

## **Prichard 2019 Charlton Grant Project Description**

I am applying for the Charlton Grant to support the collection of 30 oral historical interviews for my book *Orphans and Demons: The Tragedies of Christian Charity in Africa*. I propose to use the funds to travel from Oklahoma to Illinois and around Oklahoma to meet with interviewees.

**Purpose of the research:** In June 2015 jurors impaneled on a federal jury in the Western District Court of Oklahoma convicted Matthew Durham, a 20-year-old missionary from a suburb of Oklahoma City, on charges stemming from allegations that he molested Kenyan orphans while on a mission trip. The judge subsequently sentenced the young man to forty years in prison. Most onlookers applaud the Court's decision, pleased that a man found guilty of heinous crimes is in prison. A closer look at the case, however, suggests that not all who are culpable are behind bars. Few in the public have the background to understand Durham's case as a *product* of the long and complicated history of religious humanitarianism in Africa. My monograph, *Orphans and Demons: The Tragedies of Christian Charity in Africa*, will explore the historical context of Durham's work and the case against him. I explicate the religious, cultural, and political threads specific to Oklahoma and Kenya that allowed a troubled young man with no discernable skills to volunteer in Kenya, and provide insight into global structures that affect self-styled helpers and those to whom they minister.

The trial of Matthew Durham was highly anticipated both by Oklahomans and by those as far away as Juja, Kenya, the site of the Upendo Children's Home, where Durham's transgressions were to have occurred. The shocking nature of the crimes, the sheer vulnerability of the victims, and the seeming "ordinariness" of the alleged perpetrator made it compelling to follow. Several other aspects of the case helped catapult it to the realm of public fascination. As a member of his church congregation, Durham made several short-term missions to Kenya to care for some of that country's most vulnerable children. African Upendo staff led Durham to believe he was possessed by a demon who made him forget the assaults. The young man's attorney made the accusation that Durham's Kenyan colleagues had imposed some sort of "pseudo-tribal psychological voodoo" on him. Then there were questions about the reliability of Durham's "confession," which he gave after Upendo staff confiscated his passport and threatened to report him to the Kenyan police. Finally, prosecutors argued in federal court that Durham's "struggles" with homosexuality and his stints in "gay conversion therapy" were proof of a tendency

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toward pedophilia.

The sensational aspects of this case highlight the complex and deeply embedded role that Christianity and ideas about Africa play in the social and moral lives of Americans, and in the relationship between Africa and America. Historical patterns of thought about the helplessness and vulnerability of Africans married with the paternalism that produced the “White Man’s Burden” laid the groundwork for the centuries-old fixation on “helping” Africa. Bible Belt religious ontologies link same-sex attraction to pedophilia, shaping both the allegations against Durham and the verdict the jurors delivered. Stereotypes about the backwardness of African religious thought elide the impact of Africans’ innovations on Christian thought, which contributed to the founding of the Upendo Children’s Home and to the way the allegations against Durham were framed and understood. Exposing these trajectories also reveals the agency, initiative, and opportunism that Africans bring to these exchanges, a powerful force so often overlooked by Americans. Indeed, we learn much from this case about how Africans capitalize on naïve, if well-intentioned, Americans who direct resources toward the “orphan industrial complex”—the industry around orphan rescue, from donations to organizations that target orphans, orphanages and orphan tourism, international adoption, and propaganda about international adoption (Cheney 2017).

In *Orphans and Demons*, I examine the historical and contemporary narrative threads that produced and continue to surround the Durham case. These narratives connect Durham’s evangelism to the work of abolitionist missionaries in 1860s Kenya, to shared discourses of Pentecostalism and spiritual warfare between the US and Kenya, to the Mau Mau Emergency in 1950s Kenya, to the politics of sexual “deviance” in the American Bible Belt, and to the manufacture of an African “orphan crisis.” I ask: On what assumptions of Africa are Western evangelical development initiatives based? In particular, how did 19<sup>th</sup>-century missionary and colonial-era efforts shape how Africans—and particularly “orphans”—are viewed today? How do religious and cultural trends in the Bible Belt shape the contemporary missionary impulse to Africa, and particularly the way it was expressed in the Durham case? How did Africans improvise upon Western religious discourses, and what were the political and social effects of these innovations—in Africa and in the U.S.? This context will illustrate that while Durham alone is responsible for the alleged crimes, two centuries of history nurtured the missionary philosophy that

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surrounds them and makes them tragically understandable.

**Previous research on the topic:** To address these questions, I planned to conduct ethnographic, oral historical, and archival research using a mixture of sources: linguistic evidence and old dictionaries; historical anthropological accounts; colonial archives and missionary records; local newspapers; legal records; informal interviews and participant observation; internet sources, such as blogs and social media; and oral historical interviews. No single type of source can tell the whole story about the past because individuals and institutions communicate differently with each audience. Further, neither the oral nor the written are reified or concrete (Kelly xlvi). Thus, the oral historical interviews I will conduct under the Charlton Grant will supplement and build upon a substantial body of written and ethnographic research. By June 2019 I will have completed two-thirds of the secondary research and much of the primary research for the book, including the analysis of 6000+ pages of legal proceedings. I will also have completed drafts of two early chapters of the book which do not rely on oral historical data.

My work on *Orphans and Demons* is enhanced by my training and previous research in several ways. First, during my PhD and while writing my first book, I focused generally on the intersections of gender, politics, and religion in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century East Africa and, in particular, on Africans' engagement with Western missionary initiatives. *Sisters and Spirit: Christianity, Affect, and Community Building in East Africa, 1860-1970* highlighted African women's contributions to a British abolitionist mission to Tanzania. My current project applies this expertise to a question of contemporary import—the persistent flow of evangelical charity to Africa. Second, in *Sisters in Spirit* I took seriously the theological underpinnings of mission work and showed how those ideas influenced work in the field. Engaging with missionaries' specific theology allowed me to write with sensitivity about intimate spaces and topics—illicit love affairs, same-sex attraction, abortion scandals, and spiritual possession. I approach similar topics in *Orphans and Demons* with empathy and thoughtfulness, again grounded by a nuanced understanding of actors' theology and cultural assumptions.

Third and finally, through *Sisters in Spirit* and a new collaborative project based in Uganda I have gained experience in oral history theory, method, and practice. For *Sisters in Spirit* I completed 85 oral historical interviews with Tanzanians who once participated in or

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who had family that participated in the mission organization at the heart of my research. I conducted interviews in Kiswahili and English about topics such as schooling and education, faith and religion, family and friendships, and local and national politics. I interviewed school teachers, nuns, retirees, Supreme Court justices, professors, and pastors from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds. I am currently working on another oral historical project titled “The Self, Virtue, and Women’s Activism in Northern Uganda.” For this project, three co-PIs and I are exploring the importance of virtue and culturally specific conceptions of the self for motivating Ugandan women grassroots activists to engage in their community’s public life. Over the course of the four-year-long project we (along with several Ugandan Research Assistants) anticipate collecting approximately one hundred oral historical interviews to form an innovative oral historical and digital storytelling archive.

**Description of any prior interviews & people to be interviewed:** I have conducted informal interviews and ethnographic fieldwork as part of *Orphans and Demons*, but have not yet conducted formal oral historical interviews. Under the Charlton Grant I will conduct approximately 30 oral historical interviews with major players in this case, including: Matthew Lane Durham, his parents Kyle and Melissa Durham, and several acquaintances (Edmond, OK and surrounds); with the founders of Upendo Eunice Menja and Robert Menja (residing in Edmond, OK); American missionaries Emily Coatney, Jason Jeffries, Bethany Shipley, Aimee Reed, Hanna Nichols, Caroline Graham, and Rilee Spence (various); Durham’s defense team Stephen Jones, April Davis, Ashley Morey, Christi Panter, and Laura LaBianca Puente (Enid, OK); Prosecutors Robert Donald Gifford, III, David Petermann, and Steven Creager; the Honorable David L. Russell; Oklahoma-based certified religious counselors Kim Kimberling and pastors Thomas Richard Roberts (Oklahoma City); Oklahoman media Nolan Clay and Kyle Schwab (Oklahoma City).

**Planned arrangements for conducting the interviews:** In terms of access and logistical arrangements, I am uniquely situated to conduct the interviews for *Orphans and Demons*. My work on evangelical development initiatives in the US and Kenya granted me access to the founder of Upendo and staff; to former Upendo missionaries; and to the Durham family and acquaintances. I have taught several former Upendo-affiliated American missionaries and they have agreed to be interviewed and to assist with securing other interviews. Through community organizing and volunteering in Oklahoma, I know

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members of the legal community who will connect me to Stephen Jones, Judge Russell, and members of the prosecution team. Because I have not taken a stand on Durham's guilt or innocence—indeed, my focus is on the articulation of broader religious and cultural trends—people have been remarkably open to talk with me about the case, about their experiences, and about their perspectives. My academic background in Western evangelical initiatives in Africa and years spent working among missionaries and the objects of their ministrations means that most American interviewees see me as a sympathetic interlocutor.

These interviews will take place in July, August, and September of 2019. I will be on research-intensive leave during Fall 2019 and will thus have the flexibility to arrange meetings on interviewees' schedules and to travel to Marion, IL twice to meet with Durham. During the remainder of the Fall 2019 semester I will transcribe the interviews and integrate them into my completed research.

My approach to conducting the interviews is informed by my background as an historian of Africa. Since the discipline's inception historians have used oral evidence and have developed a critical understanding of the role of chronology and subjectivity in the creation of these accounts. Most oral historians understand their sources to be "both products and processes," whose "very subjectivity offers a way to understand how Africans envision their lives and histories" (Kelly 2018, xlvii-xlix). I approach oral history interviews as evidence to be read in conversation with the backstory that shaped the interlocutors themselves. This necessitates a certain amount of background and biographical work. This "modified or directed life history methodology" allows us to learn about each person's background and to contextualize their testimony (Geiger, 1997; Kelly, 2015, p. xlix). Testimonies are also read in conversation with broader political, social, and economic histories of the region. Embedding these accounts in the region's *longue durée* allows us to place a narrative in context (Feierman 1990).

**Proposed public outcomes for the interview materials:** In order to share with a broad audience the interviews and the story they'll help tell, I will publish a monograph with a commercial or cross-over (trade-academic) publisher. The case against Matthew Durham provides an ideal opportunity to connect my scholarly expertise and research to academic and "lay" audiences. I have already begun to publish pieces that have attracted general audience. In September 2018, on the occasion of the 10<sup>th</sup> Circuit Court's

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decision to deny Durham's appeal, I published an Op-Ed about the case on *Africa is a Country* (AIAC). AIAC is a highly-respected site for original writing, commentary, and media criticism about Africa connected to *Jacobin* and *Catalyst*. My piece was widely read and shared—in fact, it was one of the 10 most popular posts of 2018. This attention confirms the broad popular appeal of the subject matter. I hope to work with an agent at Tessler Literary Agency who represents a number of best-selling and emerging authors in non-fiction narrative, history, and other areas.

In *Orphans and Demons*, I strive to make these interventions palatable and accessible to the general reader. I have found that scholars Christianity and missionization in Africa, those who research modern-day charity and aid, and those who are familiar with some of the religious ontologies of the contemporary Bible Belt tend to intuit the nuances of this case in ways the general public typically does not: as more than just a one-off, cautionary tale of a troubled youth and an improperly managed NGO. My goal with *Orphans and Demons* is to help academics, journalists, media practitioners, and the general public see that Durham's case is not an aberration, but that is a historical remnant of the aid well-intentioned "helpers" seek to provide. My book is unique in that scholarly books in this field have generally not made their interventions accessible to lay readers who are sincerely committed to improving the lives of the world's poor and popular books, while well-received, are shallow in historical context.

**Conclusion:** As I argue in the AIAC piece, most onlookers will applaud the Court's decision, secure in their belief that a man found guilty of heinous crimes is precisely where he belongs. A closer look at the case, however, suggests that not all who are culpable are in prison. Placing Durham's involvement with Upendo in historical context poses questions about responsibility, guilt, and justice that extend far beyond the shoulders of one man. Appreciating the historical, institutional, ideological, and individual contexts of the Durham case also renders his alleged crimes more logical, more predictable, and ultimately more tragic. The questions at the heart of *Orphans and Demons* are timely and compelling, with important public policy implications for how we offer aid and to whom, how we legislate morality and for whom, and how we as a nation engage with African countries. I will bring this story to the public in a way that will fundamentally alter readers' understandings of Africa, of mission work, of the Bible Belt, and of the ways American actions reinforce disparities between Africa and the West.