. She completely ignores the devastating legacy of imperialism which has led to such dire conditions for people living in LMICs. Finally, as she discusses the need for, and benefits of, contraception for straight, married women, French Gates ignores the existence of queer women in LMICs altogether.

When French Gates published *The Moment of Lift*, which spent fifteen weeks on *The New York Times*’ best-seller list for Hardcover Nonfiction, I felt drawn to this book as a fellow privileged American deeply concerned with how extreme poverty affects women’s well-being around the world yet uncertain how to help; my own position in the world is much closer to French Gates’ than to the low-income women she describes. I live with a constant awareness of my profound and undeserved good fortune, both socially and economically, at being born an American. According to the “How Rich Am I?” quiz on the Giving What We Can philanthropy website, I am in the richest 2.1% of the global population based on my nationality, annual post-tax income, and family size (two adults, zero children). I regularly wonder how I can leverage these unearned blessings to help women and children around the world who live so close to the edge when I have more than I need. I read this book hoping to find ways to help me assist and empower women, especially in LMICs. As I began reading, I was pleased to notice how French

Gates asks for help when dealing with issues outside of her own expertise and listens to women's stories to determine their most pressing needs. However, while she refers to "the developing world" a few times in the book, she more often speaks generally of "the world" or refers to specific countries by name, thus neatly avoiding exploration of the cause-and-effect relationships between higher- and lower-income nations that historically created – and continue to enable – the desperate poverty French Gates wants to alleviate.

This tension – between her obvious concern for the well-being of women in LMICs and her blatant disregard for the systems which created the tremendous inequity and poverty these women face – merits further exploration. French Gates engages with the women she meets individually, but does not reflect on the larger, systemic issues that feminist, postcolonial, rhetorical, or ethical scholars have identified as problematic when privileged white people do cross-cultural work in historically colonized settings. She also fails to interrogate her own assumptions about what postcolonial subjects want and how much agency is actually available to them when meeting with a white philanthropist. Finally, she shares these women's stories with the readers of her book without considering who is worthy to hear those stories or whether sharing those stories is necessary for her philanthropic project to succeed.

French Gates presents her own feminist framework, opining that, "in the human universal desire to be happy, to develop our gifts, to contribute to others, to love and be loved – we're all the same. Nobody is any better than anybody else, and no one's happiness or human dignity matters more than anyone else's" (118-119). However, Julietta Hua warns that any understanding of universal needs or rights is inherently constrained by the inability of people in positions of power to understand people without it. In "Universalism and the Conceptual Limits to Human Rights," Hua discusses how the concept of universalism simultaneously aspires to increased rights for humans or women while "operat[ing] as a modern strategy of power that continues to write the 'others' of the globe as 'not yet,' thereby naturalizing the modern regimes of knowledge that privileges the self-knowing and rational subject" (7). French Gates offers a

feel-good liberalism and a theory of human equality that she tries to realize by using her vast wealth to help the poorest people of the world, but her philanthropy simultaneously ignores and employs the same logic as the imperialist project, namely that people in LMICs need Western assistance because they fundamentally lack the ability to help themselves. Furthermore, it ignores the inherent racist history of liberal humanism, which constructed white, Western men as intrinsically superior to the non-white, supposedly sub-human Indigenous people found in Africa, Asia, and the Americas and discussed liberty as freedom from constraint while ignoring ways that white men constrained the liberty of women and people of color. Any discussion of “universal desire” begins with a human being capable of acting relatively unfettered, while the history of people of color in what became LMICs is a story of oppression, subjugation, and Otherness. French Gates ascribes human dignity to the women in her book without acknowledging how white imperialism and colonization have failed to do so in the past.

In fact, *The Moment of Lift* actively contributes to the creation of a kind of cultural figure of “the poor Global South woman,” one who works hard yet cannot achieve financial or cultural agency without outside intervention from someone like French Gates. In this way, “poverty” becomes a kind of literary figure or symbol, an abstraction against which the author and her audience can compare their own lives instead of a material reality that limits real women’s quality and length of life. This book claims to tell its readers how we can empower women, but it does so by using stories about women from LMICs who experience poverty as a daily reality to support the self-conception of its author and her audience as benevolent actors in an unfair world, a world whose mechanics of injustice go unquestioned and unexamined. French Gates’ philanthropy works to reduce poverty and to help poor women, but *The Moment of Lift* actively works against those women’s interests by contributing to the creation of “poverty” and “the poor woman” as cultural objects instead of sites of suffering and recipients of harm.

French Gates discusses the poverty and disempowerment of women in LMICs and optimistically proposes that, through greater awareness and community engagement, these

women can increase personal agency and prosperity within their families and communities in order to make lives better for women, men, and children living in LMICs. *The Moment of Lift* includes chapters on maternal and newborn health; family planning; girls in schools; unpaid work; child marriage; women in agriculture; and women in the workplace, all interwoven with discussions of female genital mutilation, domestic violence, and the persistent devaluation of women in LMICs. French Gates includes her own discussions with women in LMICs about these issues and describes efforts by both local grassroots organizations and well-funded philanthropic efforts from high-income nations to solve these problems. On its face, French Gates' book might serve as a primer for the First World reader unfamiliar with the globalized feminization of poverty. However, her writing of the book – and the book's success – also raises serious questions about her position as an assumed expert on these issues. As a white American billionaire proposing solutions to women's problems in LMICs, French Gates fails to acknowledge either feminist scholars' prior engagement with these issues or the role of global imperialism in creating the deep poverty these women face.

*The Moment of Lift* also contains elements of memoir – it not only discusses the work French Gates did on behalf of the Gates Foundation, but also tells her life story and how she came to be involved in philanthropic work. In the first page, French Gates describes her upbringing as one of four children with a stay-at-home mother and a father who worked on the Apollo program. The fact that her father had a college degree and supported a relatively large family without a spouse's second income is not necessarily unusual for the time, but does depict a level of financial security that families with less racial privilege or formal education could not have expected to achieve. Furthermore, the Apollo program represented U.S. global supremacy and ongoing imperialist tendencies politically, scientifically, and ideologically, with the competition between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. serving as a microcosm of the larger battle to establish the primacy and superiority of an economic system and cultural worldview. French Gates then graduated from a private high school, earned both a bachelor's degree in computer

science and a master's degree in business from Duke University, and worked at Microsoft for nine years, where she met (and eventually married) Bill Gates. After the birth of their first child, she left the paid work force to be a stay-at-home parent and to “work in philanthropy” (5).

Attending private schools, earning an advanced degree from an expensive and prestigious university, and quitting a paying job to focus on both full-time parenting and philanthropy are incredible opportunities that few people have, yet French Gates recites these details as mere biographical facts instead of examining or reflecting on her privilege.

Because she and then-husband Bill Gates, co-founder of Microsoft, were “lucky enough not to need my income” (6), she left Microsoft and began working at what would become the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, whose “Fact Sheet” reports fifty billion dollars in contributions to various grantees since the Foundation’s inception. French Gates says, “Our foundation was just a small endowment and an idea back then. We believed that all lives had equal value, but we saw . . . that poverty and disease afflicted some places far more than others. We wanted to create a foundation to fight those inequities” (11). She has continued working as a philanthropist, focusing especially on women’s issues in LMICs, and says that “I had an opportunity to have two careers *and* the family of my dreams—because . . . I had the benefit of a small pill that allowed me to time and space my pregnancies” (12).

Despite the importance of contraception in her personal narrative – earning an impressive post-secondary education and establishing a career by postponing the birth of her first child, deliberately timing her next two pregnancies, then deciding not to have any more children after the birth of her third child – she says, “I never drew a clear connection between our efforts to support the poorest people in the world and the contraceptives I was using to make the most of our family life” (12). As a privileged American woman in a society that (mostly) encourages the use of contraception so women can choose when to get pregnant and can keep their families small, she did not realize what a luxury reliable contraception was until she began speaking to women in LMICs who lacked adequate access to contraception.

As French Gates considered contraception's role in her own life, the women she encountered urgently made their family planning needs clear to her. When she asked a mother in Malawi if she was taking her children to get their shots, the woman asked, "What about *my* shot?' . . . She wasn't talking about a vaccination. She was talking about Depo-Provera" (16). French Gates began speaking to other poor mothers in different countries who all wanted to space – and reduce the number of – their pregnancies to help them provide financially for the children they already had. An Indian woman named Meena even asked if French Gates would adopt Meena's two youngest children since Meena and her husband could not afford to feed or educate them; in despair, Meena said of her newborn, "I have no hopes for this child's future at all" (55).

In *The Moment of Lift*, French Gates describes her life story and how she became involved in philanthropic work. However, she spends no time examining her privilege as an American with financial security and a strong, socially-acceptable ethos. In fact, she writes this book for an audience of people much like herself. She explains that she read the phrase "the moment of lift" in a book and associates it with both the rocket liftoffs she witnessed as a child and the experience of riding in an airplane. She says, "At one time or another, we've all been sitting on a plane at the end of a long takeoff run, waiting anxiously for the moment of lift" and describes how she coached her young children through that stressful time on airplane flights (1). These casual remarks about how "we've all" ridden a plane or how her young children accompanied her on multiple plane trips point again to French Gates' unexamined privilege as she universalizes experiences that not everyone actually has. Furthermore, the phrase "we've all been sitting on a plane" limits the book's audience to other people who can afford to travel in planes. French Gates' book about women's poverty in LMICs is not written so the women of Africa or India who live on less than two dollars a day can learn more about each other's lives and how they cope with poverty, but rather so Western people – people who can afford plane tickets and hardcover books – can learn about women in LMICs from a Westerner like

themselves. French Gates' extreme wealth makes her unlike her audience, but she and her readers still have more in common with each other than with the women living in LMICs whose stories she describes in her book. While French Gates constructs non-Western life as impoverishment, she directs her words to wealthier readers while ignoring the many Westerners who lack the resources to ride in planes.

It is important to note that the presumption of a supposedly universal experience of "lift" also contains an expectation that, by reading about the women French Gates meets, readers can feel as if they have experienced a connection with the women depicted in *The Moment of Lift*, albeit one mediated through French Gates. Despite various barriers including differences in wealth, geographical distance, language, and rhetorical agency, French Gates expects her audience to identify both with the author and the women in her book, and "The moment of lift" seems to represent an expectation that the presumed reader will experience a sense of moral uplifting similar to the one French Gates has experienced by learning about women's experiences of poverty. While she responded to this experience by engaging in philanthropy, sharing her resources with other women when she learned about their material needs, the book itself raises no expectation that readers will engage in philanthropic work themselves; it functions as a memoir and a sharing of women's stories while asking little of the reader except for attention and a willingness to learn. French Gates seems to expect little of her readers in terms of action, and the book's coda titled "Resource Guide of Organizations that Readers Can Support" takes up only three short pages (271-273).

A critique of how French Gates presents her work seems particularly relevant now: While this administration abdicates the nation's previous commitments to foreign aid and women's healthcare and its opponents point to the necessity of continuing global aid funding and healthcare access, it is vital to maintain a critical view of the assumptions and methodologies underneath any good works performed either abroad or at home. Furthermore, French Gates' focus on contraception access provides a timely reminder of the crucial role

contraception plays in women's lives, providing an important opportunity to examine the complex and fraught role of contraception in the world, especially in light of the ongoing concerns of imperialism and climate change. Finally, French Gates uses this project to share her work with a non-academic audience receptive to her expertise, so her failure to grapple with deeper issues of colonialism and the creation of global poverty will cause those issues to remain unexamined with the reading public interested in her point of view.

### **Conceptual Frameworks, Methodology, and Brief Literature Review**

In this thesis, I propose to use a rhetorical analysis to explore French Gates' text and its impact through the frameworks of feminist postcolonial analysis and research ethics. This rhetorical analysis will focus specifically on the author's treatment of contraception access, which serves as a microcosm of her text in terms of how she discusses her personal experiences, her growing awareness of women's issues, her lack of reflection on broader theoretical and practical structures surrounding a specific issue, and how she ultimately comes to present herself as an expert to her audience while discussing the needs and lived experiences of women who do not share her many sites of privilege. This approach invites a discussion of how French Gates does or does not engage with the history of imperialism and its ongoing effects, the way she positions herself as similar to the women she interviews, and how she shares their stories in ways that might not directly benefit them. Additionally, these conceptual frameworks offer opportunities to ask questions about how French Gates claims to "empower" women in LMICs and what issues inherently inform – and limit – her methodology surrounding public health and philanthropy. I'll also use rhetorical analysis to evaluate the book as a memoir and a cross-cultural feminist text and use metatextual analysis to discuss how the book presents itself to potential readers in ways that continue French Gates' project. Finally, I'll discuss French Gates' feminist approach and how it does – or does not – align with other feminist approaches, especially concerning how white women fit into a global feminist narrative.

Postcolonial feminism, rhetorical analysis, and research ethics make space for exploring ongoing dynamics of power and wealth between French Gates and her readers compared to the women she interviews and writes about in her book. While *The Moment of Lift* actively constructs the notion of “poverty” in a racialized and gendered way, that view of poverty comes from the manufactured notion of a divide between high-income nations and LMICs that ignores high-income nations’ ongoing devaluing of the physical safety, personhood, and agency of human beings in LMICs. While poverty can be measured in terms of statistical data such as annual household income, literacy rates, or maternal, infant, and childhood mortality rates, the poverty experienced in LMICs stands out so starkly because it represents a lower standard of living than that experienced by most families in the Western world. The women in French Gates’ book seem desperately poor not only because they have too few resources to meet their basic human needs, but also because they have so much less than we – than Westerners, than French Gates, than her readers – have. Colonization, imperialism, and chattel slavery all imposed Western values in non-white spaces while stealing resources and human beings from those places, and echoes of those histories continue to resound when discussing postcolonial subjects such as women in LMICs.

Furthermore, French Gates ignores – and therefore obscures – the work of other feminist scholars, activists, and community organizers already discussing and working in LMICs. Because of her status as a recognizable public figure and her hands-on work as a philanthropist, her readers may view this book as a feminist text without being aware of other work done by or with women living in LMICs. French Gates’ brand of feminism, which focuses on liberal humanism, agency and empowerment, and scientific data and advanced technology, has a distinct white, Western flavor that seems inadequate when discussing the needs of non-white women whose lives have been shaped by a unique, Indigenous colonial experience.

*The Moment of Lift* positions itself as a feminist text representing all women, from French Gates to her presumed readers to the women interviewed in the book. However, while white

women often invoke a universal “we” when discussing feminism and women’s issues, they often fail to consider their own privilege or to understand the actual needs of women unlike themselves. French Gates’ text invokes personal memoir, feel-good liberalism, and a sense of sisterhood that belies the fact that Westerners’ experiences are vastly different from the lives of the women depicted in the book. French Gates needed contraception to live the life she now leads, but that life is far removed from the experiences of women who fear their children will starve if their families grow. I will evaluate *The Moment of Lift* in the light of feminist perspectives, rhetorical and postcolonial studies, and research ethics to try to make sense of this text and whether it benefits the women described within its pages.

*Rhetorical studies* examines the strategies of self-presentation that allow a writer or speaker to present oneself as an expert on a particular subject, specifically in the context of educating or persuading others (Ryan, Mohanty, Saffari). Traditionally, white, male, and middle- to upper-class rhetors with formal education are attributed with the highest credibility and rhetorical authority. However, an increasing acknowledgement that rhetors with different lived experiences can also offer valuable perspectives and expertise presents an invitation to listen to these speakers – formerly positioned as outsiders – in order to understand a subject more fully, especially when that subject is their own lives. Conversely, failing to listen to, or choosing to speak on behalf of, minoritized rhetors represents a failure to investigate a subject fully and further entrenches the privileged yet limited perspective of the traditionally authoritative rhetor. French Gates’ positioning of her research and philanthropic efforts as grounds for assumed expertise leads me to call this book a definitive treatment on the topic, at least for non-academic readers, since the wide body of academic research and theory surrounding these issues is not readily accessible outside the academy. However, a critical rhetorical interpretation of the issues that French Gates does not address, and the effects of those omissions, will demonstrate the book’s limitations as a definitive treatment of women’s struggles in LMICs.

Rhetorical analysis offers a way of determining who has authority as a speaker and whose stories deserve to be told – and how. Using that framework as a guide, we can examine how French Gates relays her own story, interacts with the women she interviews, and then speaks on their behalf to others. French Gates is uniquely able to speak with women in LMICs around the world; her wealth and ability to use her time for activities other than mere survival allow her to travel widely, and her name and position as a famous American philanthropist no doubt makes it easier for her to schedule interviews with people in LMICs who want to tell their stories. However, the same resources that make it possible for her to speak to women around the world also center her voice, experience, and goals even as she shares what she has heard. When French Gates speaks about her own contraceptive use as a way to draw parallels with impoverished women wanting access to birth control, any similarities are overshadowed by the fact that she could have afforded to feed more children while so many women, especially in LMICs, cannot. When she asks women questions about their lives and turns those interviews into a best-selling book or shares the results with world leaders to request additional funding for women's health and foreign aid, she brings these unnoticed women to the attention of people who might not otherwise think of them – but only by using her own position and influence to draw attention to, and through, herself. French Gates no doubt wants to use her voice as an ally, but doing so threatens to overshadow the voices of women she claims to represent. Once French Gates has these women's stories, she speaks for them instead of inviting them to speak for themselves. I will utilize the work of Linda Alcoff; Nedra Reynolds; Kathleen J. Ryan, Nancy Myers, and Rebecca Jones; and Aya Y. Martinez as a basis to discuss French Gates' rhetorical self-presentation.

To contextualize this work, *postcolonial theory* describes how power dynamics between Western and non-Western subjects, shaped by centuries of European colonization, resource exploitation, and the enslavement and forced resettlement of Indigenous peoples, extend into the present positioning of high-income nations and LMICs (Fanon, Said, Spivak, Tomicic and

Berardi). This large body of theoretical work explores how colonialism and imperialism spread and how our current academic model developed alongside them and continues their work. The colonial and imperialist construction of race positioned European whiteness as normal and the non-whiteness of the Indigenous people that Europeans encountered and subjugated as Other, a politicized social construction that continues to harm people of color today. Postcolonial theory interrogates how the modern academy continues to employ colonial-imperial logics and ultimately takes a political and liberatory stance centered on the voices of people marginalized by colonialism and imperialism, an important point when considering works such as French Gates' which has an intellectual perspective but functions primarily as a widely, publicly accessible text.

Postcolonial studies invites an open discussion of race, power, and class within our understanding of the past, present, and future interactions between high-income countries and LMICs. Such a framework allows us to consider how a long history of texts work to implicate any Western person in imperial thinking in order to create an imperial self. We learn to envision our place in the world through narratives about agency and empowerment because we, as creators and benefactors of colonization and empire, live with an assurance that our basic physical and material needs will be met; we can discuss the need for liberty and agency because we have clean water, adequate food and shelter, and basic medical care. In constructing a world that ensures our survival, we also construct women in LMICs as impoverished, as desperate, as living in a perpetual state of need. The stories we tell ourselves about our position in the world still depends on other people having less than enough.

Nan Johnson's "Ethos and the Aims of Rhetoric" discusses the rhetorical strategy of ethos, which she says is synonymous with "'tone,' 'writer's voice,' 'personal appeal,' 'attitude,' 'persona,' and 'credibility'" (112). In their introduction to *Rethinking Ethos: A Feminist Ecological Approach to Rhetoric*, Kathleen J. Ryan, Nancy Myers, and Rebecca Jones reflect on how "Much of the scholarship on ethos centers on Aristotelian ethos, where a rhetor's constructed

ethos is comprised of his intelligence, good will, and good character” (5). In *The Moment of Lift*, French Gates fails to examine her privilege as a financially secure Westerner or to question the ways that Western liberal feminism increases her own ethos while reducing the ethos of the women she represents. Her presentation of herself and these women reveals the complex interaction between ethos and power that exists in the narrative space between French Gates, her readers, and the women whose stories she re-tells. While French Gates works to build her ethos, rhetorical scholars discuss the various ways traditional ethos reduces the voices of marginalized people. Traditionally, white men have used this type of ethos to maintain their power by speaking in groups of people like themselves and failing to acknowledge “the shared yet diverse oppression of women” and other marginalized groups (5). To combat this limited thinking, *Rethinking Ethos* discusses how women transform traditional understandings of ethos to make room for themselves as rhetors in settings where their voices would otherwise go unheard.

Similarly, Aya Y. Martinez’s *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory* discusses how people of color offer counterstories that present their lived experiences and challenge the dominant white narrative which structures how race is depicted and perceived in America. These counterstories simultaneously depict individuals’ experiences of racism and point to racism, not as a series of discrete acts, but rather as a systemic form of oppression. In this context, people of color seek new ways of telling their stories that present their own truths and point to the lies perpetuated by the dominant culture. However, Martinez emphasizes that every narrative by a marginalized person is not necessarily a counterstory because marginalized people “can and do reproduce structures, systems, and practices” of the very forms of discrimination that push them to the margins (15). As a result, Martinez stresses that “Expression of minoritized subjectivity is a good starting point, but it is equally important to include the admission of and critical self-reflection on privilege” (17).

The discussions of ethos, marginalization, awareness of privilege, and possibilities for self-reflection in *Rethinking Ethos* and *Counterstory* form a helpful lens for interpreting French Gates' presentation of herself and women living in LMICs. As a woman, French Gates finds herself with a damaged ethos compared to white men. However, as an American with practically unlimited economic and social capital, her ability to utilize Aristotelian ethos grants her a rhetorical advantage over the non-Western women of color she meets and claims to represent. Furthermore, French Gates' unwillingness to examine her privilege obscures and perpetuates the social, geographical, and historical power dynamics at work between herself and these women.

Nedra Reynolds' "Ethos as Location: New Sites for Understanding Discursive Authority" posits that speakers' physical location affects their ethos. Reynolds discusses one's physical location in the world as a part of one's identity and a site of one's ethos (326). Reynolds discusses how some feminist scholars view the margins of society as a unique site of resistance and rhetorical authority and encourages people to identify their physical and social locations and remain aware of how they establish their own authoritative positions at the expense of other, less privileged or less experienced rhetors (330, 332). This discussion has important implications for French Gates' work in *Moment of Lift*, which primarily engages with marginalized women outside the United States but presents itself to a Western audience.

Physical location definitely influences how French Gates perceives her work with women in LMICs, but she does not examine how that location gives her greater rhetorical authority than the women she represents. French Gates discusses philanthropy and her involvement with women's issues as ethical concerns born from compassion and feminist values. However, because both she and her book's presumed audience live in the United States, she describes compassion and feminism in Western terms that might not be helpful to the women living in LMICs whom she seeks to help. She describes her philanthropy work as "looking for ways to improve people's lives" (5). After establishing her Western academic credentials and personal

good intentions, French Gates successfully performs the “intelligence, good will, and good character” that Ryan, et al., attribute to Aristotelian ethos; while French Gates is not a man, this performance nonetheless makes her legible as an ethical rhetor to a receptive audience (5). However, the women she meets in India or Africa lack her access to this ethos, so Gates can use her geographical – and resulting social – power to speak on their behalf by telling their stories in her own voice.

Retelling others’ stories can quickly become problematic in light of the history of colonization that generated the severe prosperity imbalance between high-income nations and LMICs, and Gayatri Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?” discusses the ongoing rhetorical imbalances that occur in formerly colonized spaces. Spivak criticizes Foucault and other European intellectuals who speak about LMICs without examining their own privileged positions because “being so uncritical” allows them to determine which oppressed people’s voices matter and which voices go unheard (274-275). At the time of Spivak’s writing, India’s story was told almost exclusively by white British conquerors and Indian elite men, allowing subaltern women’s voices to become “doubly effaced” by their race and gender (287). In the rhetorical battle between British and Indian men, women’s voices become absent and “the figure of the woman disappears” as long as men, white or Brown, tell her story for her (306-307).

Unfortunately, the imbalanced colonial rhetorical dynamic which Spivak describes can exist outside of male-dominated dialogues. Chandra Mohanty, in “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” cautions that Western women can also silence subaltern women when they center discussions of feminism around themselves and fail to acknowledge or to address the “complex interconnections between first and third world economies and the profound effect of this on the lives of women in all countries” (54). Western feminism typically constructs Western women as liberal, humanist subjects and women in LMICs as powerless objects victimized by backward systems and institutions, often without investigating local contexts; as a result, Western feminist discussions tend to perpetuate

colonial assumptions that women in LMICs are less evolved and need Western women to theorize – and to act – on their behalf (53-64). Finally, while Mohanty appreciates “the descriptive and informative value of most Western feminist writings on women in the third world,” she also reminds the reader that “Without the overdetermined discourse that creates the *third* world, there would be no (singular and privileged) first world” (54, 74). Western feminists’ focus on woman in LMICs as victims in allegedly primitive societies reinforces the unbalanced relationship between former colonial powers and formerly colonized states, in effect perpetuating colonialism as it offers solutions to some of the problems colonialism itself created.

French Gates discusses present problems and shares ideas about potential future solutions, but her unwillingness to acknowledge colonialism’s destructive history and ongoing creation of structural inequalities in the present makes her work feel incomplete. It seems impossible to create long-term solutions without a thorough understanding of how a problem came to exist. It also seems unlikely that impoverished women can speak freely about grief or anger or hunger or lack of access to medical care with a wealthy woman who has benefited from colonialism and its ongoing effects. Can meaningful philanthropic or public health work take place in a postcolonial context where the white savior does not even acknowledge her position as such? To try to untangle this situation, I will discuss the work of Chamindra Weerawardhana, Raka Shome and Radha S. Hegde, and Sylvia Wynter.

*Research ethics* have developed in a variety of fields and increasingly prioritize the experiences of marginalized subjects over the voices and aims of the Western academy (Illich, Kauffman, Loya and Peters, West). Collectively, these fields indicate that ethical treatment of marginalized subjects involves Westerners’ being aware of their position of privilege and power; continuously questioning their own motives and assumptions about what marginalized people want and need; cultural humility, or recognizing the Westerner is the outsider instead of the expert; treating people’s stories with respect, which includes not profiting from them or presenting them in a way that invites voyeurism; listening for silences, or paying attention to

whose stories are not being told within dominant or official narratives; refusing to cause harm; and hopefully making marginalized subjects better off for having participated in research or other interventions.

While research ethics govern our interactions with humans to protect them from abuse, they fail to consider how interviewing, seeking to know, or sharing results with others can function as processes of potential harm. One can successfully de-identify someone's Personally Identifiable Information without wondering whether interviewing that person or asking a specific question will cause harm. Interviewing multiple subjects creates a body of generalizable knowledge while inherently stripping away both nuance and humanity. Once a person has been questioned, Western readers are primed to assume those results should be shared, even if sharing that information will benefit only the interviewer and not the interviewee. French Gates' work faces these same ethical conundrums, but she does not address the moral implications of her work herself. French Gates asks questions to find out how to help people access healthcare or philanthropic aid; no matter how much empathy and compassion she employs, the act of asking marginalized women to tell their stories so they can receive aid could conceivably cause harm. I will discuss the work of Hilary Charlesworth, Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, Janis Davis, Miriam Ticktin, Susan Sontag, and Sherene Razack to discuss best practices for carrying out research and philanthropy among formerly colonized peoples.

Through the lenses of rhetorical analysis, postcolonial theory, and research ethics, I will evaluate how French Gates engages with issues of both public health and philanthropy. Does she reflect meaningfully on her own position in historical or present terms? Does she build a methodology that allows women from LMICs to "empower" themselves, or merely instruct people from high-income nations from afar? Does she recommend public health or philanthropic strategies that follow best practices in terms of cultural sensitivity, or does she presume expertise because she has money and the ability to consult world-class experts? Does she engage ethically with the women she interviews, not just in the questions she asks but the ways

she uses that information? Does she center their stories, or does she assume expertise in their circumstances once the interviews have ended? Does raising awareness of these issues actually “empower” these women? What does “empowerment” even mean?

French Gates describes the needs of women in LMICs in terms of empowering women, but this book has greater implications for readers from high-income nations. By sharing these women’s stories without offering the reader ways to participate in solutions, and by failing to examine questions about the positionality of the author and the reader in terms of historical and economic systems that contribute to ongoing global poverty, she reinforces the ideas that help for women in LMICs must come from people in higher-income nations and that no one need question how LMICs and the people who live there became so impoverished in the first place.

### **Summary of French Gates’ Rhetorical Positionality in this Book**

*The Moment of Lift* successfully informs Western readers about the challenging social and material conditions experienced by the women French Gates meets and interviews. However, French Gates’ description of her feminist values also neatly demonstrates the type of Western-focused theorizing that Mohanty critiques. French Gates says that “Being a feminist means believing that every woman should be able to use her voice and pursue her potential, and that women and men should all work together to take down the barriers and end the biases that still hold women back” (7). This definition of feminism, with its Western emphasis on agency and equal rights, seems at odds with the realities of extreme poverty French Gates has encountered; when a woman in an LMIC lacks the resources to feed her family, Western concepts like “voice,” “potential,” “biases,” and “empowerment” may seem less important than immediate bodily and material needs. Furthermore, these concepts may be prioritized over immediate bodily and material needs as a way to position people who do not contend with physical survival as more civilized or advanced; when reading this book, does the presumed reader identify with the women French Gates describes or see them as someone entirely different and Other? How is the reader supposed to imagine herself and her role in these

women's lives? French Gates says that all women need access to contraception, but fails to distinguish between the vastly different situations of women in high-income nations and LMICs; contraception improves women's lives by allowing Western women to attain educational or career goals, while women in LMICs need to limit their family size so everyone has enough to eat. When French Gates discusses the many rights that women in LMICs do not have, including the rights to go to school, get divorced, or see a doctor, she says that "Sometimes these rights are denied under law, but even when they're allowed by law, they're still often denied by cultural bias against women" (3). This broad assumption about the cultural misogyny inherent in LMICs simultaneously positions those cultures as inferior to Western society and ignores the many ways in which Western culture continues to devalue women; the gendered pay gap, the second shift, and ongoing attacks on women's access to contraception and abortion indicate that Western women still do not have as many freedoms as society claims. Furthermore, after listening to women talk about their experiences of poverty, French Gates seems to think these women lack ideas about how to improve their circumstances and instead assumes the responsibility for finding solutions to these problems depends on her own "worrying about the people I will fail if I don't get it right" (5). French Gates' brand of feminism theoretically focuses on women's agency, but in practice positions Western women as active saviors of passive women living in LMICs in ways that reinscribe colonialism and hinder those women's opportunities to find solutions and to take actions that will help themselves.

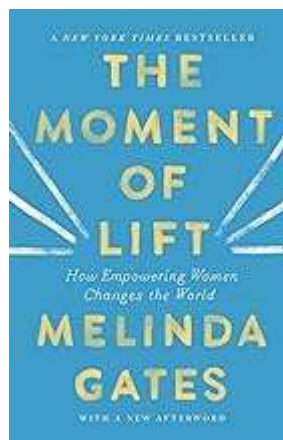
French Gates operates within a complex social and rhetorical space that includes power differentials between rich and poor, white and non-white, and Western and non-Western. These disparities between peoples in high-income nations and LMICs effectively amplify Western voices and makes non-Western voices nearly inaudible. French Gates listens to women living in LMICs in order to understand their problems, then offers herself as an intermediary to explain their lives to other Westerners similar to herself. *The Moment of Lift* offers detailed information about the needs of the world's poorest women alongside a willfully blind approach to how those

women – and the countries in which they live – became so poor in the first place. French Gates engages in warm, personal conversations with women about their most intimate concerns, but leaves both descriptions and analysis firmly in the realm of women, families, and local communities while ignoring the influence of global politics, widespread capitalism, and the historical oppression of poor people of color around the world. French Gates fails to examine her privilege, applies Western feminism – with its corresponding colonial gaze – to the needs of women in LMICs, and positions herself as an expert on these women’s issues to her relatively affluent Western audience. Through her social and geographical position, French Gates creates an ethos that makes her legible to world leaders and readers of her book by maximizing her voice at the expense of the women whose stories she tells.

### **A Metatextual Analysis of *The Moment of Lift***

Meyer’s description of the book as “equal parts memoir and mission statement” leads one to a metatextual analysis of how the book presents itself. The physical attributes of the book’s front and back covers and book flaps indicate how the publisher positions the book alongside other books and ideas in the hope of helping the book find its primary audience.

**Fig. 1. Cover of *The Moment of Lift***



As seen in fig. 1, the book has a sky blue cover with *The Moment of Lift* and the author’s name in large, bold, all-capital yellow text that appears to be painted by hand. On either side of the word “Lift,” one thick white line emanates sidewise from the bottom of the word. Four more

thick white lines emanate at roughly 30 and 60 degrees on the right side and 150 and 120 degrees on the left, creating the appearance of wings rising in a way that draws the eye upward; the white lines also give the impression of a kindergartner's partial drawing of the sun, with an imaginary circle containing the word "Lift" and the subtitle and the white lines representing some of the sun's rays. Beneath the word "Lift," the subtitle "How Empowering Women Changes the World" appears in thin, white, italicized text. The first U.S. edition, printed in April 2019, has no other text on the cover, while later versions include "A *New York Times* Bestseller" in white across the top and "With a New Afterward" in white across the bottom.

At the top of the book jacket's front flap, the book's price is listed as \$26.99 / \$34.99 CAN; this is an expensive book, only affordable to people with substantial discretionary money to spend on books or people living in an area with a well-funded public library. The front flap includes an italicized, centered quotation at the top of the page underneath the book's price, a quotation is pulled directly from the Introduction: "How can we summon a moment of lift for human beings – and especially for women? Because when you lift up women, you lift up humanity" (2). After this quotation follows a summary of the book's contents, beginning with the sentence, "For the last twenty years, Melinda [French] Gates has been on a mission to find solutions for people with the most urgent needs, wherever they live." By presenting the book's apparent thesis statement and methodology, this paragraph establishes French Gates' philosophy; positions her as an active, goal-oriented, and ethical person; and offers the unspoken promise that this book will instruct the reader about why and how the author utilizes her philanthropy to help poor women find "the moment of lift."

The summary's next paragraph begins, "In this moving and compelling book, Melinda shares lessons she's learned from the inspiring people she's met during her work and travels around the world." This sentence positions the book as emotionally resonant, the women French Gates meets as "inspiring," and introduces the word "travel" as a key part of how French Gates helps "the world." The ability to travel is an inherent part of the author's wealth and her

ability to assist others with it, yet French Gates can travel “around the world” with no concern about – and presumably no awareness of – how expensive and inaccessible global travel is to many people.

In the next paragraph, the summary states that “Melinda provides an unforgettable narrative backed by startling data as she presents the issues that most need our attention . . . And, for the first time, she writes about her personal life and the road to equality in her own marriage.” Here, the summary begins to tease the reader with the idea of a memoir – French Gates will not only talk about women from around the world, she will also share “for the first time” about herself and her marriage. Apparently, the philanthropic mission described in the book cannot be extricated from the life of the philanthropist herself, and the possibility of learning about the author’s life is presented as equally interesting as discovering more about her work helping poor women of color around the globe. Also, the reference to “our attention” draws the reader into a community of people presumed to share many of the values that French Gates espouses. The combined attractions of uncovering details about French Gates’ personal life and strengthening the readers’ experience of themselves as good people concerned with the needs of the world’s poorest women draws the individual reader’s “attention” – but without a call to either action or reflection on the part of the reader. Next, the summary tells us that “Throughout [the book], she shows how there has never been more opportunity to change the world – and ourselves.” The hopeful, upbeat tone of this sentence and the invitation to change ourselves conflates alleviating widespread global poverty with undergoing a kind of personal improvement project in a messy proposition, one which encourages the reader to identify with French Gates instead of with the people she helps. Furthermore, it implies that reading the book and using these poor women’s stories to change ourselves is an end unto itself; we do not need to join French Gates in fighting poverty, but can simply read about her work and feel good about educating ourselves about the issues. While French Gates has met these women personally, they – and their circumstances – remain abstractions for the reader.

The summary ends by describing the narrative style of the book: “Writing with emotion, candor, and grace, [French Gates] introduces us to remarkable women and shows the power of connecting with each other.” The book jacket uses the promise of emotion, personal candor, “remarkable” women’s stories, and human connection as touchstones to position reading personal stories about French Gates and the women she helps as the primary goal. Questions about motivation – either the author’s or our own – never arise, in part because the readers of this book are presumed to share the author’s own attitudes about both the helper and the helped. The final sentence of the summary proclaims, “When we lift others up, they lift us up, too.” Apparently, the women in LMICs who receive assistance from French Gates, and by proxy from the reader, do not function as subjects in their own lives except in terms of how they “lift us up” emotionally. I do not balk at the idea that altruism can benefit both giver and receiver, but I strenuously object to using that benefit as the primary motivation behind our own generous actions. We should help others because they need help and we have the means to offer it, not because helping them will make us feel better about ourselves.

After the summary on the front flap, the book’s title page has the book’s full title followed by a flat line. Underneath the flat line, rays emanate as from the sun. The copyright page includes boilerplate copyright information; the most interesting information here is the Library of Congress Cataloging information. The Library of Congress Subject Headings include “Feminism,” “Women – Social conditions,” “Women – Economic conditions,” and “Equality.” These topic position the book as a serious resource for discussing women’s rights and needs, but no mention is made here that the book functions as a memoir, even though the book markets itself as such and French Gates writes about her life story and growing involvement as both the public face and behind-the-scenes advocate for the Gates Foundation’s philanthropic work with women around the world. French Gates specifically talks about contraception as a way to connect her own experiences to the needs of women in LMICs who also need contraceptive access. The book functions as both a memoir and a book about feminism, with

the elements of French Gates' personal story remaining inextricably tangled with the stories of the women she meets and describes in the book.

The title page also includes the publisher's name, Flatiron Books. Flatiron would go on to launch Moment of Lift books in 2023, taking the name of its non-fiction imprint from the title of French Gates' book. According to John Maher of *Publishers Weekly*, the imprint would publish "original nonfiction written by experts, advocates, and authors working across a broad range of fields to advance equity for women and girls." Maher quotes French Gates as saying, "Moment of Lift Books will publish visionaries who are helping ensure women's voices and perspectives are not left behind. I hope their stories will inspire readers to join in the global fight for equality." The title of French Gates' book ultimately becomes a brand for helping Western readers learn more about the stories of women and girls, but even here the goal is to use those stories to "inspire readers," as if people can only work for women's equality if we feel "inspired." That word, "inspire," quickly becomes problematic – if people only care about women's equality when inspiration strikes, there is no room for committed action when inspiration wavers or fades. French Gates discusses women's rights as a moral issue, then implies readers only take on moral causes when we feel inspired by emotion. Despite the feel-good language offered by the publishers, it seems that meaningful activism should continue regardless of our feelings at any particular moment.

The book's dedication says "For Jenn, Rory, and Phoebe," the name of French Gates' three children. Later in the book, the author talks about how access to contraception allowed her to time when to have children, how far apart they would be in age, and how many children would complete her family. She credits contraception for helping her control her family size which allowed her to work and to parent in ways that led to her personal fulfillment and as a driving force of her interest in philanthropic work such as making contraception accessible to lower-income women around the world. Presumably, having more than these three children would have diminished her ability to engage in philanthropic efforts worldwide.

After the Table of Contents, a quotation from Marianne Williamson, described by Vox's Constance Grady as "author, self-help guru, and spiritual advisor to Oprah," appears. The quotation, "Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure," is a self-empowering excerpt of a longer passage from Williamson's book *A Return to Love*. The full quotation says, "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you *not* to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small doesn't serve the world." One wonders why the author chose to shorten this quotation; surely, the concept of "serv[ing] the world" is as important when reading the book's contents as the notion that we are "powerful beyond measure," especially since the book fails to examine the source and privilege embedded in either the author or the reader's power related to the rest of the world.

The book jacket's back flap includes an author biography, a link to the website [www.momentoflift.com](http://www.momentoflift.com), a link to a Reading Group Guide, information on the jacket designer, and the name and address of the publisher, Flatiron Books. The book's back cover is also sky blue and contains "Advance Praise" blurbs for the book from Brené Brown, Ph.D.; Malala Yousafzai; Trevor Noah; Mellody Hobson; Paul Farmer, M.D.; and Tara Westover. These blurbs continue the themes of possibility, hope, and listening to inspirational women in need found in readers' reviews on prominent websites. More importantly, these writers seem hand-picked to lend credibility to this writing project. In addition to working in fields adjacent to French Gates' work such as self-help, women's rights, social commentary, business, public health, and memoir, many of them have name recognition that lends credibility among the type of readers whom the book seeks to attract.

Brown, author of multiple books on vulnerability and courage, writes in her blurb, "*The Moment of Lift* is an urgent call to courage. It changed how I think about myself . . . [and] what's possible in the world. Melinda weaves together vulnerable, brave storytelling and compelling

data to make this one of those rare books that you carry in your heart and mind long after the last page.” Yousafzai, a Nobel Peace Prize winner who focuses on the education of girls and women, says, “Melinda [French] Gates has spent many years working with women around the world. This book is an urgent manifesto for an equal society where women are valued and recognized in all spheres of life. Most of all, it is a call for unity, inclusion, and connection. We need this message more than ever.” Noah, a biracial South African comedian and author, writes, “This book is a beautiful and concise mission statement on what we need to do to move society forward – continue to empower women. At every level and in all places women are truly the bedrock supporting the communities.” Hobson, a Black American businesswoman, says, “Melinda [French] Gates uplifts and inspires by weaving a narrative of fortitude and hope. She pushes us to challenge the status quo and never settle.” Farmer, listed on the book cover as “co-founder of Partners In Health,” writes, “*The Moment of Lift* is a book about gender equity, and its golden thread is empathy. This book lifts up the voices of women and girls whose experiences have been entirely unlike Melinda’s own. They’ve taught us a great deal, and in this beautifully crafted and artful memoir, Melinda [French] Gates invite the reader to learn from them, too.” Finally, Westover, described on the book cover as “author of the #1 *New York Times* bestseller *Educated*” and on her own website as a Gates Cambridge Scholar (yes, *that* Gates), says, “Melinda [French] Gates’s book is a lesson in listening, a powerful, poignant, and ultimately humble call to arms.”

These blurbs function to attract readers by adding rhetorical legitimacy to French Gates’ book. As experts in their own fields (either academically or within the cultural zeitgeist), their support of the book lends it gravitas. Furthermore, the authors of these blurbs can introduce or attract followers of their own work to *The Moment of Lift* since their readers are presumably interested in personal agency (Brown) or global public health (Farmer) or memoirs proffering a social justice narrative within challenging social, cultural, or economic contexts (Yousafzai, Noah, Westover), thereby increasing the likelihood that they would read and recommend French

Gates' book to their own circles of influence. These author blurbs invite a certain kind of reader – Western, liberal, and well-educated like French Gates herself – to pick up *A Moment of Lift* and to feel like they are learning more about the potential for meaningful change in other, less “developed” parts of the world.

This metatextual analysis raises questions that will be explored in the chapters on postcolonialism and research ethics, respectively. Neither French Gates' book nor her philanthropy exists in a vacuum, and I want to explore how well the author, the book, and the book's proposed solutions engage with their historical and cultural context. While French Gates looks for similarities between her life and the lives of women in LMICs with little consideration of context, French Gates' work is not a fixed artifact, but rather part of a much larger conversation about speaking and suffering. I propose a close reading of both *The Moment of Lift* and authors whose work speaks to the issues present within it in order to make that conversation more apparent.

The first chapter of this thesis will use a postcolonial lens to discuss the rhetorical strategies French Gates uses to position herself as an expert on the struggles facing women living in LMICs and how she uses the elements of memoir to discuss the importance of contraception in her own life and in the lives of the women she interviews for her book. The second chapter will discuss the larger issue of how Western scholars, philanthropists, and public health advocates engage with postcolonial subjects, specifically focusing on both ethical best practices and the importance of thinking beyond immediate needs to broader questions of historical harm and current political engagement with outdated modes of power.

Throughout this thesis, I propose to explore the following interrelated questions regarding French Gates' work:

- 1) *How does French Gates imagine herself, her audience, and the purpose of this book?*
  - a. *Why does French Gates say she wrote this book and whom does she want it to benefit?*

- b. *How does this book function as a memoir of French Gates' own life?*
  - c. *How does this book fit within an American understanding of its place as a world leader in philanthropic or otherwise benevolent endeavors?*
  - d. *What does "empowering" women really mean, and is that what women need most?*
- 2) *What happens when a wealthy American philanthropist fails to acknowledge how white patriarchal capitalist imperialism created the conditions that make women's lives in LMICs so precarious?*
- a. *How does French Gates approach gender?*
  - b. *What happens when French Gates fails to discuss her own power or to acknowledge the power disparity between herself and the women she wants to help?*
  - c. *How does including only stories of earnest, hard-working mothers inform French Gates' philanthropy?*
  - d. *How does French Gates understand poverty and its root causes?*
  - e. *How does French Gates imagine the woman living in an LMIC and what are the implications of that viewpoint?*
  - f. *How does French Gates' philanthropy reinforce the status quo of imperialism, capitalism, and patriarchy even as it treats their symptoms?*
  - g. *Does French Gates' sharing of these women's stories actually promote their welfare? If not, what could she do instead?*
- 3) *How does French Gates' philanthropy simultaneously ignore and employ the same logic as the imperialist project, namely that people in LMICs need Western assistance because they fundamentally lack the ability to help themselves?*
- a. *How does French Gates construct herself rhetorically as an expert on women in LMICs when their lives differ so much from her own?*

- b. *How does French Gates' assumed expertise reflect the ways that white, high-income nations scholars assume a louder, more authoritative position than scholars from LMICs when discussing people's problems and potential solutions?*
- c. *How does French Gates' failure to acknowledge feminist scholars' prior engagement with women's issues in LMICs fundamentally limit the scope of her work?*
- d. *How does her discussion of women's need for contraception in LMICs ignore historical attempts to limit the number of children Black and Brown women produce (and the racist reasoning behind those attempts)?*
- e. *How is French Gates' brand of white liberal feminism inadequate for addressing the needs of women of color in LMICs?*

Finally, I plan to discuss how readers of this book can engage with these same ideas in order to determine whether a model of philanthropy that challenges us both to reckon with the past and to engage with poor women in LMICs in ethical, culturally relevant ways today is possible. If so, where do we begin?

## CHAPTER II: POSTCOLONIALISM

Postcolonial scholars offer a critique of the ways that Westerners interpret the world, the self, and others within specific historical and sociological contexts. This framework offers a way to examine French Gates' narrative about herself and women in LMICs in terms of racial, economic, and social power. French Gates follows a liberal humanist framework which might seem familiar to her and to her readers, but is based on an understanding of the world in which whiteness, economic advantage, and social power inevitably position people of color as having diminished humanity and agency. Liberal humanism allows French Gates to see uncomplicated similarities between herself and the women in her book without examining power differentials or the consequences of telling women's stories instead of allowing them to speak for themselves. French Gates uses her own positive experiences with contraception as a basis for understanding the family planning needs of women in LMICs when their needs do not neatly overlap and when other feminist approaches to contraception access might work better for the women French Gates seeks to help.

In the first chapter of *The Moment of Lift*, French Gates says that "Being a feminist means believing that every woman should be able to use her voice and pursue her potential, and that women and men should all work together to take down the barriers and end the biases that still hold women back" (7). Such a position might be true of Western feminism, but it denies the reality that women in LMICs might prioritize their material needs over their "voice" or "potential." This specific, Western point of view necessarily informs *The Moment of Lift*, but is also a really weak vision of the kind of change needed to ensure gender equity, in part because it calls on "women and men" to "work together" without acknowledging either that patriarchy functions at the family, community, and state levels or that making changes will take more than "work[ing] together" to supercede the social norms that make "hold[ing] women back" desirable, profitable, or necessary to maintain even the barest standard of living in LMICs; women's

unpaid labor helps families and communities function in ways that have nothing to do with “potential” and everything to do with survival. Instead, French Gates’ desire to hear every woman’s voice is countered by Linda Alcoff, who helps unpack the notion of voice in terms of power dynamics, rhetorical authority, and privilege, especially between speakers in high-income nations versus LMICs. French Gates wants to share the stories of the women from LMICs she has interviewed, she also uses specific Western narratives as shorthand ways to connect these women’s stories to her readers’ experiences and worldview. She constructs the women in her book as “good” mothers, ensuring us that they are the “deserving poor” in direct contradiction to the idea that all humans deserve a basic standard of living and care. She erases the material effects of materialism and imperialism, ignoring them as both historical and current factors in women’s poverty and employing the logic of the “white savior,” namely proposing that these women cannot help themselves without the assistance of white Westerners such as French Gates.

She also ignores the work of postcolonial scholars and scholars of color who have discussed the needs of women as postcolonial subjects. Scholars in varying fields such as transfeminism, philosophy, communication studies, and rhetorical analysis offer insights and an academic foundation for Westerners seeking to understand women in LMICs, while French Gates’ book discusses how she came to understand the needs of women in LMICs through her own journey of increasing awareness, speaking to philanthropic experts, and interviewing women she wants to help. While there is general agreement that contraceptive access is important for women in LMICs, French Gates comes to believe that by reflecting on her own experiences using contraception, not after listening to women seeking contraception or studying data or best practices focused on how to provide contraception to women in LMICs. Her philanthropic endeavors begin with herself and flow outward to the women she identifies as needing assistance, with little attention paid to various feminist or local approaches to helping women gain access to contraception. Fundamentally, she identifies a problem without offering a

solution, even though others have already found solutions for the women French Gates wants to help. In some ways, positioning *The Moment of Lift* as a memoir centers discussions of philanthropy and helping women on the author and not the women she seeks to help, and the conclusions identified in the book reinforce, rather than challenge, the worldview of both French Gates and her readers.

Over 200 million women in the world's sixty-nine poorest countries did not have access to contraception in 2012, despite contraception's short- and long-term benefits to women (17). A decades-long study in Bangladesh found that, compared to mothers who did not use contraception, "mothers who took contraceptives were healthier. Their children were better nourished. Their families had more wealth. The women had higher wages. Their sons and daughters had more schooling" (18). According to French Gates, "contraceptives are the greatest life-saving, poverty-ending, women-empowering innovation ever invented," and helping women access birth control is a social justice issue (18). Family planning "was simple, cheap, safe, and powerful – no woman I knew went without it, but hundreds of millions of women around the world wanted it and couldn't get it. This unequal access was simply unjust" (20). As a result, she participated in the 2012 global summit where various nations "pledged to make contraceptives available to 120 million more women by . . . 2020. It was by far the largest sum of money ever pledged to support access to contraceptives" (22).

Contraception is obviously an important issue to French Gates and to women around the world. I will discuss of the works of postcolonial scholars whose positions seem relevant when considering French Gates' work as a narrator describing her own life and the lives of women in LMICs. These authors discuss problematic rhetorical strategies (Alcoff), cisheteronormativity (Weerawardhana), the racist underpinnings of liberal humanism (Wynter), the need to construct new narratives (Shome and Hegde), and Westerners' failure to employ intersectional understandings of women's issues (Charlesworth). These wide-ranging areas of expertise offer

a variety of ways to understand how Westerners continue to deploy colonial logics when describing the needs of postcolonial subjects in LMICs.

### **“The Problem of Speaking for Others”**

Rhetorical scholars discuss the various ways traditional ethos reduces the voices of marginalized people. In “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” Linda Alcoff describes how social location, particularly when one person has more social power than another, becomes “discursively dangerous” (7). Alcoff says that “Rituals of speaking are politically constituted by power relations of domination, exploitation, and subordination. Who is speaking, who is spoken of, and who listens is a result, as well as an act, of political struggle” (15). This model of “the discursive context [as] a political arena” extends to writing, being written about, and reading a book about women in LMICs (15).

Alcoff begins by asking, “is it ever valid to speak for others who are unlike me or who are less privileged than me?” (7) Privilege may take the form of geography, race, gender, or a combination of these or other social positions, but it must be at the front of one’s mind when one speaks, regardless of whether one speaks for oneself, one’s own group, or another’s group. Furthermore, issues of intersectionality also factor here – a white woman does not represent all women just by being a woman, because whiteness simultaneously limits her lived experience and offers her privilege that other, non-white women do not possess.

Alcoff discusses how speaking for, about, or in place of others do not seem readily distinguishable, but “speaking in place of” others seems most fraught because it limits others’ ability to speak for themselves (9). Alcoff posits that “when one is speaking about others, or simply trying to describe their situation or some aspect of it, one may also be speaking in place of them, that is, speaking for them” (9) in ways that silence marginalized persons, although Alcoff does allow that one “may be speaking about others as an advocate or a messenger if the persons cannot speak for themselves” (9). Alcoff especially warns against the “crisis of representation,” an ethical difficulty that occurs when, “In both the practice of speaking for as

well as the practice of speaking about others, I am engaging in the act of representing the other's needs, goals, situation, and in fact, *who they are*" (9, emphasis in original(?)). Alcott says that "This act of representation cannot be understood as founded on an act of discovery wherein I discover their true selves and then simply relate my discovery . . . such representations are in every case mediated and the product of interpretation" (9). Such a project is inherently harmful and morally suspect, especially since it can affect the person spoken about. As Alcott says, "Even if someone never hears the discursive self I present of them they may be affected by the decisions others make after hearing it. The point is that a kind of representation occurs in all cases of speaking for . . . that this representation is never a simple act of discovery, and that it will most likely have an impact on the individual so represented" (10).

As a project of both memoir and interviews, *The Moment of Lift* represents both self and others to the readers through French Gates' point of view. Alcott proposes that the way one represents oneself allows a person to take on a rhetorical identity that may be truthful but is always constructed. She says, "in speaking for myself, I am also representing myself in a certain way, as occupying a specific subject-position" (10). This form of self-representation involves "having certain characteristics and not others," allowing a type of self-editing and self-disclosure curated for public scrutiny and interpretation (10). Alcott says that self-representation occurs when "I create a public, discursive self, which will in most cases have an effect of the self experienced as interiority" (10) – the act of curating a "public self" not only creates an external narrative but shapes one's understanding of oneself, as if the creation of a public self solidifies until it becomes the private self as well. This process of self-representation seems fraught when undertaken with perfect self-awareness and moral clarity, and becomes even more dangerous if blind spots about oneself remain unexamined and unchallenged as in *The Moment of Lift*.

This book presents French Gates in conversation with women she meets in LMICs. She asks questions and records their answers in her book, creating the sense that these conversations take place between equal rhetorical partners with similar goals and common

expectations of the dialogue. However, French Gates' social position as a Westerner with the means to offer material aid reveals the inherent inequality between her and the women she interviews. Her country of origin, race, and economic privilege put her in a position that women in LMICs can never achieve, a reality which distorts the power dynamics taking place during these conversations even if that discrepancy remains unacknowledged. Furthermore, by presenting these interviews as conversations between women sharing much in common, French Gates presents them as simple acts of what Alcoff calls "discovery" without acknowledging the mediation and interpretation that takes place when including them in *The Moment of Lift*.

While French Gates certainly functions as an advocate to women in LMICs, she chooses to speak for the women she meets rather than allowing them to speak for themselves. French Gates prepared for a 2012 contraception summit by traveling to Niger and speaking to local women about how contraception made their lives better, then shared these women's stories in her own presentation to summit attendees. However, the only African woman French Gates invited to speak in person at the summit was Jane Otai, a Kenyan who credits her escape from poverty to her use of contraception. Significantly, Jane has a college degree and speaks English – in fact, she served as the interpreter while French Gates interviewed African women for *The Moment of Lift*. Despite a professed desire that marginalized women drive the conversation about contraception, French Gates and her well-educated, English-speaking interpreter spoke of the benefits contraception brings to poor women's lives while the poor women themselves stayed home. French Gates successfully convinced government heads in Europe and Africa to increase contraception funding because she said there was a need for, and provided data about the benefits of, increased contraception access (16-17). However, French Gates did not invite women to the summit to share their own stories, even when she had an interpreter at the ready; she took it upon herself to "speak in place of" these women instead of bringing those women to the summit to speak for themselves or to answer potential questions about their experiences.

Alcoff says the danger inherent in speaking for others with less privilege lies in the potential to reinforce existing power structures. At the contraception summit, French Gates' privilege – as a wealthy white American who speaks English – rendered her voice acceptable to her audience, perhaps even more acceptable than the voices of poor women of color not invited to speak at the conference could have been. While the summit yielded significant funding for contraception access, this success obscures the question of why the summit was structured so influential leaders could listen to French Gates and her educated, English-speaking interpreter rather than to the women needing contraception whose lives would actually be affected by the summit's outcome (Gates 21).

Alternatively, Alcoff offers, "We should strive to create wherever possible the conditions for dialogue and the practice of speaking with and to rather than speaking for others" in order to lessen "the dangers of speaking for others" which "result from the possibility of misrepresentation, expanding one's own authority and privilege, and a generally imperialist speaking ritual" (23). This possibility of dialogue invites marginalized people to respond to improper interpretations of them. However, French Gates seems to feel comfortable speaking for all women when she says that "I see very little difference in what we women all want for ourselves and our children. We want our kids to be safe, to be healthy, to be happy, to do well in school, to fulfill their potential, to grow up and have families and livelihoods of their own – to love and be loved" (57). One might find oneself nodding along to this list – of course this must be what all women want! – but this insistence on a universal sisterhood of women desiring the same thing transforms interviewees' experiences into a palatable narrative as interpreted by the author and readers of *The Moment of Lift* with no opportunity for the women she has interviewed to respond to her representation of them. Do all women around the world seek happiness and fulfilled potential and love for their children as first priorities, or are they more concerned with the immediate needs of good health and clean water and adequate nutrition in circumstances that deny necessary material resources to them and their families?

Even more is lost when French Gates transforms those conversations into text within her narrative – she shares the words these women speak, but offers little context regarding tone of voice, body language, or any pushback against the author. Just as French Gates offers her own polite narrative that does not push back against larger forces of patriarchy, colonialism, or capitalism, she also describes interviews with women from LMICs in such a way that edits out anger, discontent, frustration, or any other strong emotion. A person with traditional rhetorical authority must tread carefully when sharing marginalized people’s stories because of the potential to reinforce existing power structures. Speaking, whether for oneself or others, is more than a matter of transmitting information and ideas, but rather a discourse that occurs in a socially-constructed rhetorical space. Within this space, a person’s social location – their relative privilege, authority, or marginalization – will make their ideas either louder and more acceptable or quieter and potentially suspect to people with social power. When a powerful person speaks for another with less power, the message may be amplified at the expense of the marginalized person’s agency. While this is certainly the case with French Gates’ writing, Alcoff offers an interrogation of “establish[ing] a privileged discursive position wherein one cannot be undermined or challenged and thus is master of the situation” (22). Alcoff says that such a position offers the benefit of “not requir[ing] constant interrogation and critical reflection; one would not have to constantly engage in this emotionally troublesome endeavor and would be immune from the interrogation of others” (22). Creating a masterful rhetorical position inherently allows a powerful speaker such as French Gates to maintain that position without having to question herself or be questioned by others because her mastery becomes an accepted fact. However, Alcoff warns, “such a desire for mastery and immunity must be resisted” (22).

To facilitate such resistance, Alcoff proposes ways we can make sure that any speaking occurs in an ethical, politically effective way. She reminds us that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” prefers a “‘speaking to,’ in which the intellectual neither abnegates his or her discursive role nor presumes an authenticity of the oppressed but still allows for the

possibility that the oppressed will produce a ‘countersentence’” (Alcoff 23; Spivak 297). Alcoff says that “speaking to” will allow us to “lessen the dangers” of “misrepresentation, expanding one’s own authority and privilege, and a generally imperialist speaking ritual” (23). Ultimately, Alcoff insists, “The problem with speaking for others exists in the very structure of discursive practice, no matter its content, and therefore it is this structure itself that needs alteration” (23).

In order to alter existing speaking structures, Alcoff says that “anyone who speaks for others should only do so out of a concrete analysis of the particular power relations and discursive effects involved,” particularly since “the impetus to *a/ways* be the speaker and to speak in all situations must be seen for what it is: a desire for mastery and domination” (24). These strong, conviction-filled words offer a wake-up call for anyone speaking for others, asking them to interrogate their motives and methodology to see if an alternative can be found. Alcoff reminds us that “Some of us have been taught that by right of having to dominant gender, class, race, letters after our name, or some other criterion we are more likely to have the truth. Others have been taught the opposite, and will speak haltingly, with apologies, if they speak at all” (24). Such a breakdown of privilege and power in discursive situations reminds us that French Gates presents the results of her conversations with women in LMICs without details about how those conversations occurred. How did French Gates locate these women? Did they know that she would share the results of their conversations with others? How did French Gates build trust? Did these women feel they could speak freely? Were questions asked in such a way that invited open-ended answers, or did those questions point respondents toward answers the interviewer wanted to hear? Once French Gates shares those conversations with others, either at global conferences or in her book, those conversations become an end point – no further conversation with these women is available, and instead world leaders or book readers look to French Gates for solutions instead of returning to the women in LMICs to learn more about what they need.

Alcoff encourages privileged people to consider listening instead of speaking, to discuss the advantages of their privileges with others who might reveal their blind spots, to remain open

to criticism if their words have unintended harmful results, and to consider the possible consequences of their speech in terms of the hierarchical and political space in which it occurs (24-26). She reiterates that we must “pay careful attention to the discursive arrangement in order to understand the full meaning of any discursive event and offers this example:

In a situation where a well-meaning First World person is speaking for a person or group in the Third World, the very discursive arrangement may reinscribe the “hierarchy of civilizations” view where the United States lands squarely at the top. This effect occurs because the speaker is positioned as authoritative and empowered, as the knowledgeable subject, while the group in the Third World is reduced, merely because of the structure of the speaking practice, to an object and victim that must be championed from afar, thus disempowered. Though the speaker may be trying to materially improve the situation of some lesser-privileged group, the effects of her discourse is to reinforce racist, imperialist conceptions and perhaps also to further silence the lesser-privileged group’s own ability to speak and be heard. (26)

The fact that this example comes so easily to Alcoff implies that such stratified discourse occurs frequently, while its impeccable description of what happens in French Gates’ work – written nearly thirty years after Alcoff’s warning – speaks to the ongoing need for disruption in this type of discourse.

Fundamentally, Alcoff believes we should tread lightly when it comes to speaking for others and should only proceed if it will “enable. . . the empowerment of oppressed peoples” (29). Unfortunately, French Gates’ social position, wealth, and role representing the needs of women in LMICs fails to meet Alcoff’s criteria for ethical speaking for others. When French Gates articulates the needs of women from LMICs to a Western audience without examining why she has positioned herself as an intermediary instead of inviting women to speak for themselves, she unintentionally disempowers those women and perpetuates the colonial

narrative that Western people, especially when white and wealthy, have the answers to women's problems in LMICs.

### **Challenging Cisheteronormativity by “Searching for Silences”**

French Gates' book only describes women in LMICs who are married, cisgender, and heterosexual, a cisheteronormative stance that typifies the ways people from high-income nations assume expertise regarding people living in LMICs and reflects how French Gates represents herself at the time she writes the book. Chamindra Weerawardhana, in "Profoundly Decolonizing?: Reflections on a Transfeminist Perspective of International Relations," asserts that, "In the sphere of international politics, academic research and hands-on policy planning on gender equality and justice-related issues largely revolve around the male/female gender binary, guided by what is often referred to as 'mainstream' feminism, a brand of cisheteronormative 'whitestream' feminism nearly exclusively developed by cisgender white women from the Global North" (184-185). These scholars produce a feminism that supports and reproduces their own identities and values without considering the positions of people unlike them – Trans and queer folks, people of color, or people in the Global South. As presumed experts in their fields, their voices are heeded at the expense of stories of lived experiences of people living in LMICs.

As an alternative, Weerawardhana proposes a Transfeminist form of international relations (IR) that deliberately recognizes and includes non-mainstream voices; because it is "Profoundly intersectional in its orientation, Transfeminism is strongly influenced by often-sidelined critical feminisms—especially Afrofeminist, postcolonial, and Indigenous feminist epistemologies" (185). By focusing on the voices of people other than white mainstream feminists, Transfeminism produces "a Trans-inclusive form of feminism, which challenges the assumptions of restrictive perspectives that focus only on cis women" (187). Unlike mainstream feminism, which refuses to acknowledge its bias toward Western, white, middle-class, cisgender women, Weerawardhana says that "a Transfeminist-of-color epistemology . . . [is] best-suited to

address the challenges of a neoliberal world order and its inherently unequal financial, racial, sociopolitical, and cultural stratifications” such as those between high-income nations and LMICs (188). As long as mainstream feminist theory drives international political attitudes toward gender, “The gender binary stands as a theorizing gatekeeper that controls and measures the length and breadth of debates on what is generally perceived in the academy as feminist IR” (191). An uncritical acceptance of the gender binary and unwillingness to question cisheteronormativity underpins French Gates’ failure to discuss trans, queer women, or even unmarried women.

Significantly, “One of the most important contributions of feminist IR has been its strong emphasis on what Sjoberg, Hudson, and Weber (2015, 530) describe as searching for silences; that is, aspects of world politics and crises that are not prioritized or not considered as crucial” (Weerawardhana 192). To its credit, the Gates Foundation began its work by listening to the silence surrounding the need for immunizations among the world’s poorest children; as Melinda French Gates and Bill Gates learned more about unequal access to immunizations, “The most bewildering thing to us was how little attention this got” in the Western media (Gates 15). However, while French Gates heard the silence of unimmunized children in LMICs and put her resources to work for them, she does not hear the silence surrounding LGBTQ+ people in LMICs, and in fact perpetuates this silence in her own book.

Weerawardhana describes how white cis-feminists of the Global North have moved the conversation surrounding international relations away from a white, male perspective – but no further (185). Instead, the legacy of colonialism remains largely unexamined because,

In development studies . . . the majority of the work is done by white scholars who, having spent a certain number of weeks or months in the ‘field’ (which is invariably in the Global South[s]), return to their Western universities and research centers and produce work that gains international recognition as the most authoritative work . . . such practices are deeply

questionable, given the way in which whiteness and white privilege play the foremost roles in facilitating the research and its output (Weerawardhana 201-2).

This critique focuses on whose voices matter most in academia, but applies to French Gates' work as well. French Gates mentions numerous short-term trips she has taken to various parts of Africa and India during which she listens to women's stories and then positions herself as an expert on women's needs in LMICs. French Gates is not an academic, but her presumption of expertise leads to similar results. Her interpretation of these trips determines which people will benefit from the Gates Foundation's philanthropy, which means that groups she does not even perceive, such as LGBTQ+ folks, will likely not receive the same financial assistance that cisgender, heterosexual women do. By employing a Western, cisheteronormative feminism, French Gates inherently limits the scope of her philanthropy to certain issues and people without seriously engaging either the existence of Trans and queer folks or the ongoing destructive legacy of the white imperialist project. French Gates also limits her discussion to good mothers, women who are married and hard-working with no obvious addiction or mental health concerns. In Niger, she meets "a mother named Sadi Seyni whose six children were competing for her attention as we talked" and who "said the same thing I have heard from so many mothers: 'It wouldn't be fair for me to have another child. I can't afford to feed the ones I have now!'" (17) French Gates positions such women in her book as examples of deserving poor people instead of discussing the fact that unmarried women or sex workers or women with perceived social deficiencies also need access to contraception. It is possible that French Gates is working to expand contraceptive access to everyone who needs it, but the examples she uses reinforce a familiar yet unexamined moral narrative familiar to American readers, one in which recipients of charity must be worthy and morally good. As Christine Keating, et al. point out in "The Rationality of Empowerment: Microcredit, Accumulation by Dispossession, and the Gendered Economy," "The very decision to invest in women is driven by gendered conceptions of women as virtuous mothers and entrepreneurs," so that selecting

specific women as worthy recipients of aid often depends of those women's work ethic and economic reliability within systems that depend on their paid and unpaid labor to meet all the requirements demanded of them (166). In *The Moment of Lift*, the women who need contraception are coded as socially acceptable to the reader by virtue of being married, hard-working, loving mothers caught up in social and economic forces outside their control. For example, Mary in Nairobi is "a young mother who sold backpacks made from scraps of blue jean fabric. She invited me into her home, where she was sewing and watching her two small children" (17). Both Sadi Seyni and Mary are described as attentive mothers who want contraception so they can extend their resources to care for their existing children. Mary is specifically coded as an entrepreneur and a wife who says her husband agrees with her use of contraception because "Life is tough." The unspoken logic behind presenting these women as the ones needing contraception is that they are already doing all they can for their families and contraception will help them stretch their efforts – both material and domestic – further.

### **Deconstructing Capitalist Imperialism's Role in Dehumanizing the Other**

In her discussion of women in LMICs, French Gates, a philanthropist with access to billions of dollars made through capitalist endeavors, ultimately fails to acknowledge how white capitalist imperialism actually created the conditions that make the lives of women in LMICs so precarious. Sylvia Wynter's "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument" reminds us that "20 percent of the world's peoples own 80 percent of its resources, consume two-thirds of its food, and are responsible for 75 percent of its ongoing pollution, with this leading to two billion of earth's peoples living relatively affluent lives while four billion still live on the edge of hunger and immiseration" – all the ongoing consequences of centuries of colonialism (260-261). Capitalism and imperialism both create undeserving Others, the "outsiders" French Gates wants to protect (50), but she does not acknowledge these systems' persistent and ongoing negative influence. Instead, French Gates focuses on alleviating immediate suffering and helping women find better

lives within their own communities without acknowledging how imperialism has left communities in LMICs fundamentally disadvantaged compared to people in high-income nations.

Wynter explores how the Western colonial project allowed for the development of the liberated “Man, which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself” at the same time it dehumanized and Othered its subjects, positioning “‘the rise of Europe’ and its construction of the ‘world civilization’” as direct causes of, and intellectually and materially dependent upon, “African enslavement, Latin American conquest, and Asian subjugation” (260, 263). By inventing a “human/subhuman distinction,” those who considered themselves human felt justified in enslaving and dehumanizing people of color encountered during European colonizing endeavors because they believed their victims were not fully human (264). Western intellectuals created this distinction using the “principle . . . of bio-evolutionary Natural Selection,” an allegedly impersonal process by which “one’s selected or dysselected status . . . would come to be verified by one’s (or one’s group’s) success or failure in life” (310). Of course, Europeans’ use of theft and violence camouflaged the source of their own “success” while making the non-Europeans’ “failure” seem both inevitable and justified.

This Othering continues with (white) people in high-income nations still classified as more socially evolved, so much so that Wynter insists, “the struggle of our times . . . is the struggle against this overrepresentation . . . of the now globally hegemonic ethnoclass world of ‘Man’” (262). In fact, she goes so far as to say that “one cannot ‘unsettle’ the ‘coloniality of power’ without a redescription of the human outside the terms of our present descriptive statement of the human, Man” (268). Wynter proposes this unsettling would require a complete reimagining of Western civilization since the West is currently “unable . . . to conceive of an Other to what it calls human – an Other, therefore, to its correlated postulates of power, truth, freedom” (282), political and philosophical luxuries not necessarily enjoyed in LMICs because of imperialism’s lasting scars. While French Gates does recognize women in LMICs as fully human in their ability to suffer, she does not propose to “unsettle” very much at all because she fails to

examine how the concepts of “power, truth, freedom” continue to benefit people living in high-income nations over the interests of people in LMICs.

### **Postcolonial Approaches to Communication and International Law**

While classic postcolonial texts point to how colonialism overshadows the past and present, in “Postcolonial Approaches to Communication: Charting the Terrain, Engaging the Intersections,” Raka Shome and Radha S. Hegde also look to the future. They say postcolonial studies’ “best work . . . theorizes not just colonial conditions but *why* those conditions are what they are, and how they can be undone and redone” (250). These authors insist on “taking an emancipatory political stance” that invites scholars to question what they know and how they came to know it (250). By “remain[ing] acutely aware of the history, heritage, and legacies” they bring to their work, postcolonial scholars can reinvent methodologies, recreate the academy, and attempt to mitigate the damage done by the Western colonial enterprise (260-261).

Similarly, in “Feminist Methods in International Law,” Hilary Charlesworth provides several feminist methodologies for understanding human rights abuses during times of war. She acknowledges that, when applied to the law, feminist methodologies “may clearly reflect a personal agenda rather than strive to obtain an objective truth,” but insists that the idea of “objective truth” is itself a fiction presented by what Elizabeth Grosz calls the “overwhelming masculinity of privileged and historically dominant knowledges” (380). One methodology Charlesworth utilizes is “searching for silences,” or uncovering which issues a system of knowledge considers “irrelevant” or insignificant; she believes the silences within international law “may be as important as its positive rules and rhetorical structures” (381). For example, international law utilizes a vocabulary which “generally makes women invisible,” a condition which Charlesworth considers “an integral part of the structure of the international legal order, a critical element of its stability”; women’s erasure is systematized and normalized, and women’s human rights law becomes a ghettoized specialty that focuses on women primarily as mothers and victims (381). *The Moment of Lift* also presents women in LMICs as mothers and victims of

poverty, ignorance, and underdeveloped infrastructure. It offers solutions in terms of increasing access to healthcare and education and personal agency without exploring the deeper questions of why LMICs lack the resources to provide for basic human needs after colonialism has ended.

### **“The First Priority for Women”**

As French Gates became more involved in the philanthropic work of the Gates Foundation, her original role, spent working behind the scenes and staying out of the public sphere, no longer sufficed. Fellow philanthropists insisted she needed to use her own voice to draw attention to the need for contraception, a fundamental anti-poverty intervention that can promote health, education, and general well-being for women and poor families. While French Gates agonized over the decision to become more vocal in her work, she ultimately decided to proceed because “What was the point of [these women] opening their hearts and telling me about their lives if I wasn’t going to help them when I had the chance?” (19) After deciding to take a more public role, French Gates went on to organize the 2012 summit to raise European and African governments’ awareness of the need for increased funding for contraception. French Gates states passionately that the summit should “change the conversation to include the women I was meeting. We needed to bring in *their* voices” (60). Later, she says, “I wanted a conversation led by the women who’d been left out” (61). However, bringing in these women’s voices did not mean bringing in the women themselves. Instead, the summit invoked a top-down model that prioritized government leaders’ investment in the idea of contraception access without including women’s stories about their need for it, ultimately putting women at the mercy of primarily male leaders who could choose to prioritize women’s healthcare needs – or not.

French Gates says that helping women ultimately “means listening to people, learning what they want, what they’re doing, what they believe, and what barriers they face” (42). Throughout *The Moment of Lift*, she recounts conversations with women in LMICs about their lives, needs, and desires. She seems to take seriously the responsibility of listening to these

women's stories and says, "I purposely didn't go into these visits with fixed views; I tried to go with curiosity and a desire to learn" (29-30). She encourages women to speak frankly and finds that "When one person tells me a harsh truth, I can be sure that she's speaking for others who aren't as bold. It makes me pay better attention, and then I realize that others have been saying the same thing all along, just more softly" (57).

Here, French Gates does acknowledge that the gaps between her personal, privileged experience and the lives of the women she encounters means she can listen carefully to their stories without fully understanding – if she has to hear multiple women say the same thing before she really begins to understand them, then "I haven't really been listening" (57). However, the introduction to *The Moment of Lift* says she has "learned about hundreds of millions of women who want to decide for themselves whether and when to have children, but they can't. They have no access to contraceptives" (3). While this summary neatly points out the need for contraception, it raises the issue of deciding whether to have children – a decision occurring in high-income countries – without discussing any women in LMICs who desire to have no children at all. All of the conversations about contraception in *The Moment of Lift* are with married women with at least one child who want contraception to help plan how many children she will have – not a single interviewee says she never wanted children at all.

French Gates then says, "there are many other rights and privileges that women and girls are denied . . . in some parts of the globe" and offers a list of such rights: "The right to decide whether and when and whom to marry. The right to go to school. Earn an income. Work outside the home. *Walk* outside the home. Spend their own money. Shape their budget. Start a business. Get a loan. Own property. Divorce a husband. See a doctor. Run for office. Ride a bike. Drive a car. Go to college. Study computers. Find investors" (3). This staccato phrasing indicates a long list of unfair practices, but its lack of description assigns each item equal weight regardless of whether these "rights and privileges" – or lack thereof – are felt equally by all women everywhere. It seems hard to believe that the same women denied access to education

also seek to run for office or to find investors. Instead, this hodge-podge of concerns is a list of universal human needs interspersed with a few items that only some women – perhaps Western women with adequate financial resources and education – can hope to pursue. Furthermore, the italicization of the word “Walk” in “*Walk* outside the home” raises a problematic issue – is French Gates willing to criticize seemingly non-Western forms of patriarchy that seclude women at home without specifically calling out Western forms of patriarchy that limit women’s freedoms in other ways?

While government pledges are encouraging, contraceptives still have to make their way to the women who need them. While visiting a health clinic in Malawi, French Gates found “a long line of women waiting to visit the family planning room . . . . One woman told me that she had come to get her injection but didn’t know if it would be available, and all the other women nodded. They said they would walk ten miles to the health clinic not knowing if the shot would be in stock when they got there, and many times it wasn’t” (57). These long, hot, fruitless journeys meant taking time away from their domestic responsibilities while also caring for their young children as they traveled.

For people at risk of becoming pregnant, all contraceptives are not created equal; condoms’ association with HIV prevention makes them largely unsuitable as birth control in LMICs. If contraceptive shots were unavailable, the women

might be offered condoms . . . which clinics tended to have in good supply because of the AIDS epidemic. But . . . women have told me over and over again, “If I ask my husband to wear a condom, he will beat me up. It’s like I’m accusing him of being unfaithful and getting HIV, or I’m saying that I was unfaithful and got HIV.” So condoms were useless for many women, and yet health clinics would claim they were stocked up on contraceptives when all they had was condoms (57),

indicating a gap between services offered and what women needed.

French Gates addresses not only issues of access, but also the importance of gaining men's support for women's use of contraception. She describes how Rose, a Kenyan pharmacist working for a grassroots family planning initiative, engages with groups of men to reduce local stigma surrounding contraception. Rose says, "When you get men on board . . . their wives' use of contraceptives is almost universal.' She tells the men family planning will make their children healthier, stronger, and more intelligent – and because fathers see intelligent children as proof of their own intelligence, they're open to this argument" (78-79). Unfortunately, this argument succeeds by massaging men's pride rather than increasing concern for their wives' and children's well-being, presenting a local, contextualized approach that yields results without fundamentally improving men's attitudes toward women individually or more broadly. French Gates herself opines, "Men shouldn't want to have more children than they can care for. They shouldn't oppose women's desire to space the births of their children. Men's and women's interests should be aligned, and the men who see this are the ones we want leading family planning discussions with other men" (79). This is a complicated, even contradictory position, simultaneously claiming that "Male allies are essential" while potentially prioritizing men's approval of contraception over women's desire – and need – to access it (79).

Even in high-income countries, the conversation surrounding contraception has routinely discounted women's needs. French Gates recounts a story, attributed to Margaret Sanger, in which a woman asked her doctor how to avoid becoming pregnant and he advised her, "tell [your] husband to sleep on the roof"; the woman later died after a self-induced abortion (63). French Gates says, "Across cultures, the opposition to contraceptives shares an underlying hostility to women"; in the U.S., "a woman's sexual activity was [considered] immoral if it was separated from her function of bearing children," so contraception was illegal for married women until 1965 and for single women until 1972 (64-65). Furthermore, morally suspect practices such as America's eugenics movement (which Sanger herself embraced), China's one-child policy, and India's forced sterilizations, along with America's heated abortion debate and the Catholic

church's opposition to both contraception and abortion, create an environment in which women's private decisions about when (or whether) to have children get lost in a larger conversation dominated by men (62-70); as a result, many Americans still feel uncomfortable supporting contraception access abroad. Still, French Gates insists, "women want contraceptives. I knew it from my own life, and . . . I began to see it as central, as the first priority for women" (58-9).

French Gates theorizes that misogyny thrives when people position women as outsiders. She asserts, "When any community pushes any group out, especially its women, it's creating a crisis that can only be reversed by bringing the outsiders back in" (50). However, she distinguishes between outsiders in high-income nations and in LMICs, acknowledging the intersectionality of Western women based on race, disability, and LGBTQ+ identity while positioning all women in LMICs together as outsiders compared to men and failing to acknowledge that some of those women are queer (51). She says, "Overcoming the need to create outsiders . . . is the key to ending deep inequality" and suggests we need to "wake up to the ways we exclude" others (51-2). However, by ignoring the existence of queer women in the Third World, she necessarily excludes them herself. French Gates presents a distorted version of reality in which high-income nations, presumably further along in preserving and protecting human rights, acknowledges a variety of different types of women, while LMICs consist only of women and men with no other distinguishing characteristics.

Postcolonial studies offers a powerful lens through which to examine how people engage in formerly colonized states. Unfortunately, French Gates does not engage with scholars questioning the practices of speaking for others, assuming cisheteronormativity, or other loaded topics when working with postcolonial subjects in LMICs. She moves forward with a memoir in which she assumes the people speaking to her are equal to her in terms of rhetorical and geographical positionality instead of acknowledging the differences which make those conversations unbalanced. Furthermore, she speaks as if the women in LMICs have the

same challenges she does instead of acknowledging those women's challenges are fundamentally different in terms of resources and scale. She offers a brand of feminism which might serve (some) Western women well but which can seem tone-deaf when applied to the needs of women experiencing real economic precarity.

### CHAPTER III: ETHICS AND PHILANTHROPY

In 1968, Ivan Illich delivered a speech to the Conference on InterAmerican Student Projects. The speech, called “To Hell with Good Intentions,” warns of the dangers of paternalism when Americans students volunteer in Mexico. He says that “You will not help anybody by your good intentions” and criticizes volunteers, missionaries, and “vacationing do-gooders” who offer only temporary aid (315, 317). Because the American economic system “makes the rich ever richer, and the poor increasingly marginal to that system,” Illich says that American volunteers’ short-term efforts have nothing to offer the poor people of Mexico long-term (318). When discussing how some agencies prepare volunteers for culture shock, he remarks, “How odd that nobody ever thought about spending money to educate poor Mexicans in order to prevent them from the culture shock of meeting you” (318-319). One hindrance to genuine helping is that many volunteers must speak through middle-class translators, a barrier that leaves “no way for you to really meet with the underprivileged, since there is no common ground whatsoever for you to meet on” (319). Finally, Illich tells U.S. students to volunteer in their home country, where they understand the issues and “the poor . . . can tell you to go to hell” (320, 321). He says that to reject volunteering abroad means to “renounce exercising the power which being an American gives you” and to “give up the legal right you have to impose your benevolence on Mexico” (321). He encourages students to travel, look, and study abroad, “but do not come to help” (321).

Such strident language offers a different lens for interpreting *The Moment of Lift*, especially since French Gates positions it as a memoir about how she learned to help. Her philanthropic efforts are well-intentioned, but she fails to consider how American economic imperialism appears to women in LMICs. She offers opinions about what these women need, but real solutions – the kind of solutions that involve structural changes in order to benefit everyone, not individuals piecemeal – need to come from the people and their own grassroots

organizing and efforts. Illich questions even the value of interpreters, whose social distinctions from the very poor create a new layer of disconnection in conversations between the helper(s) and the helped.

In 2019, the same year that *The Moment of Lift* was published and fifty-one years after Illich's speech, Melody Loya and Katherine Peters published an article called "Critical Literacy: Engaging Students to Enhance Cultural Humility in Study Abroad." They discuss how study abroad programs can "enhance cultural humility" and "focus on mutually beneficial relationships between the learning of the students and the good of the community" (57). Loya and Peters say that Illich's 1968 speech "remains very relevant in today's context of service-focused study abroad programs" because these programs often "do not require participants to think critically about the root causes of poverty, the United States' involvement in global politics, or the lasting effects of colonization" (60). Therefore, the authors encourage students to be aware of their own privilege, such as being wealthy enough to afford international travel, and "the inherent power imbalances born of the focus on race, social class, space needs, and the needs of capital for White European colonizers" (63). As one example of this imbalance, students at la Universidad de Costa Rica informed Loya's study abroad group that "they do not like the verb 'help' (ayudar) as it implies a passive relationship, but rather they prefer the term 'accompany' (acompañar) as an indication of a joint process" (64). Loya now shares this subtle but powerful distinction with all her study abroad students. The authors have developed nine "best practices for ethical study abroad programs" which encourage students to engage with people in their host countries in ways that challenge the outsiders' historic and current socioeconomic privilege, benefit local economies, and allow a mutual exchange of information and ideas between students and hosts to benefit everyone involved (65). Loya and Peters' approach goes beyond mere understanding of people in other cultures and points toward a mutually-constructed, egalitarian relationship between people in different cultures as a basis for understanding and offering assistance without recreating colonizing structures and power dynamics.

Ethics is an important concern when working cross-culturally, whether conducting research on human subjects or engaging in philanthropic endeavors. Ethics has become increasingly important when considering protections for recipients of medical interventions, participants in surveys, and beneficiaries of philanthropic aid. The goal of ethics in these cases is to ensure that people participating in research or receiving assistance do not receive harmful interventions. Instead, scholars and other critics seek to safeguard the physical safety and emotional well-being of people who participate in interviews, clinical trials, or other forms of research. It is important that people remain free from exploitation and harm and that they receive culturally-appropriate interventions, especially from privileged Westerners. Along with postcolonial studies, a framework of ethics offers a way to examine French Gates' narrative about herself and women in LMICs in terms of racial, economic, and social power. An ethical framework insists that all of French Gates' interaction with postcolonial subjects, from interviewing to interpreting those interactions for others to offering material aid to women in LMICs, should always occur with an eye to these women's safety and dignity and ensure that these interactions should be beneficial to the women and not to French Gates herself.

Along with evaluating the ways in which interventions are carried out, research ethics evaluates the processes of description, interpretation, and knowledge production and distribution within the academy and other communities. Academia is implicated in the larger forces of racism, patriarchy, and other forms of systemic oppression, and people working within it must continue to evaluate their processes, assumptions, and results to find ways to minimize all forms of harm. It is not enough not to hurt people; research ethics demands that people be actively helped by interventions directed toward them, and ethical philanthropy must do the same.

Interestingly, philanthropists are not required to follow the same protocols as, say, public health researchers. For example, if an academic researcher wanted to interview women of color using funds from the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the researcher would have to follow

1974's National Research Act, also known as 45 CFR 46, which became law after the abuses of the forty-year long Tuskegee syphilis study, in which Black men with syphilis were observed but not offered medical intervention, came to light ("The U. S. Public Health Service Untreated Syphilis Study at Tuskegee"). This law mandates the protection of human subjects and requiring a special justification for focusing on women and members of racial and/or ethnic minority groups. Specifically, a researcher would have to "provide a rationale and justification based on a scientific or ethical basis" for how subjects were chosen (or excluded) from the interview process ("Inclusion of Women"). A researcher working with pregnant women would undergo even closer scrutiny ("Vulnerable and Other Populations Requiring Additional Protections.") Before, during, and after the interview, a researcher receiving federal funding would be required both to justify the need to include these women in the research and to document how care was taken to protect these subjects. In addition to scrutiny from NIH, the researcher's methods would also be monitored by their academic institution's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to oversee the protection of human subjects.

While French Gates describes many interviews with women in LMICs as part of *The Moment of Lift*, she does not share her interview process with readers, nor does she share how women were chosen to participate, if they agreed to have intimate details of their lives shared with strangers in French Gates' book, if they felt pressured to answer questions, or if they believed participating in these interviews was helpful – or could be helpful – to them and their families. Finally, we do not know if they received incentives or direct aid after these interviews – were they glad to share their ideas and experiences, or did they participate in interviews by French Gates in the hope that they would receive compensation or other material aid? If French Gates had been working as an academic and had shared her results in a peer-reviewed journal, the details of these methodologies, including IRB approval of her research, would have been included for scrutiny alongside her results. Instead, because she was working on behalf of a philanthropic organization, she had tremendous financial and social leverage in terms of being

able to fund travel, to pay for an interpreter, and to meet with a variety of groups and individuals, all outside of the parameters of federally-mandated research ethics that have been established and monitored for decades. In fact, the position that French Gates “wants to help” centers all discussions about ethics on the good intentions of the Westerner, a situation ripe for cultural insensitivity or even abuse.

In this chapter, I will consider the ethical ramifications of how women in LMICs are included in *The Moment of Lift*. French Gates retells painful stories told to her by women in LMICs, reflecting on their connections to her life and offering them as stories for her readers’ consumption. While French Gates responds to these women’s stories with concern, she also draws connections between their lives and her own, as if the need for contraception in her life and these women’s lives carries the same weight when their material realities are so different. In fact, French Gates identifies the role of contraception in creating the life she now has as a way to encourage readers to identify with other women’s need for contraception, focusing on the personal benefit to the Western reader as if the need for contraception in LMICs could not be persuasive on its own through public health data or women’s descriptions of their own lives. *The Moment of Lift* insists on drawing parallels between the lives of French Gates and the women she meets, creating a false sense of equivalency and eliding the overt differences between these women’s experiences and opportunities. Pointing to the similarity between different women’s need for contraception discourages both French Gates and her readers from considering larger questions of economic, social, or historical factors that make their experiences so different. Both French Gates and her readers are encouraged to find superficial solidarity with the women in the book instead of questioning their own complicity in the economic and racialized systems which make women’s lives in LMICs so challenging.

In this chapter, I will deeply engage the works of research ethicists whose positions seem relevant when considering French Gates’ work with women in LMICs. These authors discuss taking a principled stand against distributing research results, using culturally-

appropriate interventions in public health outreach, understanding how non-profits maintain a harmful status quo, interrogating the implications of sharing or stealing others' suffering in public discourse, and offering an ethical critique of philanthropic aid. These wide-ranging areas of expertise offer a variety of ways to understand the ethical pitfalls involved when Westerners intervene in the lives of postcolonial subjects in LMICs and then share the circumstances, results, and interpretations of those interventions with people without protecting the recipients from physical, emotional, or cultural harm. Analyzing how researchers and philanthropists depict human suffering is crucial to understanding how ethicists want to expand a definition of harm to better protect minoritized or vulnerable subjects. While research ethics exist to reduce suffering, it is essential to investigate how information and artifacts depicting suffering serve either to challenge or to maintain existing political, economic, and social structures. Showing or telling about suffering should be held as a solemn trust that does not cause further harm or camouflage the underlying causes of suffering. In cases where one's depiction of another's suffering causes harm, we must consider what it means not to share the details of suffering with a broader community. Finally, we must consider why we need evidence of suffering – a narrative or a photograph of a individual's pain – in order to believe the person is actually in pain. We have ample evidence in the form of population data about widescale suffering, so it is curious that attempts to draw attention to suffering so often rely on depicting personal, individual suffering.

This chapter will explore the cultural implications for moving philanthropic funds from high-income countries to LMICs, what research ethics can tell us about doing philanthropy well, and what it means to portray images of suffering with outsiders. Cross-cultural work initiated by people in high-income countries is always fraught, but ethics has much to teach us about listening to people in LMICs, doing work that addresses both immediate needs and larger political structures, and interrogating the role of pain narratives in our discussion of postcolonial subjects. Observing the suffering of other people is an intimate act that involves observing and

trying to understand pain without dehumanizing the sufferer or recreating their pain as we try to make sense of it to ourselves or others. French Gates structures *The Moment of Lift* as a memoir about her coming to understand the suffering of others and learning how to help, but a framework of research ethics encourages us to ask whether sharing the suffering of women in LMICs is a necessary part of the philanthropic work she has taken up for herself. Doing philanthropic work is a separate project from sharing information about the work with others, and it is possible to engage in philanthropy without sharing it with others. In the case of French Gates, what changes about the work by writing a book about it? What happens if she continues to do philanthropic work but never writes the book? Westerners tend to believe that reporting results is an important part of our endeavors, but questioning whether it is necessary for French Gates to write this book allows us to engage with the ethical question of what happens when outsiders share intimate details of marginalized women with each other. It is not necessary to share the details of every interaction with women in LMICs with other outsiders, and in fact a case can be made that refusing to share stories of suffering and trauma can happen alongside, and can even further the results of, the most ethical forms of listening and of care.

### **Healthcare and Listening in Marginalized Communities**

Postcolonial studies, rhetorical studies, and research ethics all have implications for how we engage in public health and philanthropic work. The best approach for public health work is culture-centered and involves active listening that prioritizes subaltern people's narratives about their needs and experiences over the narratives of Western outsiders. Furthermore, providers acknowledge people's agency and ideas about what interventions would be most helpful to them. When educating or providing health interventions, Westerners should assume a position of curiosity, acknowledge that information and technology are not the only factors that will improve quality of life, and maintain a collaborative, equal relationship between providers and recipients that allows recipients to access information and resources in ways that do not diminish their cultural values and personal agency.

Culture-centered public health work invites discussion of how medical practitioners engage with patients, especially those who are (or have historically been) marginalized. Janis Davis, et al. discuss in “Healthcare and Listening: A Relationship for Caring” how, “In recent decades, healthcare relationships have evolved from a paternalistic model to a partnership between provider and patient. Patients are increasingly more informed and participatory in decisions that impact their health” (169). As this partnership develops, communication becomes increasingly important, and the most important aspect seems to be “effective listening” on the part of the healthcare provider (169). Effective listening increases patient satisfaction and patient care and decreases the likelihood of avoidable, deadly mistakes (171). Ultimately, Davis finds that the patient and the provider both benefit when their dialogue emphasizes listening for mutual understanding (172).

While practitioners are wrestling with larger issues while dealing with public health work, philanthropist organizations and volunteers, regardless of their goals, tend to offer short-term assistance while failing to challenge systems of power, to acknowledge the legacy of colonialism, or to demonstrate ethical best practices when dealing with marginalized subjects. Overwhelmingly, they offer predetermined solutions instead of asking people what they need; use public relations and media to draw attention to the people giving aid and to depict suffering people as passive, helpless, and without agency; focus on Western values such as innovation over Indigenous values and culture; offer short-term interventions with little regard for long-term outcomes; fail to consider helpers’ privilege or power or the larger social causes that create poverty, war, and other suffering; and ultimately maintain the status quo.

In “Working Along the Margins: Developing Community-Based Strategies for Communicating about Health with Marginalized Groups,” Leigh Arden Ford and Gust A. Yep emphasize cultural identity, priorities, and shared experiences when communicating (242). Since marginalized people’s “health care concerns are treated differently than those in the dominant culture,” the authors determined that “The goal of health promotion scholarship

becomes to expose and challenge . . . systems of domination and to centralize the voices of the disenfranchised” (244, 247). In this context, dialogue emancipates and encourages empowerment, which “is the central organizing theme of all community-based health promotion strategies with marginalized populations” (248). The authors recommend long-term, grassroots projects in which marginalized groups take a leadership role in identifying health issues and potential solutions in ways that align with community values (250). Over time, community leaders and volunteers can take ownership of these projects which becoming increasingly independent of outsiders, because “In the end, it is their community; we are merely sojourners” (256). This idea of “sojourners,” as people passing through who work for a marginalized community’s good after the community identifies solutions for its problems is a powerful one that confounds the idea of external white saviors who come into the community armed with answers to its problems.

### **Capitalist Philanthropy and “The Politics and Antipolitics of Care”**

In “Capitalist Philanthropy and Hegemonic Partnerships,” Behrooz Morvaridi says the world’s billionaires have a combined net wealth of \$4.5 trillion, and many are interested in philanthropic efforts (1191-1192). However, key differences exist between the values of billionaire philanthropists and aid recipients. For instance, the Gates Foundation’s approach to poverty prioritizes innovation and technology at the expense of local knowledge and values. The Gates Foundation partnered with Monsanto, a producer of genetically modified (GM) seeds that promise higher yields but must be purchased directly from Monsanto each year, a situation that threatens farmers with increased poverty and environmental degradation (1205, 1199). Farmers also face the “compromise [of] traditional practice” in important areas such as land rights, tribal identity, and seed management, so that critics “dispute whether new technology that is rarely grounded in local knowledge is in fact in the interests of smallholding farmers and peasants,” especially when native seeds have proven vital to the stability and sustainability of local agrarian economics (1206). Ultimately, this philanthropic endeavor serves the needs of wealthy elites

and business conglomerates who operate without oversight or accountability and are “content to be concerned with poverty so long as it . . . does not threaten the hegemonic structure” through which they gained their wealth (p. 1208). This indictment bears consideration as it points out how corporatized philanthropy offers solutions without challenging the historical, social, and economics factors which create and sustain economic hardship in LMICs.

One valuable critique of philanthropic efforts is Miriam Ticktin’s “Introduction: The Politics and Antipolitics of Care,” which discusses how Western humanitarian aid workers’ appearance of political neutrality actually reinforces the status quo, allowing volunteers to create a false separation between immediate suffering and the larger, deeply entrenched political and ideological conditions that enable suffering (3). She describes how the work of France’s Médecins sans Frontières (MSF, or Doctors without Borders) factors into both France’s sense of itself as a benevolent society and its offering of emergency assistance without engaging deeper politics of oppression. Ticktin says the MSF’s “goal is not to improve the human condition but to alleviate suffering” – MSF doctors offer emergency medical care while artificially distancing themselves from “the human condition” as a whole (16). Furthermore, the “heroic French doctor” functions as a self-congratulatory white savior even when the French people believe MSF could extend its mission beyond emergency healthcare to assist with political conflicts (22, 8). Ticktin’s work offers a lens for critiquing any philanthropic efforts (including French Gates’) in which money moves from high-income nations donors to recipients in LMICs, especially in terms of how donors understand their work and whether they are willing to expand their assistance beyond temporary aid to address deeper political issues underlying human suffering.

Ticktin seeks to “address the central place of benevolence and compassion in contemporary political life, especially when enacted under the threat of emergency or crisis, as solutions to global problems of inequality, exploitation, and discrimination” (3). Ticktin insists that, regardless of individual care workers’ goodwill, care work cannot be politically neutral and actually perpetuates the system that creates crises even as it treats the symptoms: “those who

act in the name of the moral imperative generally claim to be apolitical – beyond or outside politics [when actually] . . . they work to reinforce the status quo, the established order” (19). She contrasts “politics,” closely aligned with “the set of practices by which order is created and maintained,” with “the political,” or “the disruption of an established order” (19). Ticktin believes that “Radical change is the result of *political* action, not politics. While a politics of care and compassion is a form of politics – it engages and reproduces a set of power relations . . . it does not challenge established forms of inequality” (19-20). Within this framework, French Gates’ work would definitely be considered “politics” – she encourages specific, localized improvements in women’s lives while failing to challenge the macro-level socioeconomic conditions that make life difficult for people living in LMICs.

Ticktin cautions that “in pretending to be outside power, ‘unarmed’ power is wielded without acknowledging it and therefore often without accountability” (20). This certainly applies to French Gates, who measures the “return” on her philanthropic investments in terms of “lives saved and improved” without evaluating whether, or how, she uses her own power (142); she assumes that, because her motives are good, her actions will also inherently be good, with no acknowledgement of the existence – or origins – of the tremendous power disparity between herself and the women she wants to help.

Ticktin believes women in LMICs become positioned as victims through “the gendered and racialized narratives that allow certain people and bodies to be identified as morally legitimate, as worthy of being saved” (18-19). Ticktin describes the moral calculus by which France determines which undocumented immigrants are deemed worthy of state protection, and French Gates presents her work in a similar way, documenting only the stories of earnest, hard-working mothers who want the best for their children and therefore seem worthy of assistance. French Gates says that “across cultures . . . the drive to help your child flourish is the same” (119) and offers external reasons why women in LMICs struggle to help their children flourish, but includes no stories of women seeking to overcome substance abuse problems, mental

health issues, or abusive tendencies because those women would not fit the narrative of deserving victims – and good mothers – that French Gates seeks to present (119).

Ticktin describes a “new humanitarianism” whose “goal is not to improve the human condition but to alleviate suffering wherever it occurs, in the form of emergency medical care” and insists that aid workers must look beyond crisis care to consider “if, as a humanitarian, one saves lives, what kind of world does one save them into?” (16, 20) Ultimately, Ticktin wants to find ways “to think about the shape of radical political change centered on equality, change that addresses the suffering of exploitation, oppression, poverty, and hunger as much as suffering from . . . gendered violence” (25). French Gates does make an effort to address both immediate suffering and some of its direct causes, but her non-political stance and refusal to acknowledge how imperialism has made suffering in LMICs so widespread limits her ability to engage honestly with “what kind of world” the women she helps have the opportunity to enjoy.

French Gates listens carefully to women, demonstrates genuine empathy, and wants to use her Foundation’s resources to improve their quality of life. However, her book also includes deafening silences. In addition to ignoring LGBTQ folks and the ongoing legacy of imperialism, French Gates does not mention the unequal distribution of clean drinking water around the world, even when she discusses how the responsibility of fetching water hinders girls’ and women’s educational and employment opportunities. She also fails to discuss the highly politicized issue of climate change, which is expected to harm the world’s poorest people disproportionately over time. Climate change functions as a modern extension of imperialism, with people in high-income nations exploiting the planet in ways that, according to the Canadian government, will kill many vulnerable people of color in LMICs; French Gates’ refusal to discuss climate change as a concern for women in LMICs is unsettling. Finally, while French Gates seems to work toward Ticktin’s vision of multifocal understanding of women’s issues beyond gendered violence, her goal is for women in LMICs to experience equality with the men in their own communities, not with women in high-income nations; she wants to improve women’s lives,

but does not offer a radical vision to bring equality between the people of high-income nations and LMICs.

### ***Regarding the Pain of Others***

In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag discusses the evolution of photography in documenting wartime and other large-scale violence. Despite the appearance of accuracy and objectivity, Sontag insists photographs of suffering, mutilation, and death have a distinctly non-objective point of view because human beings decide what to include and exclude from the frame (25). A photograph may tell a story, but it cannot reveal what it did not record, making photography an imperfect form of documentation. Selective presentation also applies to which events are deemed worthy of being recorded. For instance, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been thoroughly photographed while other wars and atrocities occurring at the same time “have gone relatively underphotographed,” an intentional omission with political motivations (36). Finally, the suffering of white people is expected to be presented in “good taste,” while photographs from Africa and Asia depict “grievously injured bodies” in graphic detail (66, 71).

The concept of “the pain of others” has important implications beyond photography. Any time one person’s pain is documented, written down, or shared with others, we need to take care not to use that pain to reinforce larger cultural narratives. Sontag invites readers to consider who suffers, who views suffering, and whose suffering matters in a global context. As remnants of colonialism, “photographs are a means of making ‘real’ (or ‘more real’) horrors that the privileged and the merely safe have not experienced” (7, 21). As a result, people’s desire to see – or to be shocked by – others’ suffering is outweighed by an ethical responsibility to respect the humanity of people whose suffering is captured on film (41). Ultimately, Sontag decides that “Perhaps the only people with the right to look at images of suffering of this extreme order are those who could do something to alleviate it . . . or those who could learn from it. The rest of us are voyeurs” (41).

We can use Sontag's framework to interrogate how French Gates depicts the suffering of women in LMICs in *The Moment of Lift*. She portrays such women as similar to herself, yet the examples of extreme suffering she describes – such as when Meena asks French Gates to adopt her youngest children because she cannot afford to feed or educate them – is a type of suffering beyond what the author has ever experienced herself (55). While French Gates uses such painful examples to support her greater point that everyone, everywhere needs access to contraception, she depicts women in LMICs who need contraception as trapped in a desperate struggle between life and death in which French Gates has the resources and social capital to intervene but the reader does not. French Gates is in a position to help the women she meets, and so seems to have the right to see their suffering.

However, the middle ground offered by Sontag, the person “who could learn from” another's pain, is shaky ground, in part because the reader learns about suffering women in a way mediated through French Gates. *The Moment of Lift* does not include photographs or direct transcripts of women in LMICs; instead, French Gates asks questions and receives answers through a translator, writes about those conversations as part of a larger narrative she has constructed about other women's lives, and weaves those tableaux into her own memoir of becoming a woman who helps others. Because the book does not invite self-reflection in its author or its audience, it seems unlikely to prompt meaningful learning “from” – at best, the reader might learn about women's suffering in a way that neither prompts action nor challenges the reader's understanding about why suffering occurs. By describing the details of women's suffering to readers she does not challenge to alleviate that suffering, she potentially places readers in the position of Sontag's “voyeur.”

In fact, French Gates rarely asks her readers to do more than watch the suffering of the women in *The Moment of Lift*. She describes her conversations with women in LMICs, but she does not ask her readers to join with her in trying to meet these women's needs. For instance, she does not challenge her readers to find an organization working with women in LMICs in

order to support that organization's mission through contributions of time or money; instead, she seems to take on the entire project of assisting women through her own resources, leaving readers with the feeling that French Gates (or the Gates Foundation) is helping women so the reader does not have to. French Gates' mediation of these women's experiences makes them legible to the reader while also absolving the reader of any sense of responsibility to join the work in order to help, thus ensconcing the reader in the role of "voyeur" without asking more of them.

Sherene H. Razack responds to Sontag in "Stealing the Pain of Others: Reflections on Canadian Humanitarian Responses." Razack reflects that "What makes us care about the rights and the pain of others is something all activists think about," yet cannot be predicted (375). For instance, despite the fact that Canada produced multiple films about the Rwandan genocide to try to create "massive public outrage" by showing "horrific images and stories" about infringement of "the rights of people of another colour," Razack cautions that "we could not be further from outrage than we are now." Instead, "we have engaged in a peculiar *process* of consumption, one that is the antithesis to genuine outrage and which amounts to 'stealing the pain of others'" as a national response. Razack says that "we have relied on these images and stories to confirm our own humanitarian character," as though consuming images of suffering proves our good intentions (376). However, Razack cautions, "our witnessing of Rwandans' pain has mostly served to dehumanize them further, and in the process, to reinstall us as morally superior in relation to them." To solve this problem, Razack encourages us to reflect on "how do we feel their pain *and* see their humanity? Most of all, how do we recognize our own complicity and move through outrage to responsibility?"

Razack discusses "race and the slipperiness of empathy, the ways in which the pain and suffering of Black people can become sources of moral authority and pleasure, obscuring in the process our own participation in the violence that is done to them" (376). Empathy becomes "slippery" when we try to imagine ourselves as suffering in the place of the person actually

experiencing harm. She refers to a story found in Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in 19<sup>th</sup> Century America* in which philosopher John Rankin writes to his slave-holding brother and describes "a coffle, the chaining together of slaves who are then paraded through the town and forced to dance and sing their way to the auction block" (Razack 376). Razack asks, "What does Rankin accomplish in his graphic descriptions of the horror of slavery?" While the description seeks to convince a slaveholder to "consider the slave as a person who suffers," Rankin shifts from description to imagining "what he would feel like to be a slave in a coffle" (Razack 377). Hartman says, "In making the slave's suffering his own, Rankin begins to feel for himself rather than for those whom this exercise in imagination is designed to reach" (Hartman 19). Razack says that imagining himself as a slave transforms the description so that "the story Rankin tells is about him and not about the slave" (Razack 377). Hartman says that "the effort to counteract the commonplace callousness to black suffering requires that the white body be positioned in the place of the black body in order to make the suffering visible and tangible," a process of consumption whereby "in making the other's suffering one's own, this suffering is occluded by the other's obliteration" (Hartman 19). Razack insists this process involves the viewer "identifying so readily with the slave's pain that he exists *in place of* the other and his own complicity and privilege is thereby obscured" and the slave is actually obliterated (377).

Razack says that "The nearer you bring the pain, the more the pain and the subject who is experiencing it disappears, leaving the witness in its place" (Razack 377). Hartman herself asks, "What does it mean that the violence of slavery or the pained existence of the enslaved, if discernable, is only so in the most heinous and grotesque examples and not in the quotidian routines of slavery?" (Hartman 20) If chattel slavery is already repugnant to people who believe all human beings have inherent rights to freedom and self-determination, then detailing the torture of enslaved people should not be needed to invoke empathy or moral outrage on their behalf. Razack continues that "It is the slave's status as object and not subject that confirms

both the master's and Rankin's 'disembodied universality'" (Hartman 21; Razack 378). As a result of identifying with the slaveholder and not the slave, "Rankin's position [is] as a moral subject who is not of the landscape he is surveying " (Razack 378). Pain and obliteration are not limited to one slave coffle; instead, "A material system underpins Rankin's appropriation of the slave's suffering" and reinforces the supremacy of whiteness; "If the slave were of equal legal status as Rankin, he or she could speak for themselves. Instead, Rankin gets to play both slave and master" (Razack 378). Razack says that Rankin gains "both moral authority and pleasure" from speaking of the slaves' pain and from forcing slaves "to eternally confirm that they were in fact enjoying slavery" as they danced toward the auction block, both literally and in Rankin's description. Despite Rankin's desire to convince his brother to recognize slaves' humanity, he instead "confirm[s] white superiority through images of Black suffering" (Razack 378).

Razack then turns to audience responses to the film *Shake Hands with the Devil*, an adaptation of the prize-winning book of the same name written by General Romeo Dallaire, leader of the United Nations peacekeeping force on the ground during the Rwandan genocide. Razack viewed the film at the 2004 Toronto Film Festival and says that "we learned little of the Rwandan genocide itself, except that it was great evil, and that Africa had mysteriously descended into savagery" (382). Razack says that, while watching the film, she and the audience "did not have to consider our own economic or missionary complicity . . . we left the cinema warmed by our own capacity to care." The film takes Dallaire's point of view, focusing on the trauma he endured by witnessing genocide until "His goodness becomes our goodness, as the film reviews all make abundantly clear" (383). In the film, "the Rwandans themselves simply come to stand in for the worst that is human, while we in Canada stand in for the best. We literally absorb or consume what has happened to them and become the humanitarians we say we are" (384). Ultimately, Razack says, "We conclude that . . . Genocide, far from depressing us, uplifts us . . . because the hero of the story is us" (385). There is no need to talk to Rwandans about the genocide, because "If we need to know more about Rwanda, we have only

to ask Dallaire or the film's director," who can tell about their experiences viewing traumatic images of war crimes instead of being victimized by the war crimes themselves (386). In this and other situations, Razack says that "it is my conviction that our consumption of individual experiences of trauma have effectively blocked any movement" beyond sympathy toward considering our privilege (387). As a result, "We have too often felt, rather than thought, and very little has changed."

Razack says that "it is clear that something else must accompany looking and feeling" and proposes a careful assessment of an observer's privilege within the complex relationship and rhetorical dynamics (389). For instance, Harriet Jacobs' narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is a first-hand account of an enslaved person's story; Razack says that Jacobs "is a survivor witness while the others are observers once removed" – we might learn from Jacobs' "survivor witness" account, but we can never transcend the position of observer because Jacobs' struggles, both experienced and narrated herself, can never be ours (390). Because of this discrepancy, Razack proposes that "We need . . . a recognition of power relations, questioning on every turn the feelings of familiarity and intimacy . . . We should consider the text . . . as an encounter, meeting the text with our own testimony of the collective history in which we are embedded" (390). This encounter offers an opportunity for writers such as Jacobs to speak and for others to listen, but listeners must be careful not to allow our own stories to overwrite that of the original speaker.

Razack insists that, when it comes to analyzing the "encounter" between the writer, the reader, and the larger forces of history, "Efforts to do all of these things have consistently run aground on the shoal of race" (390). Something happens when a Black woman writes about her experiences in slavery, and something happens when a white person reads that account. What exactly happens remains limited by white folks' willingness to engage honestly with what such a narrative reveals about the people complicit in, or benefiting from, a system of chattel slavery. Razack proposes that "continu[ing] to maintain a willful blindness about our collective history,

unable to call up . . . anything that might show us how we are implicated in the West's power over the non-West" essentially shuts down discourse and makes meaningful understanding impossible (390). If Harriet Jacobs' story is personal, the racialized social and economic power disparities become the context of that story – it is not enough to listen to Jacobs' story, we must insist on honesty about complicity and the ongoing benefits of being white in slavery and post-slavery contexts.

For Razack, the next step is giving up racial power, which we can only do "By naming it *as our own* (we who consume the narratives) and by understanding that power has a material base" (391). Narratives are both stories and more than stories – they tell us what happened, and they also tell us the conditions that allowed such events to happen, but the reader must be able to accept and take responsibility for the ongoing racialization that made such conditions possible. Razack says that reading such stories without taking responsibility happens because "We can steal the slave's pain, and the pain of Rwandans because they have no personhood that stops us, and because we continue to benefit from their resources. We can mourn with them and avoid any responsibility for the past or implication in the present" (391). All of those possibilities shut down meaningful dialogue and our ability to understand the suffering of others in a meaningful way. Mourning with suffering is not enough; we must acknowledge and seek to change the conditions in which such suffering occurs. Next, I will discuss how French Gates could have done things differently when determining what to do with the information interviewees shared with her. One crucial element of this type of cross-cultural work is seeing interviewees as people co-constructing improvements in their lives instead of passively receiving assistance or information from outsiders. Another is "refusing research," or determining that information shared in interviews can be used to help but will remain unavailable in other contexts. Questioning whether information should be shared outside these conversations is an important part of pushing back against systems of knowledge that privilege

Westerners' experiences and grant them an authoritative position when helping people in LMICs.

### **Political Subjectivity, “Ethical Listening,” and “Refusing Research”**

In “Feminist Facts: Interview Strategies and Political Subjects in Ethnography,” Bette J. Kauffman encourages social science researchers to interview research subjects with the goal of making them active participants instead of passive objects (187). She insists, “there is condescension in the notion that research subjects have power and agency only to the extent that researchers enable or allow it.” Researchers often craft an image of their subjects as “others” during the course of research and publication (189). Additionally, a refusal to consider the researcher’s own identity encourages the normalization of the “white, bourgeois, patriarchal standpoint” in ways that “shape the very selection of what constitutes a ‘problem’ worthy of study, whose reality or social knowledge will be construed as ‘answer,’ and what techniques will be privileged for the selection of ‘facts’” (191-192). Ultimately, Kauffman says care must be taken to protect and to preserve the “knowledge and ways of knowing of historically oppressed groups” (p. 200).

In “Ethnography and Ideology: The Politics of Cultural Representation,” James T. West says that “ALL discourses are enacted within relations of power” even if they do not discuss or acknowledge power openly. However, researchers are not the only ones aware of power dynamics; research subjects also comprehend, within their own sphere of cultural understanding, these same dynamics and will articulate them, but often only if the researchers ask questions to invite those descriptions (213-214). West argues that ethnography’s first priority should be empowering typically silenced subaltern people to convey their concerns without the diluting influence of the researcher’s voice (215). Unfortunately, sharing this work with the academic community is dangerous because “what is privileged are reductionistic themes, academic jargon and the voice of the researcher,” usually at the expense of the work’s “potential counter hegemonic force” (216-218). Sharing one’s results is critical for an academic

with career ambitions, but it also has implications for French Gates' work. Does this work need to be advertised, especially if the funding is self-contained and French Gates is not trying to raise more money for the Gates Foundation? *The Moment of Lift* offers a story of how French Gates became involved in the work of philanthropy, but it does not seem to consider the dangers of sharing the work with others. Because French Gates has a strong rhetorical position and invites her readers to identify with the women in her book as she herself does, the conversation created focuses on compassion with little effort to engage in a larger political struggle or a challenging of the status quo. French Gates frames her argument about empowering women around the presence of goodwill based in personal conversations with, or empathetic response to, the women in her book instead of asking more of governments, of communities, or of her readers, and therefore misses the opportunity to serve as a "counter hegemonic force."

Elizabeth S. Parks, a dialogic ethicist, wrote *The Ethics of Listening: Creating Space for Sustainable Dialogue* with the goal of promoting improved methods of "ethical listening" that create a system of dialogue sensitive and empowering to both parties in a conversation (15). She describes dialogic listening, a type of listening which "promotes the dialogue and mutual understanding between conversation partners while maximizing openness" (4). One way to listen this way is to "practice constitutive silence – a kind of silence that invites others to share space with us, embodying listening in such a way that whether through quietness or loudness the other knows that they are welcome" (10). In this scenario, equal participation can occur when people with more power design and ask questions to invite those with less power into the leadership of the conversational space (185). Finally, Parks does not favor merely documenting conversations, but argues that listeners are ethically responsible for meeting needs when they have the resources to do so (140-141).

While the academy often views knowing as its right, Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's "R- Words: Refusing Research" proposes that "stances of refusal in research are attempts to place

limits on conquest and the colonization of knowledge” (225). They refuse to collect pain narratives if doing so will benefit the academic researcher’s career through publications and tenure without helping the person telling the story because “there are some stories that the academy has not yet proven itself responsible enough to hear” (227, 232). Indigenous subjects often trust their most sacrosanct personal and cultural knowledge and narratives to researchers, and the authors say these stories should be treated with respect and sensitivity, even if that means not sharing them as social science research (234). Instead, they believe researchers can listen to Indigenous peoples without publicizing the details, either to honor the sacredness of what is shared or to refuse to domesticate Indigenous knowledge within the academy. Finally, they believe that refusing traditional, exploitative research “makes way for other r-words – for resistance, reclaiming, recovery, reciprocity, repatriation, regeneration” in order to move beyond present conditions and to imagine new ways to bring healing and justice for survivors of settler colonialism (239, 244).

### **A New Form of Philanthropy?**

One interesting way to change conditions is to give money directly to people in need. In 2013, National Public Radio presented a segment about Give Directly, an American charity that gives \$1,000 cash payments to individuals in Africa. Since “Recipients do not have to pay it back. They can spend it however they want,” two NPR reporters went to Kenya to investigate how people spent the money. First, they interviewed Carol Bellamy, a former director of UNICEF, for an opinion about no-strings-attached donations. She said that charities tend not to give cash directly to individuals because they fear recipients will purchase non-essential items such as cigarettes, alcohol, and weapons; Indigenous Kenyan charities expressed similar concerns. However, when the reporters went to a Kenyan village to see how people making two dollars a day would spend \$1,000, an “unimaginable sum of money,” they discovered people investing in various profitable business ventures that would alleviate their poverty long-term. Surprisingly, almost everyone in the village also bought a metal roof. Neither the charity workers

nor the reporters had considered the need for a new type of roof, but grass roofs are expensive and require constant maintenance; for each person who bought a metal roof, they'll "have more money in [their] pocket. It's like [the charity] just boosted [their] income for years to come." When one man accused a neighbor of wasting funds because he had not purchased a metal roof, the reporters discovered that Julius, a widower with two children, had actually used the money to pay a dowry so he could remarry. Overall, accusations of wasteful spending were unsubstantiated, and the reporters praised the benefits of the Give Directly model, which has low overhead, does not require "experts or a large staff," and trusts people to spend the money on what they most need. While the Give Directly model does not address systemic issues that cause poverty, it does allow people in LMICs to determine their highest priorities independent of external assumptions about what they most need.

Access to contraception and reproductive care is an important element in improving healthcare for people around the world. In *The Moment of Lift*, French Gates shares discussions with women in LMICs who want access to contraception in order to manage the size of their families in order to improve outcomes for their children. Research ethics, which apply to federally-funded interventions with human subjects but do not apply to philanthropic work, offer a way of understanding the vulnerability of people approached by researchers, health workers, and other people trying to offer helpful interventions. Work in research ethics demands that people receiving assistance or care be protected from physical harm during such interventions, but other types of harm must also be guarded against. It is important not only to minimize suffering when helping others, but also to tread carefully when sharing stories of existing suffering with others.

Suffering functions as a type of emotional shorthand in *The Moment of Lift*. French Gates shares stories of women who need contraception by discussing how logistically difficult it is for them to obtain and how much they struggle when they cannot access it. While French Gates says all women need access to contraception, she does not allow that statement to stand

on its own, but instead tells detailed stories of how women's daily lives are made more difficult without it. Even as she insists that these women are just like French Gates and her readers, she tells stories demonstrating how the women she interviews endure more struggle, hardship, and precarity than the author and her audience. French Gates shares these stories of suffering to prove that women need help and to demonstrate how her philanthropic work offers that help, but it is unclear whether the actual sharing of these stories makes that work more beneficial. French Gates shares these stories with some care, but never seems to consider whether they should be shared at all. More importantly, she does not reflect on who benefits when she shares these stories. French Gates and the Gates Foundation do much to help women around the world, but the question remains: Was this book necessary to accomplish that work?

## CHAPTER VIII: CONCLUSION

*The Moment of Lift* is a complex book combining aspects of both memoir and storytelling. By dissecting the book's discussion of contraception through the lenses of rhetorical studies, postcolonial studies, and research ethics, I tried to make sense of what the book hoped to accomplish and whether it succeeded. I read the book looking for ways to make a difference in women's lives, but found more questions than answers there. *The Moment of Lift* blurs the distinctions between helper and colonizer, claiming to provide solutions to improve women's lives without really interrogating the question of why French Gates should be the one to speak for the women she has met and interviewed. A careful reading of this text reveals a type of Western feminism that speaks of rights without demanding structural change or questioning one's own privilege or fitness as a teller of other's stories, especially stories about suffering. After reading *The Moment of Lift*, I remain dissatisfied with the premise of the book itself, that a wealthy American woman can make a difference by telling the story of her own philanthropy. Good intentions are one thing, but self-reflection and a determination not to speak for others would have been even better.

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