

Child Soldier Stories and the American Marketplace

by

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ABSTRACT

This project offers an analysis of the child soldier story genre of literary writing in the context of Africanist discourse in the U.S. It defines the genre as encompassing fictional and non-fiction narratives that depict child soldier protagonists in Africa as written by African authors. It examines nine of the most popular and critically-acclaimed works through their predominant themes and concludes that the genre ultimately makes a harmful contribution to how the African continent is popularly understood in the U.S.

The first chapter defines the genre as it has been constructed by the American publishing industry. It places child soldier stories within a larger marketing category known as misery literature and explains how they are taken to inappropriately represent everyday life in Africa.

The second chapter examines their representations of childhood on the continent. They convey the idea that it is not possible for children to experience what readers are likely to understand as a normative childhood and that recovery is only possible when these characters relocate in the West. China Keitetsi's 2005 memoir *Child Soldier* is the main focus for this analysis.

The third chapter concerns how they address organized violence in Africa and causes for child soldiering. While some reject the view that 'tribalism' is to blame for recurring conflicts, all appear to endorse the Afro-pessimistic conclusion that terrible conditions in Africa are not likely to improve. Ahmadou Kourouma's 2007 novel *Allah is Not Obligated* is the main focus for this analysis.

The fourth chapter considers whether a more critical view of the humanitarian industry that is exhibited in many child soldier stories can be considered a redeeming feature of the genre. It also concentrates on efforts by former child soldiers to change their public identities through their embrace of humanitarian advocacy. Emmanuel Dongala's 2005 novel *Johnny Mad Dog* is the main focus for this analysis.

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INTRODUCTION

MORE IMAGES OF AFRICA

This is a study about child soldier stories, a form of genre writing that became popular in the U.S. during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Most child soldier stories are written by African authors, some of whom are themselves former combatants. For this reason and others, which I explore in the chapters that follow, many American readers have come to associate the genre, as well as the participation of young people in organized violence more generally, with the African continent. The works provide a view of African histories, politics, cultures, and day-to-day realities that might appear familiar, insofar as they compliment existing thinking about Africa in the U.S., what Edward Said would call our “cultural repertoire” (63) and Christopher L. Miller describes specifically as “Africanist discourse” (5). The genre emerged during a time when broader concerns were expressed in the public sphere about the military recruitment of children. Its success is partly a consequence of this interest, but the reverse is also true—Child soldier stories in turn influence discussions about the practice, even if only as one of numerous components of our Africanist discourse. Separately, they vary in communicating reductive, sometimes contradictory, and in some cases even productive messages about the continent, or at the very least critique our perceptions about it. But together, when compared against what we know to be true about Africa, the genre must be seen just as unfavorably as the Western literary fantasies of the continent that precede it. The ultimate purpose of this study is to show that child soldier stories make a harmful contribution to

how Africa is perceived in the U.S.

Chinua Achebe begins his famous essay “An Image of Africa” with an anecdote that illustrates the problem about how Africa is often perceived by non-Africans. In 1974 he encounters an older, ostensibly white, man on the campus of the University of Massachusetts Amherst, who expresses surprise that Africa has histories and literatures that might be studied. Achebe argues that this observation is not just a consequence of the man’s ignorance. He explains that the typical conceptions of Africa that many persons in the Western world possess are imaginary. They do not resemble the experiences of most Africans, past or present. These images are derived from racist and racialist ideologies that distort reality largely for the purpose of self-aggrandizement. Westerners often use them, sometimes unconsciously and in other cases deliberately, to compare their own cultures, literatures, and histories against others which are deemed to be lacking. And they are routinely reproduced in Western representations of Africa by novelists, artists, and journalists. Achebe chooses to analyze these sorts of images in Joseph Conrad’s depiction of the continent in his celebrated novel *Heart of Darkness*. He devotes a portion of the essay to what he refers to as Conrad’s particular racist fixations, but he also gestures towards the racist framework that extends beyond the thoughts of one canonical author, a worldview that led many of his American colleagues at the time to regard the Africans who are depicted in the work as merely scenic elements and hardly characters in their own right.

Forty years later as the twenty-first century begins, some perceptions in the U.S. about Africa have changed, though not necessarily for the best. Americans are often

criticized for their apparent lack of curiosity about the world outside their own national borders, but their ignorance about Africa is understandable (if not totally justified) because many Americans have limited first- or even second-hand exposure to the continent. African immigrants to the U.S. represent a marginal percentage of foreign-born residents in the country during the last fifty years (Malone, et al 2). The U.S. has not maintained significant trade ties with Africa over this period; the increasing reliance on oil reserves notwithstanding, imports from and exports to African states represent less than two percent of overall trade volume by the end of the twentieth century (International Monetary Fund 11). Moreover, over the past few decades the U.S. has not cultivated robust ties with African countries. After the 1988 Tripartite Accord, which effectively ended Cold War activities in Africa, the U.S. government replaced its integrated economic, diplomatic, and military aid policies of the past with *ad hoc* programs (or none at all), in which a majority of Americans appear to show no interest. At the present time the relationship between the U.S. and Africa can be reasonably characterized as distant. Most Americans rarely direct their focused attention toward the continent at all, and when they do it is usually in response to briefly-publicized crises.

The infrastructure of Africanist discourse has remained somewhat constant over the last few centuries. What changes are the immediate events or circumstances at any given time that contribute to it. The emaciated black bodies in *Heart of Darkness* are not unknown to American readers in the present-day, only the context in which they appear differs. Conrad portrays Africans as victims of European colonialism, to say nothing of their own savagery as he characterizes it. More recently, similar scenes of abjection have

been associated with famine. Only a few years before the publication of Achebe's essay, television footage of malnourished African children was broadcast to American viewers during the Nigerian Civil War. Further reports from Ethiopia and the Sahel followed in the 1970s. Many drought-related humanitarian disasters have occurred in Africa since that time as well, which strengthens the association between the continent and tragedy. Kevin Carter's Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph of a vulture lurking behind a starving young Sudanese girl became central to this representation as an image that seems to communicate everything that is wrong with the continent.¹ While the image itself is contemporary, the sentiments it evokes are well-established and grounded in an "almost neocolonial ideology of failure, inadequacy, passivity, fatalism, and inevitability" where Africa is concerned (Kleinman and Kleinman 7). In the U.S., this depiction of children who are forsaken by their communities and nature itself epitomizes the African experience. The starving child became a predominant (though not entirely new) image of Africa in the twentieth century, one that is no less troubling than the 'savages' and slaves of centuries past.

These impressions do not come from disaster reporting alone. Africa is a rare topic of conversation in the U.S., but it is not completely absent from the American consciousness. It is the setting of non-fiction and fictional narratives in television, film, and literature, and also occasionally the subject of print articles and news broadcasts.² For many Americans, these accounts are the only source of information about Africa; thus, they draw from and reproduce a relatively limited set of stereotypes. Ignorance is made more acceptable through characterizations of the continent as mysterious and beyond

comprehension. Racism is perpetuated as Africans are framed as simultaneously naïve and transcendently wise, violent and victimized, desperate for help and beyond hope. Poverty, underdevelopment, disease, corruption, sectarianism, and war are all seen as typical. These ideas are routinely applied indiscriminately and constitute what Antonio Gramsci pejoratively calls “common sense” thinking on the topic (419). Africa is too often viewed as a vast undifferentiated space. When place names are invoked they are frequently used to illustrate what are regarded as quintessentially African conditions: Somalia is therefore a metonym for anarchy, Rwanda for ethnically-motivated conflict, and so on. These stereotypes are engendered by relatively recent events, but it is also important to remember that the characterization of Africa as a kind of dystopian setting has long been a part of Africanist discourse—for this reason, they are easily reproduced.

The fact that images of Africa in the U.S. are almost invariably negative is not because Americans are invested in its failure. Many people are truly indifferent to what happens there. Media bias, which takes the form of selective reports that focus on the absolute worst circumstances that take place in Africa, certainly influences how it is comprehended. But it is not necessarily racist to draw attention to social and political problems that occur on the continent, which are numerous. Rather, what is racist is the view (one that is repeatedly implied and at times directly stated in reports about Africa) that these problems are intrinsic and inevitable, that Africans cannot avoid or improve upon these conditions. This Afro-pessimistic sentiment is rooted in the social evolutionist theory of the nineteenth century and is evident even in recent efforts to “re-brand” the continent for the benefit of non-African audiences, such as the July 2007 issue of *Vanity*

Fair on Africa (Carr).³ Many Americans assimilate these Afro-pessimistic ideas, along with the motley of stereotypes I describe above, as they form their own opinions about Africa. Melville J. Herskovits described this process in 1962 as “inertia in holding to an outward image and the attraction to the exotic” (239). A decade later Achebe characterized it as “more akin to reflex action than calculated malice” (793). But no matter the motivation (or lack thereof), the problem is pervasive and continues to the present day. It is even difficult to critically examine representations of Africa without prejudice insofar as Africanist discourse can impair rational interpretation and judgment. Much of what is written about Africa seems to confirm our preexisting biases and for many Americans the potential consequences of misinterpretation are too negligible to warrant critical re-examination.

CHILD SOLDIERS IN CONTEXT

Famine was arguably the capstone of Africanist discourse in the late twentieth century as a recognizable showcase for (and example of) failure. But more recently the phenomenon has become less remarkable; most Americans seem indistinctly aware of drought-related disasters in 1998, 2011, and 2012. Instead, a different crisis has entered into public consciousness at the beginning of the twenty-first century—that of child soldiering. Of course, famine is still occasionally a subject for conversation, but the starving child is no longer the most prominent figure in our sensational image of the continent. One measure of the increasing visibility of child soldiers can be found in the frequency of media reports about them. A cursory review of articles from the *The New*

York Times between 1970 and 2010 reveals an exponential growth in interest over this period, for example. From 1970 to 1980, one article included a brief mention of an under-age Cambodian soldier. There were eight articles in the next decade, several of which describe the U.S. government's opposition in 1988 to raising the minimum age of recruitment to 18. Thirty-seven articles were published on child soldiers between 1990 and 2000, including what would become the 2000 Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict; most of the articles that refer to specific countries refer to wars that take place in Africa. Finally, between 2000 and 2010 there were 182 articles (and editorials) on child soldiers and again the majority concern the practice among armed groups in Africa. Indeed, as I will demonstrate throughout this project, child soldiers epitomize present-day thinking about Africa in a variety of ways. The prevailing opinion is that child soldiering is an epidemic, like AIDS or malaria, that has spread across the continent; this impression is wrong in both its assumptions and facts. Yet it predominates, not only because it is easily incorporated into Africanist discourse, but also because published data on child soldiering is so poorly understood.

The definition of the term 'child' in the context of military service varies widely among international bodies, non-governmental organizations, and individual countries. The UN-authored 1977 Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions and the 1989 CRC set the minimum chronological age for military recruitment at fifteen years old. The 2000 Optional Protocol—which, as I explain above, the U.S. initially opposed for many years prior—expanded these regulations, prohibiting compulsory (but not voluntary)

recruitment for persons under eighteen, advising governments that they must prevent direct participation by children in conflicts and also prohibiting their use by non-state groups entirely. Other international bodies recommend even stricter protections for young people. For example, the 1990 African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) forbids all forms of recruitment of persons under the age of eighteen.

Particular state guidelines vary widely. In countries such as Burundi and China, voluntary participation in the armed forces is not restricted on the basis of age. In many other states, age requirements differ according to the circumstances of recruitment, whether it is voluntary or compulsory, if it occurs during wartime or in the absence of organized conflict, and so on. Nevertheless, some governments ignore their own laws and treaty obligations altogether.

Similarly, there is no international consensus with respect to this issue on how to define soldiering. The most comprehensive source of data on the military use of children around the world is the non-governmental umbrella organization Child Soldiers International (CSI), which was founded in 1998 by other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to collect information about the practice.⁴ Its definition of the term ‘child soldier’ originates with the 1997 Cape Town Principles—an agreement that also informs the language of the ACRWC—and refers to

any person under 18 years of age who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters, messengers and anyone accompanying such groups, other than family members. The definition includes girls recruited

for sexual purposes and for forced marriage. It does not, therefore, only refer to a child who is carrying or has carried arms. (11)

The authors of the Cape Town Principles—academics, policy experts, and child advocates— adopted an intentionally broad focus with the objective to remove as many children from the battlefield as possible. The world derives some awareness of child soldiers from this definition, insofar as CSI bases its calculations upon it. But it lacks nuance and popular relevance as well. Children of both genders are at risk of sexual exploitation and may perform any combination of the above roles over the duration of their service. In the popular imagination child soldiers are commonly understood as being both agents of violence and also its victims; this dual condition does not apply to those children whose experiences are limited to the latter. CSI may classify sexual captives or camp followers as child soldiers, but many others do not recognize them as such

Young people who do become directly involved in conflict are also regarded differently depending on the context in which they are mobilized. Studies on child soldiers will frequently draw upon Western historical examples (and, in particular, American ones) to demonstrate that the practice is widespread, but they can often be misleading. Some accounts are simply inaccurate; for instance, most participants in the 1212 Children's Crusade were not children, but rather adults of low social status (Raedts). Other examples, such as that of the young Spartan soldiers of ancient Greece or the adolescent French military strategist Joan of Arc, are of limited use as contemporary notions about children do not apply to them. Ideas about what constitutes childhood and the age when one becomes an adult changed dramatically in the modern era evolving into

present-day conceptions. Still, young people have certainly participated in war in more recent times. Personnel records from the American Revolutionary War are incomplete, but the consensus among historians is that large numbers of children under the age of sixteen—then the *de facto* age of maturity—served in the Continental Army (Cox; Werner, *Pursuit* 21). The official minimum enlistment age for both the Union and Confederate armies during the American Civil War was eighteen.⁵ However, Werner notes that between 250,000 and 500,000 under-age combatants, representing from ten to nineteen percent of the total combined forces, took part in the hostilities (*Reluctant* 2).

Although these examples demonstrate the systematic use of child soldiers in the West, their inclusion as part of more recent studies also reinforces the social evolutionist view that Western societies have outgrown the practice as non-Western ones have not. Racist implications aside, this claim is also without merit. Throughout the twentieth century, the U.S. government has barred persons under the age of eighteen—or seventeen with parental consent—from military service (“Regular”). Yet children have still joined the armed forces by falsifying their enlistment documents. Ray Jackson, former National Commander of the Veterans of Underage Military Service association, estimates that between 50,000 and 100,000 under-age Americans willingly fought in the Second World War and Korean War (53). The number of children who served in the U.S. military during other major twentieth-century conflicts—i.e. the First World War, Vietnam War, and Gulf War—is unknown. However, the general circumstances of their participation and individual cases are well-documented.⁶ Further, these circumstances persist in the early twenty-first century as well. According to the 2008 CSI report, the U.S. military

mobilized a relatively small number of seventeen-year-old soldiers as part of operations in Afghanistan and Iraq (360).⁷ And the American Civil Liberties Union contends that the U.S. military systematically targets children between the ages of eleven and seventeen through training programs like the Junior Reserve Officer's Training Corps, the participation of military recruiters in school activities, and other measures (8-17).

Notwithstanding these practices, the U.S. is usually distinguished from other countries and non-state groups on the issue. While the specific age of a child is not a determining factor in international law, the same cannot be said of popular opinion. Tolerance for the military use of children usually decreases in conjunction with their chronological ages. P. W. Singer maintains that CSI and other non-governmental advocacy groups should collaborate with the American government to develop more comprehensive international legal standards, rather than criticize it for recruiting seventeen-year-old children (148). The U.S. military encourages the interest of but does not formally recruit persons younger than seventeen and it is generally no longer possible for them to surreptitiously join. Moreover, a distinction is often made between the practices of recruitment and mobilization. Seventeen-year-old personnel are officially employed in non-combat roles in the U.S.; young persons who were or about to be sent to the combat zone in Afghanistan and Iraq were redeployed once their ages were determined. Therefore, although the U.S. continues to use child soldiers, the experiences of these children are largely incomparable with those in most other relevant circumstances. For these reasons, as well as the relatively narrow focus on the recruitment and use of child soldiers in Africa, the practice is widely perceived not as a

domestic problem or even a global one, but rather as distinctly African.

DATA ON CHILD SOLDIERS, 1998-2012

How much of a problem is child soldiering in Africa, exactly? The technical challenges involved in documenting the magnitude of the practice are numerous. In addition to semantic and methodological concerns, it is also extremely difficult to gather quantitative data on the number of child soldiers who are or have been mobilized (Ames, Pedersen and Sommerfelt). For this reason, many studies are either limited to specific countries or qualitative in nature. CSI began publishing tentative global estimates in 2001. More than 300,000 children participated in war in eighty-five states between June 1998 and March 2001, according to its inaugural report. At least 120,000 young people operated within Africa, mostly Angola, Burundi, Congo-Brazzaville, Congo-Kinshasa, Ethiopia, Liberia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Sudan, and Uganda (10, 14).⁸ Researchers concede that while their findings are carefully documented, in some instances they are approximate. Moreover, CSI cannot account for the total number of children recruited over the duration of a given conflict; they can only provide limited appraisals (495). Notwithstanding these challenges, CSI provides a figure—300,000 child soldiers—that advocates, reporters, and writers use to bolster their claims about the practice. They have done so consistently, oftentimes without context and long after revised calculations were published.

The 2004 CSI report does not include a global estimate of child soldiers during the given research period, but indicates a general decline in their recruitment (15). On the

African continent, “[l]ong-running wars came to an end releasing thousands of child soldiers but up to 100,000 children were estimated to remain involved in hostilities” (31). Neither global nor regional calculations appear in its 2008 report. However, its authors note a further reduction in the number of child soldiers around the world to “tens of thousands” (9). There are a number of explanations for these decreases. More detailed guidelines concerning the military use of children (known as the Paris Commitments and Paris Principles) were drafted in 2007 to supersede the Cape Town Principles. Additionally, many governments have signed and ratified the Optional Protocol to the CRC. Still, CSI concedes that new legal standards are not the main reason for why fewer child soldiers were documented during this research period than in previous years. Instead, they credit the fact that several lengthy conflicts ended, including those “in which children are directly involved – from 27 in 2004 to 17 by the end of 2007” (14). The probability that governments and non-state armed groups will recruit children again increases with the emergence of armed warfare rather than decreases because of additional, stricter, or more widely adopted legal instruments.

In lieu of publishing a quadrennial global report in 2012, CSI released a study on the use of child soldiers by state armed forces and allies only between January 2010 and June 2012.⁹ Regional and global estimates of this specific dimension of the practice are again not included, which dramatically diminished the organization’s value as a source for quantitative information. The best remaining authority on this matter is the UN Secretary-General’s annual report *Children and Armed Conflict*, which lists alleged and verified cases. From this data we can derive an approximate baseline estimate for recent

numbers of child soldiers. Between 2009 and 2011, around 15,000 child soldiers were documented around the world, 12,000 of whom were located in Africa. These estimates are also imprecise; in some states where under-age combatants are known to operate, the UN and its partners lack the ability to adequately monitor conditions or report cases. Still, they are consistent with reductions that have occurred throughout the past decade and serve as a more accurate measure of the practice in the present day than the now-outdated figures that are more commonly cited. Two years before CSI began to systematically collect information, Rachel Brett and Margaret McCallin wrote, “The total number of child soldiers in each country, let alone the global figure, is not only unknown but unknowable” (27). In a broad sense this statement remains accurate. Nevertheless, because of the information assembled over the last fifteen years not only do we have a much better understanding of the scale and scope of the practice, we can also confirm its downward trend.

Most persons who read these reports (or child soldier stories, for that matter) will agree that even a small number of child soldiers is too many. But the practice must also be put into perspective. Perhaps the best way to comprehend it is to compare the above estimates with the number of children of recruiting age. From 1998 to 2001, the same period when CSI first collected data, there were more than one-and-a-half billion children around the world between the ages of six and seventeen (UNICEF 2001). Therefore, according to the 2001 CSI estimate, roughly one out of every five thousand children were child soldiers. The ratio widens even more from between 2008 and 2012 as the number of combatants decreases to less than one in thirty-three thousand children. This approach is

not without bias; the possibility of recruitment is clearly greater in some areas of the world than others. Moreover, the perception that child soldiers are an African problem is correct in at least one respect: more can be found in Africa than in any other region. But a similar analysis of data from African states reveals the same contradiction between the actual scale of the practice and how it is frequently represented. Between 2008 and 2012, one in every ten thousand African children served as child soldiers. When the statistical sample is restricted to those states in which they are known to operate—Central African Republic, Chad, Congo-Kinshasa, Ivory Coast, Libya, Somalia, Southern Sudan, Sudan, and Uganda—it remains clear that their experiences are not at all representative of the majority: just five one-hundredths of a per cent of children of typical recruiting age who live in these countries are child soldiers. When the data is shown in context, it becomes clear that the military recruitment of children is a marginal practice in Africa.

One reason for discrepancy between conditions as they actually exist and how they are represented is that in spite of the relatively small number of child soldiers who operate in the field, many scholarly and journalistic studies on the subject continue to suggest otherwise. The use of outdated or inaccurate data is widespread; many authors continue to cite the 2001 CSI report and its worldwide estimate of 300,000 combatants.¹⁰ Furthermore, they fail to adequately communicate the actual extent of the problem. An illustrative example comes from Michael G. Wessells, who explains that if all child soldiers “stood side by side, locked their hands, and spread their arms, they would form a human chain 250 miles long” (2). This is an evocative image, but it is also premised on an essentially meaningless calculation, one that is meant to impress readers rather than

inform them. Joel Best argues that in order to remain visible in what he describes as the over-crowded “social problems marketplace” (15), some advocates for children exaggerate the actual dangers that they face. Deliberate misrepresentation may be a factor in reports about child soldiers as well, but the most likely explanation is probably more mundane: these figures seem plausible and have been reprinted frequently enough that they are now regarded as conventional wisdom. The unfortunate consequence is that readers are encouraged to embrace the falsehood that child soldiers are endemic to the continent while in fact they are not.

METHODS OF ANALYSIS

Accounts of child soldiering in television broadcasts, newspaper and magazine articles, blogs, and academic research all contribute to a growing curiosity and public awareness in the U.S. about the military recruitment of children. But while ostensibly factual reporting can convey information (or mislead) about the practice, they are often ill-suited to communicate deeper meaning or significance. This is the function of narratives, which attempt to *show* readers what data only reports upon and invite them to *interpret* that information through plot, characterization, and so on, the foundations of literary writing. It is no wonder therefore that the CSI reports often feature story-like descriptions and news reports about child soldiering in the popular media frequently begin with an account of a particular child’s experiences during wartime. Still, I contend that the best examples of storytelling on this subject can be found among the group of works that I describe collectively as child soldier stories. I define this genre in greater

detail in the following chapters, but suffice it to say here that I use the term to refer to works that 1.) are authored by Africans, 2.) take place on the continent, and 3.) feature child soldiers as primary characters for the duration of the narrative.¹¹

I focus on nine child soldier stories in particular for this study. My sample is a generally representative survey of the genre, but also restricted according to commercial and/or critical success—I am interested in those works that are well-known, well-received, or both. Roughly half of the narratives that are included here are memoirs written by or in collaboration with former child soldiers such as China Keitetsi (2005), Ishmael Beah (2007), Grace Akallo (2007), and Emmanuel Jal (2009). I also examine fictional stories by the first-time authors Uzodinma Iweala (2005) and Delia Jarrett-Macauley (2005), as well as the more acclaimed novelists Emmanuel Dongala (2005), Ahmadou Kourouma (2007), and Chris Abani (2007). Other child soldier stories have also been published, including Senait Mehari’s memoir *Heart of Fire: From Child Soldier to Soul Singer* (2006), Esaie Toingar’s memoir *A Teenager in the Chad Civil War* (2006), Beatrice Lamwaka’s short story “Butterfly Dreams” (2010), Ben Okafor’s radio drama “Chukwudebelu” (2005), stage performance *Child of Biafra* (2007), and reggae album (2011) of the same name. I do not mention these narratives further as they have received comparatively little public or critical interest. I do not address Jal’s hip-hop album (2008) or documentary (2008) for the same reason.

My analysis of the stories is premised on the view that they are produced mainly for Western audiences. I will address this point and its implications in the first chapter (which I also describe below), but note here that nearly all of the authors, editors, and

publishers responsible for them are based in the U.S. or Europe. Indeed, only two of the narratives under consideration have been issued in African editions: the South African publisher Jacanda produced the first version of China Keitetsi's memoir *Child Soldier* before the London-based Souvenir Press revised it for Western readers, and an Arabic translation of Ishmael Beah's memoir *A Long Way Gone* was published in Egypt by Dār al-Shurūq. The term 'Western' is routinely used in postcolonial criticism to describe the hegemonic discourses that originate in and are enacted by members of dominant groups. It is coded racially as white and encompasses the U.S. and Western European countries. The concept serves a practical function and I invoke it where appropriate. Yet it is also important to specify that my study is concerned with American contexts in particular. Most child soldier stories originate in the U.S.; while a few were initially produced by British-based authors and publishers, they have since become available in the much larger, more influential American book market. Equally important, these two countries have very different relations (historical and current) with the African continent, circumstances that will necessarily affect interpretations among their respective readers.

A second premise, one which has been implicit throughout this introduction, relates to the basic narratological argument that both the production and reading of these works are shaped by cultural codes, the shared knowledges and norms that inform how we understand and communicate about the world. The meanings of a story are generated on the basis of these codes, which as Foucault explains will change over time to form historically specific discourses. Writers have certain ideas in mind when they compose a work that would be familiar to those who read them shortly after publication but may

require more interpretation as time passes and conceptions change, and will likely be interpreted entirely differently in the future. This study focuses on a contemporary genre of writing, the assumption here being that the codes these stories simultaneously invoke and imprint upon readers are known to most Americans in the early twenty-first century. This does not mean that every reader inevitably derives the same meanings from a child soldier story; the innumerable differences among readers lead us to consider some codes as more significant or relevant than others. Yet if we examine the structural and aesthetic characteristics of the works it becomes clear that they privilege certain codes, the effect of which is to constrain (but not necessarily fix) our interpretations of them in the present time. One of the functions of this study is to foreground and analyze these favored readings, especially as they relate to Africanist discourse.

Child soldier stories have received relatively little critical interest as a genre despite their respective popularity and acclaim. Alison Mackey and Maureen Moynagh separately examine a number of these works in the context of human rights discourse, while J.A. Kearney offers a more generalized survey. Most of the narratives are studied individually (if at all), with *Beasts of No Nation* and *Allah is Not Obligated* receiving the most attention. I take a more comprehensive approach. In fact, it is the commonalities among a wide range of stories that allows me to claim that they are a distinct genre of writing and not simply a loose collection of stories with similar characters. My position in this regard informs the structure for each chapter and particularly those in which I examine predominant themes. First, I draw on the nine aforementioned works as appropriate to demonstrate the shared attributes of the genre in a panoramic approach to

their analysis. Second, for each chapter I concentrate on one story in particular that exemplifies a given approach to the subject, as some stories will clearly privilege these readings in more dramatic or remarkable ways. Of course, there are occasionally divergences in how a story addresses a predominant theme, which I will also explore as they appear. However, my overall purpose here is to establish a foundation for understanding child soldier stories as a discrete category of contemporary African writing.

SUMMARY OF THE STUDY

In the first chapter, I describe child soldier stories as both a literary and marketing genre. In some respects, their success is surprising because American readers show no particular interest in African writing. Moreover, publishers in the U.S. are often reluctant to release books of uncertain profitability. Nevertheless, I demonstrate that the genre as a whole—and not just the bestselling memoir by Beah—has exceeded commercial expectations. In addition to describing the unique characteristics of these stories, I also show how they resemble an existing, successful genre called misery literature, which I argue is a significant contributor to their positive reception in the publishing industry. They narrate tales about children overcoming tragedy within the familiarly dystopian setting of Africa. They also expand upon the motif by characterizing the protagonists as both the perpetrators and victims of violence. As I demonstrate with an analysis of the cover and jacket art designed for child soldier stories, this dual condition is key to the marketing of the genre. Moreover, unlike other forms of misery literature, these works,

whether fictional or non-fiction, are construed as evidence of life as it is lived in Africa. There are several explanations for this faulty interpretation: the stories are written by African authors and therefore deemed 'authentic', there are few alternative depictions of Africa that are as popular or widely available, and most readers otherwise have little familiarity with the continent. This worldview is also encouraged by the content and structure of the stories themselves, which are crafted to meet the expectations of their primarily American readers.

Chapter two concerns the messages that these narratives communicate about one of the most prominent subjects in the genre: childhood in Africa. For Americans, the concept of childhood is well-developed, if also contradictory at times. And most readers will draw upon these ideas as they evaluate how the African characters mature in child soldier stories and the conditions in which they do so. Here I closely examine how the works address this subject in the context of some of the most prominent characteristics of childhood as it is understood in the U.S., that it is theoretically and materially separate from adulthood and also a stage of development in an ultimately teleological process, as well as the notion that children coincidentally embody innocence and evil. In what should come as no surprise, the young African characters compare poorly against these standards, for what is typically characterized as no fault of their own. They do not experience childhood in the American sense of this concept because in Africa it is not possible for them to do so. To be clear, these stories do not contest the applicability of non-African conceptions to African contexts. Rather, they leverage the practice of child soldiering on the continent to suggest that Africa is a simply terrible place to be a child.

In keeping with the redemptive nature of misery literature, most conclude with their protagonists recovering whatever they can of their childhoods by settling in the West. Indeed, only when the narratives are read closely does it become apparent that other, nameless characters experience what might be called normative childhoods. And only a much broader familiarity with African writing about childhood would reveal that the experiences of these protagonists are not representative of the whole.

In the third chapter I concentrate on how the stories portray those responsible for child soldiering, as well as the various instances of organized violence that engender the practice in the first place. In doing so, they engage with the general impression in the U.S. that the African continent is hopeless, especially with respect to safety and security. Because warfare is seen as endemic in Africa and attributed to either primordial forces or ‘tribal’ differences, the prevailing sense is one of Afro-pessimism: there is no reason for hope or to believe that conditions will improve. Child soldier stories tend to corroborate this worldview. They are ambivalent on ‘tribalism’ as a cause of organized violence, but also largely minimize the stated political or ideological aims of those who belong to armed groups. Instead, most combatants become involved with little more than a desire for self-enrichment. Violence and corruption are depicted as socially-sanctioned behaviors that are encouraged and subsequently internalized among child soldiers. Most importantly, the stories indicate these dire circumstances will not change for the better. Some individual characters are shown to either retain their innate ethics or rehabilitate, which is central to their structures as recovery narratives. However, most of the stories are otherwise deeply Afro-pessimistic in their outlook for the continent itself and

therefore confirm the notion in the U.S. that socially and politically it is a lost cause.

Whereas in the second and third chapters I focus on how the genre reinforces racist stereotypes about Africa, in the fourth chapter I concentrate on some of the more critically productive work that child soldier stories offer. They provide readers with a unique perspective of how the humanitarian industry tends to operate in Africa during moments of crisis: that of the beneficiary. Both child soldiers and civilian characters interact with representatives from the UN and various humanitarian organizations that would ostensibly protect their interests, often in ways that contradict the traditional understanding of the former as passive aid recipients and the latter as capable and committed agents of Western benevolence. They typically do so by inverting these characterizations so that humanitarian characters and organizations appear naive and helpless, unable to meet the needs of communities affected by organized violence and even, in some cases, indirectly supporting its perpetrators. Nevertheless, while the genre criticizes the humanitarian industry, the memoirs in particular are very supportive of humanitarian advocacy, both within their respective narratives and as an embodied manifestation of it. Former child soldiers who write about their experiences serve as proof that humanitarianism is not without successes. Moreover, participation in the advocacy against the military recruitment of children gives them the opportunity to transform their public identities, a process that is not without its risks, but which is embraced regardless.

The extent to which these positive features can redeem the child soldier story genre is, of course, a matter of interpretation. I conclude that they do not. The racist

legacy of how Africa is comprehended and represented in the U.S., as well as the tendency to interpret them as realistic depictions of everyday life on the continent, places a burden on African writing in the American book market. Any assessment of child soldier stories must take into account how they engage with common stereotypes in the attempt to stimulate our imaginations. Do the narratives provide readers with a truthful account of conditions in Africa, from the normative experiences of childhood to the circumstances and causes of organized violence? Is our entertainment, or the critique of the Western humanitarian industry, or the integrity of the recovery narrative as a literary form worth the potential harm that child soldier stories cause to the already-fragile image of Africa in the U.S.? Would most Africans recognize their communities in these stories? I contend that in each case the answer is no, and therefore the genre as a whole should be known primarily for its failed ethical vision.

INTRODUCTION | ENDNOTES

1. For a more detailed account of this image and its reception, see Greg Marinovich and Joao Silva.
2. These depictions have been extensively examined by Africanist scholars. Broader studies of the image of Africa in the U.S. over the past two centuries include Dennis Hickey and Kenneth C. Wylie, Curtis Keim, Ruth Mayer, Michael McCarthy, and Nederveen Pieterse.
3. For a critique of the special issue, see Sean Jacobs.
4. The organization changed its name in 2011 from The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers to Child Soldiers International. For clarity, I will use the latter for purposes not related to bibliographic citation.
5. During the final year of the war, the Confederate Army lowered this requirement to seventeen years of age (Eicher and Eicher 29).
6. See Ray D. Jackson and Susan M. Jackson; Coalition *Global Report 2001* 455.
7. In addition, the U.S. has sanctioned the conscription of children by the governments of Chad, Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan, and Yemen (Office).
8. This attempt to quantify the practice is not without controversy. In concordance with my argument, Scott Gates and Simon Reich assert that the 300,000-soldier estimate “has never been justified in terms of hard data, has no clear basis in fact, was arguably never accurate, and is now certainly wrong” (11).

9. According to Ineka Hall, CSI plans to release a new global report in 2016, which will become available nearly a decade after the previous one.
10. Notable examples include Singer 30, Wessells 2, Romeo Dellaire 104, and David M. Rosen 2012, 1.
11. Where appropriate I distinguish between the authors of memoirs and their self-representations as protagonists.

CHAPTER ONE:

CHILD SOLDIER STORIES AND THEIR FICTIONS

INTRODUCTION

Ishmael Beah published his memoir *A Long Way Gone* to significant acclaim in 2006. Less than two years later, the influential American author and publisher Dave Eggers described him as “arguably the most read African writer in contemporary literature” (179). This statement has since been included on dust jackets for both re-prints of the memoir and Beah’s 2014 novel *Radiance of Tomorrow*, ostensibly evidence that the stories they contain are worth reading. And while the claim is impossible to prove, it appears accurate; few other recent African authors have garnered similar attention in the U.S. If nothing else, Beah produced the most successful example of a child soldier story in the genre. In its inaugural year, the memoir sold 611,435 copies and appeared on the *Publisher’s Weekly* bestseller list for twenty-nine weeks (Maryles 2007, 29; Maryles 2008, 31). Readers bought another 250,000 copies in 2008, while total sales have by now surely surpassed a million (McEvoy 27). To make one of any number of comparisons, *Disgrace*, the best-known work by Nobel Prize-winning author J.M. Coetzee, has sold 257,000 copies since its publication in 1999 (Stoddard). *A Long Way Gone* is more than just a popular story; most critics praise the memoir as being insightful and well-written. So the question is not whether Beah is an influential African writer with proven success, but more significantly why and how he has succeeded? As in many cases in the publishing industry, serendipity is a factor here; overall success in the book market is not

inevitable. But what I want to suggest in this chapter is that there are other influences which not only contributed to his achievements but also those of the genre he represents.

Child soldier stories are distinct from other forms of writing—Western and African in origin—in which child soldier characters might appear. Yet many publishers and American readers are already familiar with their most basic themes. The success of the genre owes much to the fact that it resembles an existing marketing category known as misery literature. Publishers recognize that child soldier stories may generate similar levels of interest (and profitability) and, as I indicate below, sales data demonstrates that at least some of these works have met this expectation. However, the genre differs from misery literature in both kind and degree. Some of these differences have an effect upon how it is represented and marketed to readers as I will demonstrate below with an analysis of cover art design. Further, child soldier stories are not bound by the same strict distinctions between fantasy and reality. Because many readers are ignorant about present-day conditions in Africa the temptation might be to interpret African writing—fictional and no-fiction—anthropologically.¹ A consequence of this mode of reading is that these literary accounts are treated as evidence of an epidemic that in fact does not exist.

At first glance, interest in child soldier stories is surprising as American readers do not have any particular affinity for African writing. As I explain in the introduction to this study, the U.S. has few recent cultural, economic, or historical ties to the continent that might generate interest in its literature. Most U.S.-based publishers have determined that notwithstanding a select number of works by Achebe, Nuruddin Farah, and Ngũgĩ wa

Thiong'o, and with the possible exception of visiting African students and Africanist academics, there is no popular demand for African writing. American editions of titles by other writers are released on occasion, but the field as a whole has never received much attention from within the industry.² British publisher Heinemann established an American subsidiary in 1978 to distribute its well-known African Writers Series (AWS). The imprint achieved modest success in the U.S. by targeting the educational market, rather than large retail bookstores (Currey xxv-xxvii). These advancements were crucial to the viability of African writing after the continent suffered badly from economic decline during the 1980s; traditional publishers of African literature discovered that they could no longer rely on African governments for bulk purchases. This circumstance also led to a shift in the relative influence of the U.S. market. Before the AWS was discontinued in 2003, the production of new titles and reprints was increasingly dependent on American readers (xxvii).³ Yet it is also clear that African writing as a whole has never attained mainstream success in the U.S. Widespread indifference among American readers reinforces the opinion among most publishers that it has very limited potential for profitability.

This commercial logic has dominated the American publishing industry since the mid-twentieth century. Multinational conglomerates have acquired and merged every major trade publisher in the country and many smaller influential houses as well, including Random House (RCA, 1966; Advance, 1980; Bertelsmann, 1998), Little, Brown (Time, 1968; Hachette, 2006), Penguin (Pearson Longman, 1970), Simon and Schuster (Gulf and Western, 1975; Viacom, 1994; CBS, 2006), Doubleday (Bertelsmann,

1986), HarperCollins (News Corporation, 1987), Farrar, Straus and Giroux (Holtzbrinck, 1993), Macmillan (Holtzbrinck, 1995), and numerous others. Some corporations entered the book industry in order to provide greater synergy among their other media holdings. These firms anticipated that they could release a book through their own publishers, promote it in their magazines, newspapers, and television stations, and adapt it to film using their production studios, though this process is not necessarily efficient or even widely practiced (Moran). Others regarded publishers as additional sources of revenue. Veteran editors like Michael Korda, André Schiffrin, and Jason Epstein have documented the negative effects of media consolidation on how conglomerate-owned publishers are managed. Parent companies typically require these assets to achieve optimum profitability. Consequently, because book sales are difficult to forecast, publishers increasingly rely on bestseller 'frontlists' (i.e. works available for less than a year) rather than those titles that could potentially generate revenue over a longer period of time, including most African writing.

Furthermore, it has become more difficult for publishers to keep their 'backlists' of older titles of which copies remain from a previous print run. Costs for the physical storage of books are minimal. However, in 1979 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Thor Power Tool Company v. Commissioner* that companies could not write-down the market value of their unsold inventory in order to lower their taxable income. Publishers once maintained backlists for many years as the initial print runs for most titles do not sell out during their first year. They also invested the profits from tax savings on their inventories into the production of new works (Schmidt 95). Following this court decision, publishers

warned of potential consequences on their industry (as well as those of distributors, wholesalers, and booksellers) that included “smaller initial press runs; destruction of backlists; earlier remaindering; higher unit costs; [and] the loss of markets and reputation that occurs when publishers cannot fill orders” (Loe, “Study” 19). Subsequent research by Leonard Schrift (1985) and Mary H. Loe (*Thor* 1986) show that the predictions were partly accurate. Since the 1980s, publishers have prioritized titles that they anticipate will sell quickly and have allowed more books to go out of print rather than add them to their backlists. Most titles that do appear on these backlists were at one time bestsellers, some of which are re-marketed during milestone years or if they are adapted to film (Donadio). In general, publishers are much less likely to take risks to support potentially unprofitable authors and genres.

Beah is a talented writer, but like many notable literary figures over the past forty years, his success did not occur by accident, but rather is due in part to these systemic changes in the American publishing industry. He benefited greatly from the perception that his memoir could become a bestseller. Ira Silverberg, later the Director of Literature for the National Endowment for the Arts, served as Beah’s literary agent. Sarah Crichton chose the memoir for her imprint, which is owned by the prestigious publisher Farrar, Straus and Giroux, and was its editor as well. Both ensured that the book received maximum exposure. Within a year of its publication, it received a number of positive reviews in widely-read newspapers and magazines including *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Time*, *People*, *Entertainment Weekly*, and many others. He appeared on popular television programs like *The Daily Show* and *20/20*, as well as other broadcast

networks like *National Public Radio* and *CSPAN*. The popular coffee retailer Starbucks selected *A Long Way Gone* as a featured title for its book program, making it available for purchase in more than 6,000 stores around the U.S., all but ensuring its success (“Riveting”). I do not mean to suggest that a publisher can guarantee popularity among readers, even through a focused marketing campaign. But the attention he received is atypical of an unknown, first-time author; it is especially unusual for the work of an African author. Both his publisher and agent recognized that the memoir had potential and subsequently they invested heavily to influence its reception.

UNDERSTANDING THE GENRE AS A GENRE

Popular interest in child soldier stories is not limited to *A Long Way Gone*—it extends to other similar works. The most compelling way to demonstrate this interest is through an examination of industry statistics and sales data. The problem is that most publishers, especially big firms, are not willing to release this information and there is relatively little data in the public domain on this subject to collect, analyze, and generalize from.⁴ Even so, we can draw some tentative conclusions from what material is available. It has been proposed that the average book, in all genres of writing and published via all methods, will sell five hundred copies over its lifetime (C. Anderson 164). Literary agent Noah Lukeman writes that many publishers will consider ‘literary’ novels to be successful if they sell between 3,000 and 7,000 copies, while non-fiction works are viewed as a success at 20,000 copies sold. These estimates are contingent on numerous case-specific factors, including an author’s reputation, the influence of a

publisher, the various formats and editions of a work, and so on. But they do establish a baseline for analysis. Abani's novel *A Song for Night*, released by the independent publisher Akashic Books, sold 15,000 copies by 2012 (Ingalls). Readers bought a respectable 3,500 copies of Jarrett-Macauley's novel *Moses, Citizen and Me* (Murphy). Every child soldier story contributes to Africanist discourse, but some are more influential than others. Still, the genre is not a contrivance or shadow cast by one influential title. Available sales figures demonstrate that a number of child soldier stories have been commercially successful (to say nothing of public or critical interest in them) even in an over-crowded book market.

Child soldier stories can be understood in several ways: 1.) in relation to other representations of the under-age combatant in Africa; 2.) as a distinct form of writing; and 3.) as part of a broader marketing category known as misery literature. Regarding this first point, child soldiers appear in several major studio movies released in the last decade, including *Blood Diamond* (2006) and *Machine Gun Preacher* (2011). However, the overall effect of these filmic texts is limited. Mainstream reviews demonstrate that viewers increasingly approach Western treatments of the continent with greater skepticism and critical awareness.⁵ Moreover, the child soldier characters are not fundamental to these narratives—*Blood Diamond* traces the redemption of a white Zimbabwean mercenary with the assistance of an American journalist, while *Machine Gun Preacher* centers around the humanitarian efforts of an American ex-felon. Achebe's criticism of *Heart of Darkness* is equally applicable to these works. Although some African characters are depicted sympathetically, the continent itself is still no more than a

setting and child soldiers a signifier of its hostility, a barrier that the outsider protagonists would eventually overcome.⁶ Their inclusion reinforces the idea that the military recruitment of children in Africa is regrettable, but also to be expected. Even so, ultimately their influence is relatively minor as child soldiers are largely incidental to these narratives.

Child soldiers are familiar figures in African writing more generally. One of the first African Francophone novels published in the West, Bakary Diallo's 1926 novel *Force-bonté*, features a young Senegalese boy who fights with the French army during World War I. They appear in various literary accounts of both anti-colonial and post-independence conflicts, though never to the degree that might constitute a trend.⁷ In recent years, largely because of increasing public attention on the practice, critics and readers have begun to notice child soldier characters and writers are savvy enough to continue using them. For example, the male protagonist of Angelina Sithebe's 2007 novel *Holy Hill* is an ex-prostitute, drug dealer, and addict. A brief description of his experiences as an under-age combatant amplifies his tragic condition, rather than functions as the basis of a larger consideration or critique of the practice. Critics often refer to Chimamanda Adichie's 2006 novel *Half a Yellow Sun* in their examinations of child soldiers in African writing, insofar as a teenage house boy who narrates a portion of the work is forcibly recruited into the Biafran army.⁸ She devotes a chapter to his abduction and mobilization for an unspecified, but relatively short period of time. However, the novel itself is not *primarily* focused on his condition as a soldier or the broader military use of children. These events have a more general function, to

demonstrate one of many negative consequences of the Nigerian Civil War.

Child soldier stories differ from these other works enough that it is appropriate to group them together as a distinct form of writing. This genre is defined by several conventions that most (if not all) of the works share, whether fictional or non-fiction. Some of these characteristics are self-evident. For example, all the protagonists are African children recruited by government or non-state forces to be soldiers. But there are other essential traits that also bind them together. They offer scenes of life prior to enlistment and following decommission, but a majority of the narratives emphasize their wartime experiences. Almost all of the characters are combatants in the popular sense of that term: they are responsible for maiming or killing other young people and adults, destruction and theft of property, and, in roughly half of the stories, sexual violence. Sometimes this behavior is coerced by comrades or commanding officers, but just as often these characters are depicted as willing participants in criminal activity. Many of the works reflect upon the social and political circumstances that lead to child soldiering, as well as its embrace by some adults and rejection by others. They portray the traumatic effects of the practice on the children and its contravention of Western conceptions of childhood, which American readers are assumed to possess. Finally, they nearly always gesture toward the possibility of redemption. A few characters are denied this opportunity, but many others can become children again, usually through the intercession of Western humanitarian aid workers and in several cases eventually settling in the West.

In one sense this genre is relatively new, the product of the moment when child soldiering entered into public discourse. These child soldier stories are somewhat unique

as they do not draw in any significant way from previous narratives that feature child soldier characters (perhaps with the exception of Uzodinma Iweala's use of 'rotten English' in apparent homage to Ken Saro-Wiwa's 1985 novel *Sozaboy*). Still, their general thematic content—that of suffering children—may be familiar to American readers. There are numerous reasons for why a publisher might accept a manuscript: its quality, the appeal of its subject matter, a special relationship with its author or their agent, and so on. But in many cases, the economic justification for publishing a work should be obvious; most contemporary publishers are no longer willing (or able) to take risks on unproven authors or content. Because the book market is unpredictable, when they do develop a bestseller they and other publishers frequently attempt to reproduce this success by releasing similar titles. In some cases, these narratives will transcend their faddish reputations and constitute new marketing categories. The success of child soldier stories can certainly be interpreted in this way, especially when viewed in isolation. However, in the broader context of the book market it would be more accurate to regard them as an outgrowth of misery literature, an existing marketing category with proven viability.

Misery literature features predominantly child characters who endure various forms of physical and emotional abuse (Bury, Addley). An essential aspect of this form of narrative, which is ostensibly non-fiction but inevitably contains fictional aspects, is the eventual triumph of the protagonists over their tragic circumstances or a hopeful implication that this outcome is, at the very least, possible. However, much of its focus is the graphic depiction of their mistreatment. Several of these stories have become

bestsellers over the past few decades, perhaps most notably Dave Pelzer's 1995 memoir *A Child Called "It"*, Frank McCourt's 1996 memoir *Angela's Ashes*, and J.T. LeRoy's 2000 novel *Sarah*. Misery literature is so popular in the U.S. and Britain that large chain bookstores have devoted entire sections to this genre (O'Neill). Most of these texts are ephemeral and of poor literary quality, but they sell in sufficient quantities that the publishing industry continues to produce them. The narrative conventions of child soldier stories parallel misery literature, in particular their frequent scenes of violence, rape, and drug use, as well as the eventual recovery (most of the time) of their protagonists. Beah, Keitetsi, and other former child soldiers-turned-authors were unknown to the public before the release of their memoirs, but readers will recognize their kind of story: that of the traumatically abused child. Therefore, although publishers ordinarily regard African writing as unprofitable, many released child soldier stories with the hope that they too would achieve the same success. Each of the six largest publishers in the U.S. have released at least one child soldier story under consideration in this study.⁹ They do so apparently with the confidence that readers are familiar with, and seek out, these similarly lurid accounts about children overcoming tragedy.

I do not mean to suggest that child soldier stories simply mimic this preexisting genre. Most examples of misery literature produced and sold in the U.S. feature American characters and settings. In contrast, child soldier stories are generally viewed as a specifically African phenomenon; similar narratives that take place in other regions of the world or are written by non-African authors, such as Patricia McCormick's novel *Never Fall Down* or Şöpā Cakti's 'auto-fictional' story *Gorilla*, have not been commercially

successful. Unlike in other forms of misery literature, child soldier protagonists are both victims and perpetrators of violence. This is one of the most distinguishing features of the genre and many characters acknowledge the untoward cycle in which young civilians are brutalized by child soldiers before becoming combatants themselves. The protagonist of Ahmadou Kourouma's novel *Allah is Not Obligated* rhetorically wonders what a child can do when they live "in some fucked-up barbaric country where everyone is cutting everyone's throat," before answering his own question: "You become a child-soldier of course [...] so you can have lots to eat and cut some throats yourself; that's all your only option" (90). The experiences described in child soldier stories are often unique. However, in a more general context, they are simply an extreme form of the degradation that misery literature relies upon. Therefore, they are distinctly African while also in conformity with an established marketing framework.

COVERING CHILD SOLDIERS

The tension between vulnerability and violence makes child soldier stories compelling; the second chapter of this study partly focuses on how this dichotomy is represented in the stories themselves. But it also presents a challenge to the designers, art directors, and editors who are responsible for marketing these titles to readers. How do they convey this dualistic structure to industry professionals and consumers in order to encourage sales? Many promotional materials used for this purpose are short-lived, including media kits, presentation stands and counterpacks that are used in bookstores, and so on. They are difficult to examine as booksellers frequently discard these items and

publishers rarely archive them. Marketing devices used by online booksellers are also ephemeral. Book covers and dust jackets (herein referred to simply as covers) are an exception, however; they are often preserved by readers and collectors as an art form in their own right. Furthermore, they are the most recognized, widely-viewed promotional materials for readers, which makes them an appropriate object for study. There is little academic analysis about the potential influence of covers on potential readers, but market research on the subject demonstrates that it is considerable (Orange Prize, Phillips). Publishers know that distributors and booksellers accept and decline works on this basis (Going, qtd. in Williamson). The publishing industry is therefore sensitive to the messages that covers transmit. Before a cover receives final approval it is reviewed by the aforementioned designers, art directors, and editors, and also by the marketing, publicity, and sales departments, as well as the author of the work.

Covers incorporate a variety of marketing paratexts. Potential readers are more likely to purchase a book if they know and prefer a particular author (Phillips). As such, the names of well-known writers are displayed prominently in cover art, a style popularized by the designer Paul Bacon in the 1950s. When an author is not known within a target market, or in the case of debut works, publishers might apply other paratextual elements, which even the casual reader is visually familiar with, to generate interest. Pithy titles are chosen in collaboration with authors to achieve the broadest appeal. Straplines refer to both form—e.g. “a novel”, “a memoir”—and subject matter—e.g. “a child soldier story”—though as Gerard Genette maintains, their purpose may be to influence preferable readings rather than indicate factual information about a work (10-

11). Paragraph-long summaries, which usually appear on the back or inside cover, are included for this same purpose. Review excerpts from recognizable authors or those published in noteworthy periodicals demonstrate to both retailers and consumers that the book is worthy of their interest. These devices may be used differently depending on the needs of the publisher and the intended market, and readers do not necessarily regard each paratextual element with equal significance. However, publishers hope that together they will render a profitable first impression.

A brief look at the publication history in the U.S. of Iweala's 2005 novel *Beasts of No Nation* and its front covers demonstrate these paratextual conventions. The first edition hardcover, which is published by HarperCollins, features a design by Roberto de Vicq de Cumplich. The cover image is a photograph of seven children silhouetted against a bright sky. The name of the author, title, and form are all printed in unremarkable typeface. In the next edition, published that same year with a new design, the representational photograph is replaced with large, block-letter typeface that spans the cover in a full-bleed print style, identifying both the author and title, but not its form. An illustration of a leopard or lion on hind legs fighting a bovid is arranged within the lettering. The imprint Harper Perennial issued a paperback edition in 2006 with yet another cover design, this time by Gregg Kulick. It is also somewhat abstract with five rows of uneven lines that stretch across its surface. The author, title, and form are shown in apparently hand-lettered typeface, which is positioned center-right on the cover. The imprint's signature "P.S." feature, which includes an author interview, a description of his inspiration for the work, and a list of his favorite books, is announced in the lower-right

corner. The most recent edition of the work, also published in 2006 by Harper Perennial, brings together several covers and paratextual elements. The Kulick design remains the same, however a bold column is superimposed at left over one-third of the cover. The animal figures from the previous edition are positioned at the top of this vertical band, under which is a list of periodicals that identify the novel as “A BEST BOOK OF THE YEAR” as well as excerpts from several positive reviews.¹⁰

Cover design is meant to give visual expression to, or convey some aspect of, the story that it advertises. Whether readers consider one or more of the covers used for Iweala’s novel to be visually appealing is a matter of personal preference. However, none is particularly effective at communicating anything meaningful about the narrative itself. What distinguishes this latest edition of *Beasts of No Nation* from its three predecessors is that its commercially-focused paratext—the reviews, awards, and so on—directly competes with what might be described as its aesthetic elements. Because the principal function of book covers is to attract potential readers, publishers believe that a title will likely sell more copies if it receives literary endorsements of the kind showcased here. Some designers express concern that when marketing and sales departments assert greater control over cover design, creativity is stifled (Drew and Sternberger 141). Nevertheless, this intervention is inevitable and not limited to the addition of the paratext that I describe above. When a publisher decides that a work is best positioned in the marketplace as part of an existing genre, as is the case with child soldier stories, they will frequently use established visual strategies that are integral to cover design in order to manage reader expectations.

Simon Stevens identifies a visual motif that appears on the covers of numerous recent editions of African narratives, which features an acacia tree set against a warm sunset (Ross). Peter Mendelsund, Associate Art Director at the Bertelsmann-owned publisher Knopf, explains that this repetition is likely due to the conservatism of marketing departments and ignorance of book designers (qtd. in Silverberg). It also demonstrates how cover art communicates certain ideas about how readers are expected to understand the stories within them. Publishers hope that this familiar imagery might help interested readers to recognize new titles with similar content. While child soldier story cover art is relatively diverse, none of the U.S. editions of these works features the visual cliché described above. Instead, they tend to follow or mimic the well-defined aesthetic conventions of misery literature, which usually feature the portrait of a child with hand-lettered or scrawled typeface, which is meant to evoke the confessional nature of these narratives (Addley, Sinclair). Stock images are often adapted for the covers of fictional child soldier stories; they are chosen for effect, rather than fidelity to a particular narrative. Not surprisingly, the locations where these images are taken rarely match the settings to which they are applied, and in several cases civilian children are meant to represent soldiers.¹¹ The commercial risk of transforming Africa into a homogenous site of conflict through this editorial decision is minimal; most readers will not recognize the discrepancy and many are already predisposed to view the continent in this way. The greater problem for designers is how to adapt existing visual conventions in misery literature to an analogous genre in which the apparently vulnerable child protagonist is also likely a murderer or rapist. The messages they communicate are often less than ideal.

Some examples of cover art simply fail to convey both conditions. When they err it is usually because they over-emphasize one aspect of this dichotomy over the other. For instance, the U.S. edition for Abani's novella features the image of a boy that does not accurately convey the violence of the child soldier protagonist. On the other hand, child soldiers are represented as monstrous on cover art used for Dongala's novel. A person of indiscriminate age and gender is shown on the cover of the 2005 first edition published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, rakishly posed with an assault rifle. The figure wears a t-shirt with the image of a cartoon dinosaur, but there is no other indication the soldier is also a child. More troubling, the soldier's head is replaced with an illustration of a snarling dog. The 2006 Picador imprint edition features a stenciled icon of a bulldog that wears a name tag in the shape of the African continent, an image also used for the 2013 e-book edition. Both covers emphasize the protagonist's *nom de guerre* at the expense of his humanity. There is no reason to suggest these images are chosen with malice, nor that their designers necessarily intend for them to function in this manner. But cover art that depicts child soldiers as dangerous animals are not benign in effect. Representations of this kind contribute to an over-burdened discourse about Africa in the Western imagination. They risk precluding the humane identification that comes with recognition of the human subject.

Cover art for the 2005 edition of *Johnny Mad Dog* is adapted from the most common (and perhaps the most obvious) visual strategy the genre: the image of a child holding a firearm. This juxtaposition and the apparent familiarity of the child with the weapon demonstrates the threat of military service to both the child and his childhood.

While it is clear that book covers usually change with each new format and edition, this image is standard. It transcends the usual targeted marketing regime and is used in cover art for at least one edition of a majority of child soldier stories in publication. In other words, this visual motif is not just a popular design choice, but also a representational paradigm. A typical variation on this image is its simplification into a black silhouette. This aesthetic choice is quite evocative, but it too is fundamentally problematic. Readers might be able to apprehend the humanity of child soldiers as it is manifest in their faces, but if they are reduced to abstraction as in these covers, that recognition may be diminished. Moreover, this simplification particularizes and racializes what is in reality an uncommon practice that is not limited to the continent. These blank projections, which appear to represent any African child, misrepresent the truth; their implication is that child soldiering is an epidemic throughout Africa, when in fact that is not the case.

The most iconic cover in the genre is also the best-executed example of the child-with-gun theme. Beah's memoir uses this imagery to good effect in order to convey the vulnerability and violence inherent in his narrative. Jennifer Carrow is the original designer, but the photograph by Michael Kamber is its most distinguishing feature. It depicts a young soldier, wearing an assault rifle on his back, while his arms are slung over a rocket-propelled grenade across his shoulders. That he is armed demonstrates his potential for violence, yet his vulnerability is also clearly on display. The rocket is useless without a weapon to fire it, while his broken sandal hangs crookedly behind him. He is not alert to his surroundings; his sorrowful, downcast gaze is directed toward the road in front of him. This image so effectively communicates these common themes that it has

been re-used on twenty-five of the thirty-odd different editions of the memoir, a rare outcome in the publishing industry. It became part of Beah's brand, even though the photo is not of him nor taken in the same conflict as the one in which he participated. Of course, he is not directly involved in the choice to use that specific image; cover art for his work represents a generic vision of Africa that comes from the publishing industry, one that strives to give readers a snapshot of his narrative. By appealing to a type, it offers them a chance to ostensibly comprehend his story before they even check its contents.

FACTS OR EMOTIONAL TRUTHS?

A far more significant difference between child soldier stories and their more traditional counterparts is in how they are received. Misery literature is written exclusively as non-fiction. Their sensationalism is effective insofar as the abuse described in the texts is believed to have occurred as described. Because these works are primarily motivated by events—abuse and its transcendence—rather than by the identities of the persons who experience them, it is not enough that authors represent themselves faithfully, as Philippe Lejeune proposes. Rather, these scenes of violence and redemption must be precise. Recollections of the traumatic past can at times be inconsistent; after all, memoirs are “inevitably, to a degree, fictive (not *fictional*)” (Couser 81). However, the outrage expressed by many readers when a memoir is discovered to be fraudulent demonstrates the limits of creativity within the form. Many bestsellers and critically-acclaimed works of misery literature have been identified as fabrications, including

Anthony Godby Johnson's *A Rock and A Hard Place* (1993), Benjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood* (1995), Misha Defonseca's *Misha: A Mémoire of the Holocaust Years* (1997), LeRoy's *Sarah*, Margaret Seltzer's *Love and Consequences* (2008), and various others. The negative consequences of these revelations are not limited to the reputation of the author; editors, literary agents, and publishers are also affected. For example, the settlement of lawsuits stemming from revelations about James Frey's fictional memoir cost his publisher Random House \$1.2 million ("A Few"). But damage to the reputation of misery literature itself is of an even greater concern to the industry. When readers no longer believe that these stories are authentic then sales will subsequently decline.

Similar scandals involving memoirs by former child soldiers demonstrate that these authors and their narratives are not equally vulnerable to these allegations. In the most notable example, the truthfulness of Beah's memoir was challenged less than a year after its initial publication.¹² Reporters for the *Weekend Australian* newspaper wrote several articles questioning key events in the narrative. Foremost of their claims is that Beah served as a child soldier for only a few months, rather than two years as he suggested (Gare and Wilson). They also report that a melee he describes at a UNICEF rehabilitation center, in which six young people were killed and several others wounded, did not take place (Wilson). Crichton and Silverberg (who, incidentally, also served as Frey's literary agent) rejected these allegations. Beah also responded in a statement released through his publisher, insisting that his account "is not something one gets wrong. [...] Sad to say, my story is all true" (2008). This reply is consistent with his

previous assertion in the memoir that he possesses “an excellent photographic memory that enables me to remember the details of the day-to-day moments of my life, indelibly” (*A Long Way Gone* 51). He later moderated this position and even expressed a desire to write fiction, which would be free from the constraints of the autobiographical form. (Italie). Nonetheless, his credibility as a writer remains tied to his identity as a former child soldier, which he and his representatives vigorously defended.

Unlike other authors whose narratives have been contested, Beah did not suffer professionally from the controversy. Most readers appear to have either dismissed the allegations or were unaware of them. They did not affect sales, nor was the title ever at risk of being withdrawn by retailers. Future editions did not include a disclaimer, which is a common response to charges of falsehood even when a publisher rejects the claim. Moreover, public commentators largely refrained from questioning or criticizing Beah, as many had done his contemporaries LeRoy or Frey. Elizabeth Twitchell mentions the challenge to Beah’s memoir in the context of her analysis of Dave Egger’s 2006 work *What is the What*, a quasi-autobiographical memoir of Sudanese refugee Valentino Achak Deng, and wonders if “the foreignness of the African voice to Western ears make any work of African auto-narration unmediated by a Western amanuensis ring false?” (634). Quite the contrary, it appears that most critics are willing to accept the work and others like it as they have been presented, notwithstanding credible skepticism. A very similar controversy occurred in Germany over the truthfulness of Senait Mehari’s 2004 memoir *Feuerherz*, one that reveals the receptiveness to these stories. Mehari eventually admits, “I was not a child soldier. [...] The media write what they want. And when they call me a

child soldier, I say OK, if that's what you need, that's what you can call me" ("TV Report"). These responses invite an alternative question: Why are child soldier memoirs not held to the same standard as other misery literature?

Sara Nelson, then-editor in chief of *Publisher's Weekly*, gives an explanation in her article "Emotional Truth" that epitomizes the reactions among many critics and, perhaps by extension, readers as well. She insists that while the particular events in Beah's memoir can never be completely verified, the story has nevertheless "opened the world's eyes to horrifying truths that no one—publisher, newspaper, reader—can ever dispute." She does not refer here to Beah's personal experiences, but rather the amorphous child soldier whom he is believed to represent. Her affirmation of the "emotional truth" of the memoir may be equally true of misery literature set in the U.S., but it is clear that child soldier stories are regarded differently. They are interpreted through codes of meaning that are perpetuated by Africanist discourse. The certainty among many readers that child soldiering is widespread throughout Africa, despite evidence to the contrary, serves as confirmation of the truthfulness of Beah's memoir and is also construed by many readers as evidence of the practice. For this reason, Beah need only to gesture toward his military service; his account of this period, including his recollections after demobilization, spans just thirty-two pages. Readers are left to interpret these events by using their imaginations and what they know, or think they know, about the practice.

The tendency to interpret these stories as apparently realistic documentation of ordinary life is not limited to non-fiction. Simon Gikandi and Ato Quayson have

separately shown how fictional African writing is interpreted in the same way.¹³ One reason for this reading is that publishers regularly add explanatory material to these works, with the effect that they “[invoke] the familiar aura of other, incommensurably ‘foreign’ cultures while appearing to provide a modicum of information that gives the uninitiated reader access to the text and, by extension, the ‘foreign culture’ itself” (Huggan 37). These aids usually take the form of maps and reference guides, or acknowledgments and translator’s notes that offer factual or ethnographic information. Some editors and authors incorporate translations for non-English terms as well. Femi Ojo-Ade maintains that Saro-Wiwa added a glossary to his novel because he wrote deliberately for a Western audience (xv). Now, when they are included, these translations are integrated either directly into the narrative or as footnotes. Their function is to give the appearance of objectivity to an otherwise subjective medium. Even with fictional stories that do not include this kind of paratext, the appearance of accuracy persists. For example, *Allah is Not Obligated* is set in several named West African countries and its fictional characters mingle with historical figures. Abani avoids using these same signifiers in *A Song for Night*, which also includes a disclaimer at the beginning of the work on the coincidental nature of names, places, and events. But his work is not ahistorical fantasy either. As I describe in chapter three, repeated references to the three largest ethnic communities in Nigeria and the protagonist’s self-identification as Igbo give the novel a veneer of plausible reality.

Fictional child soldier stories are often informed by autobiographical accounts and other popular accounts on the subject. Iweala, a life-long resident of the U.S. (and whose

mother is a former vice president of the World Bank Group and, as of this writing, the Finance Minister of Nigeria), explains that he was inspired to write his novel by two works of non-fiction: the memoir by Keiteitsi, whom he met while a student at Harvard University, and an article on child soldiers published in *Newsweek* magazine (“P.S.” 7-11). He notes that he “relied heavily on accounts and interviews given by former child soldiers from around the world” for material (11), as did Jarrett-Macauley (227-228), and surely also the editors who are involved in the production of other titles. At the same time, these fictional narratives and their authors have become a primary source for information about the military recruitment of young people in Africa. Most notably in this example, Iweala’s presumed authority on the subject has led not only to the further spread of inaccurate data in his epitextual commentary (to use Genette’s term), but also the unusual circumstance in which he is asked to analyze Beah’s telling of his own experiences as an under-age combatant (“Slaughter”). For many American readers, the distinction between imagination and reality in Africa is as thin as the paper on which these stories are printed. In practice, this means that fictional and non-fiction writing are regarded as equally denotative, with the former often undifferentiated from the latter. Twitchell contends that the authenticity of fictional narratives that depict trauma is “determined by the author’s ability to make readers believe, if only for a moment, what they know to be a lie” (635). However, in the context of the child soldier story genre, in which the distinction between fiction and non-fiction is not always clear, I argue that many readers will defer to those works that confirm their worldviews. The authors of these works are viewed authorities on the subject, not just as former combatants or

inspired writers, but more generally because they are Africans, addressing what is widely perceived to be an African phenomenon.

MEETING EXPECTATIONS

Characters who reflect on the act of telling their own stories are well aware not only of the potential influence of the medium, but also the necessity for them to present their narratives in an engaging manner. For example, in *Moses, Citizen and Me*, the London-based protagonist works with a mysterious forest-dwelling man named Bemba G to rehabilitate decommissioned child soldiers, in part by teaching them the principles of effective storytelling. Later they perform an adaptation of William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* for an international audience, drawing thematic parallels between events depicted in the drama and the civil war in Sierra Leone. The young actors use this same training to narrate their own experiences to foreign journalists after the performance. Likewise, during a brief visit to the U.N. Headquarters in New York City to take part in a conference on child welfare, Beah meets an American professional storyteller who promises to show the children involved "how to tell our stories in a more compelling way" (196). She too understands that a well-told narrative will likely have a greater impact on an audience—receptive or indifferent—than the presentation of data or a chronology of past events. Beah embraces this lesson when he is asked to provide testimony about the challenges that children face in Sierra Leone. He abandons his prepared statement and instead tells a personal story of redemption.

The effectiveness of narratives is generally commensurate with how well they

have been adapted to fit both the needs and preferences of their intended audience, even among receptive readers. In this context, representatives of the U.S. publishing industry—agents, editors, ghostwriters, translators, and so on—function as intermediaries in this process. Their involvement is not always welcome; some African authors are resentful of the belief that their works must be “assimilated to recognizable market trends” (Huggan 35-37). A few very vocally reject the Western publishing regime and its audience entirely, notably Ghanaian author Ayi Kwei Armah. Jal registers his own unease with this process with an incongruous remark in the acknowledgments of his memoir—referring to his ghostwriter Megan Lloyd Davies, who is tasked with helping transform his memories into a narrative form that is complimentary to the expectations of American readers; he says, “I don’t want to thank you because you were a pain in the ass” (262). Yet he also embraces the image that is expected of him and incorporates it into a personal brand—*War Child*—that encompasses a documentary movie, a hip hop album, and his memoir (published in hardcover, softcover, electronic, and audio formats). Most of the authors give the accustomed recognition to editors, agents, and others who have contributed to the publication. The contents of these works, paratextual materials, and publicly-available epitexts suggest that most authors accept the conventions that are deemed necessary in order to bring child soldier stories to American audiences.

Acceptance does not necessarily come at the expense of style or individuality.¹⁴

When considered in isolation the ethical visions of the stories, to borrow the concept from Marshall Gregory, are generally sound; they are not morally simplistic (with the possible exception of Akallo’s memoir) or structured in ways that invite sympathy or

scorn for the child soldier characters where it is inappropriate to do so. However, these narratives, which are explicitly designed for Western readers are deeply problematic in other regards. As I demonstrate in the next three chapters, most child soldier stories do not meaningfully contest, challenge, or subvert racist Africanist discourses in the U.S. And while they might contain “emotional truths” as Sara Nelson contends, they also communicate both factual and conceptual falsehoods about Africa and its communities. The military recruitment of children does take place in at least a few African countries. However, well-documented decreases in the practice have been met in the U.S. with a proliferation of memoirs and novels based on the subject. These stories are accurate insofar as the experiences of actual child soldiers are similar enough to what is depicted in their narratives. But it is also true that they may do enormous damage to the image of Africa in the U.S. by how they represent it. They are crafted to meet the interests of readers as consumers, which are shaped by Africanist discourses that limit rather than expand their expectations. Consequently, their authors, agents, editors, and publishers participate in the marketing, sale, and consumption of an ‘Africa’ that does not exist.

CHAPTER ONE | ENDNOTES

1. Christopher Miller specifies in *Theories of Africans* that the problem with this approach is not the desire to gain anthropological knowledge from African writing, but rather that due to the general ignorance of Western readers about African cultures, these works cannot be read in isolation.
2. A small number of imprints—most notably Heinemann’s African Writers Series (AWS), but also to a lesser extent Longman’s Drumbeats, Macmillan’s Pacesetters, and Oxford University Press’ Three Crowns Series—have been responsible for publishing much, but by no means all, of the Anglophone African literature that is available in the West.
3. The Penguin Group (then-owned by the media conglomerate Pearson) revived the AWS in 2008 with Achebe as its Editorial Adviser. However, as Akin Ajayi observes, its inaugural list consists entirely of re-prints.
4. By way of illustration, none of the major trade publishers responded to my requests for the sales figures of individual titles. Moreover, Nielsen N.V. declined to sell a license to the MacOdrum Library at Carleton University for its BookScan service, which provides sales data for up to 70 percent of the U.S. market.
5. Representative reviews for *Blood Diamond* include Dargis, Lee, and Travers; similar examples for *Machine Gun Preacher* include M. Anderson, Chang, and Sharkey.
6. The white protagonist of *Blood Diamond* is from the African state Zimbabwe, but

his insistence that 'Rhodesia' is his homeland marks him as an outsider.

7. See for example Ayi Kwei Armah, Pepetela, and Ken Saro-Wiwa. Several child soldier narratives have been published in other countries more recently, such as those by Lucien Badjoko, Florent Couao-Zotti, and Senait Mehari. Because they have not been translated into English and are not widely available in the U.S., I did not include them in this study.
8. See for example Eleni Coundouriotis, Catarina Martins, and Maureen Moynagh.
9. Indeed, Faith J. H. McDonnell, co-writer of Akallo's memoir, explains that the publisher Chosen Books deliberately sought out this kind of narrative, rather than being offered a manuscript as is typical in the industry. She then solicited Akallo. Tellingly, the former child soldier thanks McDonnell "for the idea of writing this book" (17-18).
10. My purpose here is to sketch a brief outline, rather than provide a complete descriptive bibliography. As of this writing, a film adaptation of the text remains in pre-production; once it is released, a mass-market edition will likely be published with its own specific visual conventions. For an analysis of how tie-in editions of this kind can influence the reading experience, see Rebecca N. Mitchell.
11. Abani's novel is set in Nigeria, but the photo used for the 2007 Akashic Books edition cover was taken in Liberia. A civilian boy from Kenya is shown on the cover of Jarrett-Macauley's novel, even though it takes place in Sierra Leone. That country is also the setting for Beah's memoir, however its widely-reprinted

cover features a child soldier photographed along the Liberia/Guinea border.

12. For a more detailed account of the dispute, see Graham Rayman.
13. Christiane Ndiaye notes the same tendency among French critics of *Allah is Not Obligated*.
14. Indeed, editorial rigor is apparently sacrificed in Keitetsi's memoir in order for the ex-child soldier to narrate her story "entirely in her own idiom" (vi).

CHAPTER TWO:

NARRATING LOST CHILDHOODS IN CHINA KEITETSI'S *CHILD SOLDIER* AND OTHER STORIES

INTRODUCTION

During its tenth-anniversary year in 2010, the humanitarian organization Right to Play commissioned several television ads to support its fundraising efforts. Earlier promotions like “War” (2007) and “Priceless” (2009) follow a predictable formula in which the successes of its programs are represented visually by recreating children. But for its anniversary campaign the organization adopted a different approach. Its signature ad “Assembly” features the wordless recording of an African boy reassembling a field-stripped AK-47 assault rifle, an image that is designed to encourage the “sympathetic intervention” of the viewer (Moynagh 39). At twenty-one seconds the copy reads “LET HIM BE GOOD AT SOMETHING ELSE,” followed by the word ‘PLAY’ and the sound of children laughing. The ad concludes with the voice of an adult narrator: “Help give a child their childhood back. Donate at right-to-play dot-com.” This pitch clearly demonstrates the social constructedness of childhood by distinguishing between the biologically immature agent and his experiences as a soldier. Yet its effectiveness is contingent on a culturally-specific understanding of his circumstances; the ad can only make sense if it is evident to the viewer that this child’s rote familiarity with his weapon means that he no longer possesses whatever it is that defines him as a child, even if temporarily. It relies upon ostensibly universal ideas about childhood as well. The ad’s

creators assume that viewers want this child and others like him to be removed from the adult world of organized warfare, where they do not belong. By donating to the organization viewers can help rehabilitate their childhoods and give them the opportunity to act like children again.

The decision by Right to Play to associate the loss of childhood with child soldiers and not, for example, the victims of disease or malnourishment, is deliberate. Child soldiering is an activity that is by definition limited to a particular age group. But most importantly, it compels children to engage in what is commonly viewed as exclusively adult behavior. Following more than a century of anthropological and psychological research, the scholarly consensus is that child development is strongly influenced by family upbringing, peer groups, and other environmental factors. But in the popular imagination, the characteristics that define childhood are usually regarded as innate and considered by many to be universal.¹ Furthermore, many Americans can and do use representations of children in non-Western narratives and other contexts, such as the Right to Play ad, as a means for cross-cultural comparison and judgment; if a reader believes that children are fundamentally the same the world over, it follows that they can learn much about a community from how its children are integrated into adulthood and the experiences of those young people during this process. Both the ad described above and child soldier stories are structured in ways that encourage these readings. Yet the latter are also unique in that they offer a more substantial look at the subversion of childhood in Africa from the perspectives of the children themselves. The purpose of this chapter is to show exactly how child soldier stories do so and their significance in this

regard.

Childhood is variously defined in the U.S. and some conceptions conflict with others depending on the context. Moreover, while all persons under the age of eighteen are legally designated as children, they are also both regarded and treated differently depending on their chronological ages. As I will explain below, in the U.S. childhood is understood to be 1.) separate from adulthood; 2.) a developmental stage; and 3.) simultaneously constituted by evil and innocence.² These are the primary ways that American readers comprehend childhood, and through them I examine the messages that the stories communicate on this subject in the context of child soldier stories. What they suggest is these conventions are not sustainable in Africa; it is just not possible to separate children from adults either in theory or practice in this setting. Wartime experiences interfere with the ostensibly natural process of individual social and psychological development. Child soldier characters are either made to behave badly or else their evil nature is let loose. Even the most innocent of characters cannot remain so forever. These observations are generally to be expected; American readers, African writers, and the narratives and characters themselves generally agree that child soldiering has a profoundly negative impact on childhood. The problem here is that because child soldier stories are so popular, and as American readers often mistake these depictions of childhood as typical across Africa, and insofar as child soldiering is erroneously thought of as widespread across the continent, these stories leave readers with a false impression about conditions in Africa.

A common rhetorical gesture among academics is to say that, as an ideological

project, non-Western narratives such as these contest Western discourses that seek to universalize culturally-specific concepts like childhood. But this is not the function of child soldier stories. The few characters who challenge Western ideas about childhood, such as Birahima in Ahmadou Kourouma's novel *Allah is Not Obliged* and the eponymous soldier in Emmanuel Dongala's novel *Johnny Mad Dog*, are deliberately countered by the structure and narration of their respective stories. Some of the works are critical about what it *means* to be a child in Africa, but in ways that compliment the preconceived notions of American readers, their primary audience. Because the focal point of these stories is the aberrant practice of child soldiering, depictions of more conventional, less troubled childhoods are invariably obscured. The lives of African children only appear to get better when they are taken by well-meaning Westerners away from the continent entirely. Young people who remain in Africa risk further maladaptive development, including suffering from ambiguous social and emotional identities, as neither entirely children nor adults. In other words, the genre communicates to American readers, with little reservation, that Africa is simply no place to be a child.

CONCEPTUALIZING CHILDHOOD IN BRIEF

Both American and international laws set the age of majority at eighteen and therefore establish a specific duration for childhood. In practice, the particular ages when childhood begins and ends vary widely depending on the context. Allison James and Alan Prout identify 'age classes' as a typical form of categorization in the U.K., one that seems to be equally applicable to the U.S. The term denotes "group[s] of coevals who progress

through the age structure together,” most evidently in the formal education system (233). According to this standard, childhood occurs between the ages of five and fourteen or so, during which time children are required to attend primary school. This age range is, for the most part, coterminous with boundaries indicated in various influential twentieth-century theories of human development. Sigmund Freud specifies a ‘latency stage’ in his psychosocial theory of maturation that begins near the age of five or six and concludes when the child reaches puberty, usually between ages ten to thirteen. This period is characterized by a suppression of infantile sexuality and further development of self-identity. Once children become sexually mature they begin a final ‘genital stage’ and then enter into adulthood. Erik Erikson expands upon Freud’s theories of development to encompass the entire life cycle. He argues that between the ages of seven to thirteen, young people become self-aware, a significant process in itself and also a precursor to the next stage of adolescence. Jean Piaget categorizes children between the ages of seven and eleven into a ‘concrete operational stage’, one in which they develop a capacity for logical thought. The connection between maturation and the faculties of reason is by no means a recent development; it is central to the seventeenth-century educational theories of John Locke. This division of the life cycle into different stages can be traced back through antiquity (Grant), though its “chronologization” into precise segments is a more contemporary exercise (Kholi). Nevertheless, ambiguity remains about when, exactly, childhood begins and ends.

Complicating these matters is the fact that in the U.S. the boundaries, dimensions, and divisions of childhood have been differently constructed according to their

biological, juridical, moral, political and epistemological contexts (Archard 31-33). The ages at which an individual obtains certain rights (enfranchisement), expectations (self-reliance), responsibilities (taxation), obligations (military service), and accountability (criminal sentencing) are not always the same. James and Prout refer to these phases as ‘age grades’ (223), and their uneven progression in Western societies is frequently a source of unease. For example, the biological age of sexual maturity in the U.S. is twelve or thirteen.³ However, the legal age of sexual consent is between sixteen and eighteen, depending on state laws, and additional guidelines depending on the relative age of the participants. What these discrepancies demonstrate is that children will undergo multiple stages of childhood—early childhood, middle childhood, adolescence, preteen, teenaged, and so on—before they become adults. Yet while a seven year old is usually regarded and treated differently from a sixteen year old, both appear to conform to the practical and abstract definitions of childhood and are therefore considered together to be children.

These definitions—the particular conceptions about what childhood is exactly—are more coherent but no less complicated than the decision about who belongs in the category and should be characterized as a child. David Archard writes that in contemporary Western societies, the concept of childhood is comprised of three fundamental features, again: 1.) separateness from adulthood; 2.) a developmental stage; and 3.) simultaneously constituted of evil and innocence. Regarding the first aspect, children are not just distinct from adults in an ideational way—they are made to be different when restricted to separate social spaces. The kindergarten and school are obvious examples of age segregation through the establishment of spaces where children

are exclusively meant to reside, and in the U.S. these locations are constructed solely for the education and socialization of children. Wards of the state are traditionally housed separately from adults in orphanages and juvenile detention centers. Children's hospitals and pediatric wards are devoted exclusively to young patients. Playgrounds furnished with equipment designed specifically for child use are recreation areas intended exclusively for them; indeed, adults who linger near a playground without the accompaniment of a child are usually characterized as a threat.⁴

Conversely, there are social spaces where children are not meant to reside. These areas are typically associated with the privileges and obligations of maturity that take place within them, for example the consumption of alcohol in bars, sexual commerce in brothels, or even participation in war on battlefields. This relationship between an activity and its space is not necessarily deterministic. These spaces have been reserved for adults according to the "spatial practices" of contemporary American society (Lefebvre 8). The proximity of children to the battlefield is of particular concern and exacerbated by the fact that organized conflict is rarely confined to prescribed spaces. In spite of protections outlined in the Geneva Conventions and other treaties, children remain at risk of victimization and military recruitment. For this reason, Graça Machel declares in her frequently referenced report to the UN General Assembly that the international community must "claim children as 'zones of peace'" (90). This benign statement serves as a reminder that young people do not control their own personal spaces. Those who do appear on the battlefield, especially as willing combatants, disrupt the very social conventions that would exclude them from it. As Tanya Monforte insists, they challenge

(at least in theory) not only conventional ideas about childhood, but also attempts by adults to “sanitize” or justify war by imposing social order upon it (195).

One explanation for both the abstract and literal partition of children and adults is that human development is usually seen as a teleological system, with childhood as an intermediary stage and adulthood the ideal end. An individual who successfully completes this life course is understood to have gained “certain cognitive capacities, is rational, physically independent and autonomous, has a sense of identity, and is conscious of her beliefs and desires, and thus able to make informed free choices for which she can be held personally responsible” (Archard 39). Children are believed to lack these attributes and therefore they cannot fully participate in the adult world; in this respect they are defined by an absence, what they are not. How they attain adulthood, and the role of adults in their maturation, has been a matter of considerable debate. Locke maintained that individuals are born without innate knowledge or faculties for reason. Children may develop these abilities on their own as they mature and broaden their experiences of the world, but for Locke the most beneficial condition is when adults facilitate childhood development through a structured curriculum, including moral instruction. Jean-Jacques Rousseau countered by insisting that children are not incomplete adults as Locke imagined, but rather they represent a distinct stage in the life cycle and are intrinsically capable of virtuous thinking and moral behavior. He argued that society has a corrupting effect on all individuals regardless of age and that therefore adults should provide children with a secure environment in which their physical, intellectual, emotional, and moral growth can take place naturally. Although their

educational models differed, both believed that 1.) development from childhood to adulthood would necessarily occur, and 2.) successful maturation entailed an improvement upon a child's existing abilities. These conclusions are still reflected in current developmental theory and Western beliefs about children in general.

The third of these contemporary conceptions of childhood, that the moral disposition of children is both innocent and evil, is evidently religious in origin.⁵ The Christian Bible is the most influential source of this contradictory view on the inherent characteristics of children, which has led to many interpretations about their ontological or theological status. For example, an instructional prayer in the Book of Psalms states, "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me" (*Oxford Bible*, Ps. 51: 5). The Book of Proverbs contains similar references not only to the fallen nature of children, but also how adults should attend to them. In one lecture on corporal punishment the speaker advises parents, "Withhold not correction from the child; for *if* thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die. Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and shall deliver his soul from hell" (emphasis in the original, Prov. 23:13-14). According to this perspective, children will inevitably succumb to their evil natures without corrective influence, the theological-hereditary consequence of the Fall of Man. In the present day, evil is commonly understood as a spectrum, rather than half of a binary moral condition. As the self-identities of children evolve from the "self-oriented hedonism" that defines early childhood (Zimbardo 99) toward a state of adult awareness, they may act in ways that can informally be described as evil. Yet malevolence is distinct from mere bad behavior. The term is usually reserved for extremity, circumstances in which children

inflict incomprehensible harm. These incidents are quite rare, but they occupy a central place in the American imagination with respect to childhood.

Innocence is an equally complex concept. Moses explains in the Book of Deuteronomy that children “had no knowledge of good or evil” (Deut. 1:39). Likewise, in the Book of Isaiah the speaker refers to a period in the life cycle “before the child shall know to refuse the evil, and choose the good” (Isa. 7:16). Strictly speaking, these passages do not assert the innate goodness of children, as Rousseau claims. Rather, they exist in a state of prelapsarian ignorance—they do not possess moral maturity and are temporarily incapable of good or evil. This interpretation is not exclusive to children; a lack of awareness or knowledge forms the basis of the Romantic figure of the ‘noble savage’ for example. However, when this definition is applied to children, chronological age becomes a factor. Younger children are much more likely than adolescents to be described as innocent, as the later have had more opportunity to observe and experience evil. The age grades and developmental theories that I outline above are derived from the juridical sense of the term, as in a lack of, or incapacity for, guilt. Traditionally, children are judged more leniently than adults if they commit crimes because it is believed that they do not possess the reason necessary for moral agency.⁶ Conversely, crimes against children are considered more egregious. More generally, the innocence of the idealized child is amorphous. That children are innocent is for the most part self-evident in the U.S., a belief that transforms evil behavior by young people into existential paradox.

These characteristics are not in themselves uniquely Western but together they represent the predominant understanding of childhood in the U.S. and establish a criterion

against which every facet of child life is evaluated: who they should interact with, what activities they should participate in or abstain from, where and when they should be present, how they should act and talk, and so on. As I suggest throughout the above analysis, a central problematic of this discourse is that it does not accurately represent the lived experience of children. When their behavior is considered troubling it is because adults fail to acknowledge the variety of chronological, biological, and social childhoods. Young people who deviate from these models are considered aberrant and adults who do not sufficiently enforce them are socially or even criminally sanctioned. Judgments of this kind are not limited to American children; because these criteria are believed by many Americans to be universal, they are used to critique the maturing conditions of every child, no matter their country of origin or cultural background. Children fascinate adults as a matter of course and child soldier stories are particularly compelling since the varied experiences of the young characters do not appear at first glance to conform to Western expectations for them. Yet still they resonate with American audiences not from their portrayal of childhood as being different or even non-existent in Africa, but rather because the works affirm what is culturally familiar about children and childhood by ostentatiously narrating its loss.

AFRICAN CHILDREN WITHOUT CHILDHOODS

How do readers know that the protagonists of child soldier stories are actually children? Titles such as *Child Soldier* and *Girl Soldier* suggest as much, but these signifiers of age are not an ontological guarantee. Take for example Ken Saro-Wiwa's

novel *Sozaboy*, which is widely considered a precursor of the genre. The use of the word ‘boy’ throughout the work does not necessarily indicate that the protagonist Mene is a child, but rather is always context-specific. His future wife Agnes refers to him as a “small boy” during their courtship because he is unable to control his sexual arousal. The Sergeant Major and Chief Commander General of the rebel army both use the word ‘boys’ in a military-colloquial sense to address him and his fellow soldiers. The term is used in association with his job as an apprentice bus driver, but as Femi Ojo-Ade demonstrates, middle-aged men are also frequently employed in this same capacity (65, n.7).⁷ Older residents from his village repeatedly call Mene a “young boy,” but they do so in order to assert their superior social status and not his chronological age. In this sense, he is a child insofar as the other characters in the narrative are his elders. Mene’s chronological age is not provided, nor does Saro-Wiwa explicitly identify the conflict that drives his novel, but the names of several southeastern Nigerian cities and other contextual clues suggest the Biafran War, which began in 1967. As several older men in Mene’s community discuss its consequences, a veteran of World War Two reminisces about his experiences while fighting in Burma and says, “Mene be a small picken by that time” (26). If Mene was born in or earlier than 1942, the same year that African divisions entered Burma (Bayly and Harper 294), then he is at least twenty years old and not a child at all according to legal or cultural standards both in the U.S. and internationally.

Age signifiers are equally unreliable for determining chronological age in contemporary child soldier stories. Mad Dog and his civilian counterpart Laokolé consider themselves to be adults at age sixteen. But while the former calls his superior

officer Giap “old” at twenty-five years old, the latter refers to her thirty-eight year old mother as “still young” (29), a description that she uses shortly afterward to describe her twelve-year-old brother. Similarly, her eighteen-year-old friend Mélanie is called ‘child’ by an American aid worker as well as Laokolé’s mother, who is herself addressed at one point by a family friend with the same expression. These and other examples from the text demonstrate that the rhetoric of maturity and immaturity is semantically unstable and likely denotes relationships among familiar characters or their experiences during wartime, rather than a specific age category. In *Johnny Mad Dog* the term ‘child’ is synonymous with victimhood and therefore it seems appropriate in these cases: Mélanie’s family is killed when Mad Dog commandeers their vehicle, while Laokolé’s mother witnesses the murder of her husband by government troops (who permanently cripple her) and loses her son in a panicked crowd as they try to avoid rebel militias. The fact that these adults are victimized by persons under the age of eighteen makes the signifier ‘child’ doubly significant and would also seem to render chronological age irrelevant for many characters in the novel: the language of childhood is imbued with a familiar but new meaning—that of subjugation—no matter the chronological ages of those to whom it is applied.

To be clear, many characters in child soldier stories do sometimes distinguish between children and adults and interact with them based on this distinction. However, in the practical context of armed conflict, chronological age does not have as great an influence in this decision. Still, most stories specify, either directly or inferred, the ages of young combatants. This information may not be relevant to their characters, but it is

certainly of interest to American readers as a marker of various social expectations and therefore a possible foundation for cross-cultural comparison. Citizen, the eponym of Delia Jarrett-Macauley's novel *Moses, Citizen and Me*, and Keitetsi are the youngest protagonists in the genre at the age of eight during the time of their enlistment, though several works note other child soldiers as young as six (Jarrett-Macauley 87) or seven (Keitetsi 126, Abani 131, Beah 109, Jal 76). The median age of the protagonists is eleven-and-a-half, yet this figure is imperfect as some soldiers do not know how old they are. Birahima says that he may be either ten or twelve years old, but that no one in his family is really sure (3). Emmanuel Jal explains in the preface to his memoir that like many of the other 'Lost Boys' of Sudan he adopts a symbolic birth date of 1 January 1980, while later in the story he describes his enlistment as taking place at nine years old (76). Uzodinma Iweala's novel *Beasts of No Nation* is the single exception to this convention as the age of its protagonist Agu is never given or even speculated upon; he concludes, "All we are knowing is that, before the war we are children and now we are not" (36).

Even so, semantically the protagonists of these stories are still children insofar as they are under the age of eighteen for, in most cases, the duration of their narratives. Their chronological ages matter because the closer they are to adulthood the less likely readers are to mitigate their responsibility for inappropriate behavior. Mad Dog and Citizen both kill civilians, but while the former is almost eighteen the latter is only eight years old. Their proximity to or distance from the threshold of adulthood is central to how readers decide if these children should be held accountable for their behavior. The issue is further complicated by their length of military service and their age during this period.

Few of the stories provide specific details in this regard and there is substantial variation throughout the genre. Beah may have fought for only a few months, while Keitetsi and Jal spend one half of their young lives as combatants. Generally speaking, child soldier stories do not encourage one interpretation over another on this issue and instead present chronological age as fact. Readers are expected to judge the relevance of age in relation to actions of characters. They might find it difficult to derive meaning in this regard from Iweala's novel and its protagonist. The work depicts a full range of adult behaviors typically represented in the genre: Agu kills both soldiers and civilians, rapes and is the victim of sexual violence, abuses drugs, and so on. If the impulse when reading this work is to either forgive Agu for his offenses because he is too young or else condemn him as mature enough to be morally responsible, the narrative denies the possibility of either judgment because his chronological age is not given. However, most child soldier stories encourage rather than resist these kinds of readings.

What these stories suggest is that childhood, as it is typically understood in the West, is unsustainable in Africa. The characteristics that define the concept are shown to be either ill-suited to contemporary life on the continent or simply irrelevant. Chronological age does not communicate to the reader any meaningful information about the characters' actual age status. When acknowledged it is usually subverted: under-age soldiers expect deference from civilians and obedience from subordinates. Their young ages do not prevent them from achieving high rank nor, for example, does it determine their placement in school grades if they integrate back into civilian life. For most child soldiers, military structures generally replace traditional age classes such as school

cohorts. Children of varying chronological ages progress through the age structure on the battlefield rather than in the classroom. Schoolrooms are converted into ‘war rooms’ in several stories, making concrete the lack of physical separation between children and adults and serving as an analogy for the alternate developmental structure that is imposed by armed groups as a replacement for organized education. Military service supersedes age grades in most respects as well. Once under-age characters become soldiers they secure the privileges and, often with regretful hindsight, responsibilities of adulthood. Child soldiers continue to mature biologically, but this process is far less teleological than what is imagined in the U.S. Many do not enjoy traditional means of socialization and their physical immaturity is frequently juxtaposed against the brutality of their actions. Yet at other moments, most of these characters appear prematurely aged—physically, psychologically, and emotionally—by their participation in war.

This dysfunction is evidenced by the frequent incongruity between what they think and how they express themselves. Birahima narrates his story in a rakish West African patois with numerous references to dictionary definitions and parenthetical explanations of the words and phrases that he uses throughout. These digressions are usually humorous or sardonic, and they demonstrate his relative immaturity. However, at other times in the novel Birahima temporarily sheds his ignorance and provides nuanced analysis, such as his fifteen-page explanation of the history of Sierra Leone, albeit in the same childish voice (157-172). Passages such as these should not be read as examples of the ‘wisdom of children’; Birahima assigns meaning to past events as if he were an adult for the benefit of adult readers. Mad Dog is a bit older than Birahima but also portrayed

as obtuse, especially in comparison to Laokolé.⁸ Yet occasionally he narrates with the uncharacteristic eloquence of an adult observer; in one example, the normally vulgar, slang-dependent speaker describes watching his girlfriend “bobbing her head, *a priori* for no apparent reason, until the melody of a song—an incongruous, even unearthly sound in that ghostly silence—came drifting from the vehicle and reached our ears” (133). Chris Abani makes no effort to disguise the mature ‘voice’ of his mute adolescent protagonist. My Luck acknowledges in the second paragraph of the text that he “sound[s] too old for my age,” without any further explanation. Readers might know that most protagonists are children because they are identified as such, but the traditional markers of childhood and what readers think they know about age do not correspond with how the characters act, comprehend, and narrate their own experiences.

CHINA KEITETSI, THE ADULTERATED CHILD

Keitetsi’s memoir demonstrates, almost entirely without qualification, the unorthodox psychological and social development of child soldiers. For her, the process begins well before enlistment as she is the target of ill-treatment by her family. The author documents a litany of violence including beatings, intimidation, removal from school, and numerous other ‘betrayals’. In this respect, *Child Soldier* resembles traditional examples of misery literature. Her father is the main agent of this abuse, but other members of her step-family also contribute to her suffering. Keitetsi’s initial response is vengeful. She describes several incidents in which she poisons her stepmother, self-injures and blames her grandmother, and so on, but all without positive

results. Later she withdraws emotionally, while her sisters leave their home as soon as they are able. Throughout the first section of the memoir, these abject circumstances are characterized as non-normative within her community. Her father deprives her of necessities, whereas her peers are well-provided for. Bruises make her an object of empathy among other children and when her father beats her in front of them they respond with sadness. Parents and teachers consider the situation to be indefensible but their attempts to reason with her father do not result in success.

When Keitetsi eventually leaves home and tries to secure work as a domestic servant, members of the community reject her on account of her chronological age. Even those adults who express sympathy, such as a kindly doctor and his wife, ultimately decline to hire her for this reason. They consider her too young not only for full-time employment, but also to live independently of her father. The wife explains, “You may not be able to understand why I can’t help you now, but some day you will. I just don’t want you some day to be alone without your family” (83). Her advice seems to be predicated on a culturally-specific view of family bonds that American readers might not share. Yet Keitetsi’s experiences are clearly atypical. Not only is this rationale misguided, the young protagonist seems incapable of acting upon it. She dismisses any meaningful relationships with her family members; she repeatedly takes advantage of and steals from her biological mother, refuses to attend one sister at her death bed, takes pleasure in the passing of another during the Rwandan genocide, and frequently dismisses a third who wants to help her. She is emotionally stunted by the time she achieves independence. Her behavior towards others is capricious, even those of whom she is fond like the father of

her first child, Lieutenant-Colonel Moses Drago. Though not entirely sociopathic, her psychosocial condition is that of a person wholly self-absorbed.

Keitetsi writes that during her early years, “I got a bit ‘savage’ in those surroundings—a feeling which I never really got rid of” (2). Her upbringing demonstrates some of the worst effects of poor childhood development. Her time in the formal education system is sporadic as her father removes her from school as a punishment. The lessons that she learns at home are fundamentally antisocial. Her only role models are characters like her sister Margie, who shows her nothing more than the possibility of escape. Consequently, her empathy and ability to think critically are deficient. In a chapter titled ‘An Innocent Betrayed,’ her sister Helen reveals to their father that Keitetsi has pilfered some bananas. Keitetsi appears to forgive her but later reports her to their grandmother for a scheme to sell stolen milk in which they both participate. In a separate incident, she steals money from her step-grandmother and in the very next scene discovers that her bag has been taken. Without irony she “asked myself why all this trouble had to happen to me: what have I done to the world?” (79). To be clear, Keitetsi should not be judged as an adult on the basis of this contradictory behavior. Yet these examples are not mere childishness, but rather evidence of a pathological naivety that she retains even as she matures in other respects. Sometimes this lack of sophistication can be read as grimly amusing: for example, she is oblivious to repeated allusions that her commander Ahmad Kashilingi has raped his own daughter. Yet in other cases her ignorance can also be dangerous. She misinterprets as friendship what is really a business relationship with a Swiss entrepreneur, which causes her to owe him an enormous debt

that she cannot repay. Indeed, she is woefully incapable in nearly all of her commercial dealings.

She matures not under the supervision of family members or teachers, but rather in the context of her military service. Keitetsi has no choice but to enlist and, unlike civilians in her community, the National Resistance Army (NRA) of Uganda does not refuse her because of her young age. Quite the contrary, as a child she is considered an asset. Child soldiers are eager to please their commanders and need little encouragement to perform brutal tasks such as murder and torture. Unlike adult soldiers, “[o]ur memory and experience of another life from the past, and our awareness of death, was a lot more limited than the other soldiers’. We fought with one spirit, totally committed to whatever cause there was, with no turning back in contrast to most of the grown-ups” (124). Keitetsi and her peers are rewarded for their service with integration into the relatively fixed structure of the military. She is praised for successfully carrying out orders and punished for dereliction of duty. Some officers do not possess the necessary discipline of their profession—Keitetsi is quite critical of undeserving soldiers who receive promotions—however she regards these conditions as preferable to those she endured while at home. Her life seems to her to have purpose in the military, her actions are valued more often than not, and she is given a chance to excel. For many under-age combatants, the military serves as a necessary alternative to family life; in several works, they are taught to regard their weapon as a surrogate family member or lover. Military service also gives them an opportunity to seek revenge against those allegedly responsible for the deaths of relatives. Keitetsi views her situation differently in this

regard as she “knew where my parents were, and I just hoped to stay alive, so that one day I could return home and kill them” (123). However, she too regards commanders like Kashilingi as paternal figures.

Central to the stability that military life offers is the concept of rank, which surpasses everything, including chronological age. Rank determines from whom Keitetsi takes orders, as well as which soldiers constitute her subordinates. The achievement of status within the military is not limited by how old she is, but rather her abilities and the extent to which she is favored by her superior officers. That said, in practice some characters do continue to assert the perceived importance of chronological age. In one noteworthy scene, an older boy confronts Keitetsi: “[H]e told me to respect him, even though we shared the same rank as lance-corporal. Now my blood was boiling and my gun was loaded in my arms, but still he added as if he was a wise old man, that more age earned more respect” (149). Keitetsi shoots the boy in a display of *realpolitick*, but she is also influenced by, and acknowledges the significance of, conventional attitudes about the subject. Under the command of Kashilingi at the age of thirteen or fourteen, she selects three recruits to serve as his bodyguards. Her first choice is much older than she is and despite his lower station, he refuses to recognize her rank on this basis. While her second choice refers to her as ‘Afande,’ or teacher, she remains uncomfortable because he too is older. She makes her third choice explicitly because of the recruit’s youthful appearance, despite the fact that he is only one or two years younger than her. Even after she is promoted to sergeant and appointed chief escort to Kashilingi, Keitetsi worries about her status. She admits, “I had the rank and title to decide for the escort, but I was a

young girl at the time, who was afraid that one day they would disobey my orders” (181). Chronological age no longer predetermines status in most child soldier stories, and within the social infrastructure of armed groups its relevance is minimal. But among individual soldiers it still has a place in the social hierarchy, especially in the context of the exercise of authority.

In contrast, there is one type of relationship about which military personnel of all ages and ranks are certain: that between soldiers and civilians. Keitetsi’s enlistment is transformative in this regard. Once scared and deferential, she no longer has patience for non-military citizens who disobey her commands, and often reacts violently when they fail to comply. She expresses disgust when an officer’s wife beats a nine-year-old soldier, not for the abuse itself, but rather because the boy is a member of the NRA, while the woman is not. This attitude extends to relationships in her own family. After Keitetsi accosts her mother for visiting with a suitor, the man says, ““These kids! When they go to the army, they suddenly lose all respect”” (161). The relevance of this claim, which is based on a traditional deference in Africa toward one’s elders, is greatly diminished in wartime and post-war societies. As if in demonstration of this point, Keitetsi drives her mother and the man away when they ignore her demands. Similarly, when she first returns to her family farm after enlistment her father tries to talk with her as an equal. However, she rejects his questions about her experiences as a soldier as contextually inappropriate; irrespective of her personal hatred for the man, he is a civilian and therefore not entitled to ask these kinds of questions. The distinction between military and non-military renders age grades obsolete, even among community and family

members.

Child soldiers derive their privileges from the authority inherent to their profession and the weapons they carry, rather than the number of years they have lived. They participate in a variety of activities that are, in the U.S., usually reserved exclusively for adults. For example, Keitetsi drinks at bars and nightclubs. She claims at one point to smoke forty cigarettes a day. She manages, albeit ineptly, a number of business ventures. The material advantages that child soldiers benefit from in wartime and post-war societies, most notably the right to solicit bribes and plunder conquered towns and villages, also lead to circumstances in which the dependent relationship between adults and under-age children becomes upended. During her adolescence, Keitetsi assumes guardianship of her mother, supporting her financially and securing a house for her. But she tries to control the people her mother interacts with; she demands that her mother reject suitors and says that if she wants a relationship then Keitetsi can force her father to marry again. Her immaturity is often juxtaposed against her agency in this way. Whether or not custom permits her behavior on account of chronological age, if it is desired or warranted, or if even she is capable of making informed decisions, her narrative and others like it indicate that she will do so because she can, because soldiering takes primacy over childhood in both her personal and public identities.

CHARACTERS AS BOTH INNOCENT AND EVIL

Child soldiers enjoy the freedom to act in ways that are otherwise prohibited because of their age, but they are not permitted to refuse orders. The most affecting

requirement of military service in the context of the genre is to kill both enemy combatants and civilian sympathizers, and child soldiers are not exempt from this task. Some characters are given justification for killing others by their leaders, while others have personal motivations, but no matter their reasons nearly all of the protagonists commit homicide, to say nothing of other immoral offenses such as theft, destruction of property, and so on. There is no standard literary treatment of these killings, other than a mental disassociation that accompanies their repetition; descriptions of the first homicide are generally more vivid than the following. Mad Dog and, to lesser extent Birahima, kill with enthusiasm. Agu, Beah, Jal, and My Luck express a range of conflicted emotions. In keeping with his portrayal, Citizen is enigmatic; the text does not reveal how he feels. Despite her cavalier attitude, Keitetsi does not describe this aspect of military life in much detail; she kills soldiers and civilians, but does not dwell upon this fact. Nevertheless, the offenses she and other characters commit during war are especially significant as extreme examples of the Western idea that children possess an essentially evil disposition, as well as a direct challenge to contrary view that they are innocent in nature.

The term 'innocence' is applied in two distinct ways in relation to child soldiers: morally and juridically. The former is characterized in the stories as either an innate, axiomatic trait of childhood itself, or a precarious state of being in which a child soldier may have knowledge of wartime violence but not experienced or perpetrated it. This second condition is not sustainable after enlistment. While she participates in several skirmishes, Grace Akallo, co-author of the quasi-memoir *Girl Soldier*, is the only

protagonist not depicted as killing others. However, she cannot prevent her own victimhood. Her weapon serves an alternative function in the portrayal of her lost innocence: on three separate occasions she attempts suicide with it. Still, the incident that signals she is no longer innocent is much more common in the genre than self-harm: she is raped by her commanders. When Keitetsi indicates that in the NRA “[i]t was a crime for a child soldier to say: ‘I cannot do this, because I’m a child’” (210), she refers specifically to the sexual abuse of under-age combatants by superior officers. Most of the protagonists are victims of rape. Keitetsi in particular is sexually assaulted numerous times in her life, including by a chief in her community, an army captain, Kashilingi, and numerous unnamed officers.⁹ Sexual mores may differ among different cultures, but in most cases rape is unambiguously depicted in the narratives as a non-consensual, malevolent violation.

It is equally as difficult for child soldiers to avoid traumatizing others. Because most do commit offenses, their juridical innocence is not easily determined or agreed upon in the texts. Justice is summarily administered on the battlefield and, regardless of whether the accused are guilty of a crime, they are often executed without delay. However, once conflicts abate or end, culpability becomes a more complicated issue. All of the child soldier protagonists are coerced into killing or maiming others for the first time and are usually portrayed as reluctant to do so. They may also be said to lack the moral maturity that is necessary to recognize the grave nature of their actions. Moreover, child soldiers are not in practice able to object on principle to the orders they receive. After they are decommissioned, Western humanitarian aid workers absolve them of their

crimes on this basis. The common refrain, which Beah and Keitetsi are taught to internalize, is that they are not at fault for their actions during wartime. The rationale for this perspective is multifold: the recruitment of young people is regarded as more serious a crime than what the child soldiers themselves might have done, their age precludes true agency, and even if they did commit heinous acts their ontological innocence supersedes their technical guilt. International organizations like the UN, which frequently enter post-war states as self-appointed mediators, also adopt this position. In perhaps the most noteworthy case, David Crane, Chief Prosecutor of the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL), declared that although former child soldiers were officially subject to his prosecution, he was unwilling to indict children for any crimes they may have committed during wartime (“Special Court”). The government of Sierra Leone and many victims of the conflict in that state opposed providing child soldiers with immunity, which was the reason they were originally included in the jurisdiction of the SCSL (Rosen 302).

The perspectives of civilian characters in the stories vary on whether the under-age combatants are responsible for their actions. For example, Citizen’s own family absolves him of the murder of his grandmother, but other members of his community consider him dangerous and refuse to accept him or other former child soldiers. A family friend explains, “Who wants a child who only knows how to kill? What kind of nightmare is that? What kind, eh? If they keep these children here, is like keeping something bad in the blood. Something rotten, isn’t it?” (19). These civilians do not necessarily reject the children because of specific crimes, but rather because of their infamous reputations. This notoriety precedes Beah and his friends as they flee the

conflict in Sierra Leone; even before they enlist, local militias regard them as “monsters” (55). It also follows Jal after he withdraws from service, becomes an adult, and lives abroad as a refugee (196). Civilian characters regard child soldiers in different ways during their respective conflicts: some embrace these young soldiers, others show ill-will, and most accept their participation as inevitable. However, once the conflicts end, few express sympathy for ex-child soldiers as they are widely regarded as corrupted by their experiences. They are no longer innocent and perceived of as unwilling or unable to integrate back into their communities either as children or adults.

Child soldiers themselves are ambivalent about their culpability for violence. Some like My Luck and Birahima do not provide excuses for their actions, nor do they expect forgiveness; the former resigns himself to the idea that “there are some sins too big even for God to forgive” (79). Others exonerate themselves as having been soldiers performing their duties. While Jal finds it difficult to narrate his participation in the killing of innocent civilians during a battle and says that his actions continue to “torment” him, he also maintains that he “feel[s] no guilt about that day because I was a child who took part in killings as the hatred and sorrow built up over years was released in mob violence. I did not kill in cold blood, I killed in war” (255). Agu consoles himself with similar thoughts: “I am soldier and soldier is not bad if he is killing. I am telling this to myself because soldier is supposed to be killing, killing, killing. So if I am killing, then I am only doing what it right” (23). Yet even at what we can assume is a relatively young age, he also understands that his actions are ethically and morally wrong, in spite of his initial excuses. After one particularly gruesome encounter he maintains, “I am not Devil.

I am not bad boy. I am not bad boy. Devil is not blessing me and I am not going to hell,” before concluding, “But I am still thinking maybe Devil born me and that is why I am doing all of this” (48). Agu is not consoled by the rationalization that he has only performed the tasks required of a soldier. Equally important, he wonders the responsibility lies within his own evil nature.

None of the other characters describe their own actions as ‘evil,’ nor are they labeled as such, which is perhaps an indication of the moral ambiguity of war. Their behavior is certainly morally objectionable and causes harm to others, in the most basic sense of the concept. Yet the stories encourage differing readings depending on the age, context, and characters involved in a potentially evil offense, even in the cases of indefensible wartime violence. For example, of the three protagonists who rape adult civilians, two are portrayed sympathetically. Twice Agu perfunctorily refers to raping others in *Beasts of No Nation*. When older comrades become excited as they near a city with a brothel, he admits, “I am too young to be knowing about these thing even if I am knowing from how the men are talking about woman that I am really wanting one to be making my soldier feel good. I am wanting one, *but not like how we are getting them in battle*” (emphasis added, 101). Later as he reflects upon his actions in regret, he explains, “If they are ordering me KILL, I am killing, SHOOT, I am shooting, ENTER WOMAN, I am entering woman and not even saying anything even if I am not liking it” (135). In both cases, the novel portrays these incidents as evidence of the extent to which his commanders have corrupted his childhood. He cannot refuse orders, so he appeals to readers instead as a meek sort of defense. Agu discourages readers from blaming him for

his actions by presenting them in this manner.

My Luck describes his rape of a civilian in much greater detail than Agu does. He too is forced to rape by a superior officer. The woman whom he assaults recognizes his predicament, and consoles him even as she is being victimized: “The woman’s eyes were tender, as if all she saw was a boy lost. She stroked my hair tenderly, whispering as I sobbed: ‘It’s all right son, it’s all right. Better the ones like you live’” (85). Sexual gratification is irrelevant to the act; both of the works depict rape as a means to compel obedience from subordinates and, in a larger sense, as Susan Brownmiller describes, a “recognizable pattern of national terror and subjugation” (37). His fellow child soldier Ijeoma recognizes the danger inherent in the act, not only for civilians but also for My Luck himself. She tells him and he acknowledges, “I knew what she meant. I was thirteen, armed and lost in a war with the taste for rape” (86). To prevent him from doing so of his own volition in the future, the two child soldiers have consensual intercourse after every battle when other soldiers claim the so-called ‘spoils of war.’ When My Luck says that he loses his virginity to Ijeoma (59), he privileges their sex act as one of choice rather than depravation. Furthermore, he demonstrates his rejection of evil by killing the officer who commanded him to rape when the man later attempts to sexually assault an under-age civilian.

Mad Dog represents the opposite condition, the child soldier as unequivocally evil. During his first narrated encounter with civilians he enters a broadcast station and rapes a well-known television presenter. Characterizing his assault as what any soldier “*ought* to do with a beautiful chick” (emphasis in the original, 23), he convinces himself

that his victim is in fact a willing partner. The text indicates that he rapes others as well, though this is the only incident described in detail. The scene is meant to demonstrate his evil nature and Mad Dog is distinguished from Agu and My Luck in this respect. He rapes willingly, does not regret his actions, and fails to show empathy for his victims. The conflict in which he participates is merely a pretext for satisfying his own instinctual lusts, as Brownmiller writes more generally about rape during wartime (37). Odile Cazanave claims that the work “deconstructs the whole process of de-humanization of children turned adult soldiers [sic]” (63) by juxtaposing Mad Dog’s ostensibly adult behavior and sense of self-maturity with his childish characteristics and lack of authority. However, these attributes are by no means contradictory. Even if readers do not view children as inherently evil, Locke’s argument that they may become so without proper guidance is evident. Mad Dog embodies the worst consequences of Rousseauian development. He is the savage child who, in the absence of moral instruction, assimilates into a culture of violence.

Readers need not be familiar with the entire genre or other child soldier protagonists to comprehend Mad Dog in the context of the narrative. He is an unsympathetic figure, especially in comparison to Laokolé. The two share scenes and even lines of speech, but their personas are antithetical to each other. Like all characters in the novel, they are caricatures. She is respectful, conscientious, and as mature as any of the adult civilians she encounters; he is a vicious, unruly child. However, the narrative exacts a price from readers for their identification with Laokolé. The characters finally interact with each other directly during a publicity event for the newly-installed

‘president’ of their country. After Laokolé publicly embarrasses Mad Dog, he seizes her, ostensibly in order to rape her in retaliation. Instead, she kills him in a poignant final scene—which, in accordance with the style of the narrative, Mad Dog foreshadows in an earlier remark (126)—by crushing his genitals. This ending provides symbolic catharsis to a terrorized community and to readers who, for much of the story, can only witness the injury that Mad Dog inflicts. But it also precludes a straightforward interpretation in which innocence (and innocents) remain virtuously opposed to evil. Again, although the Western humanitarian impulse may be to forgive Mad Dog for his evil actions, his peer Laokolé judges him unworthy of rehabilitation.

BECOMING CHILDREN AGAIN IN THE WEST

Each of the protagonists in these stories is a child in some sense, but none possess what readers in the U.S. would call a conventional childhood. The effects of their participation in war are described in various ways, but the meaning is generally the same. Some narratives describe the impact of these experiences on all child soldiers. They are identified in *Moses, Citizen, and Me* as “old before [their] time” (128). Keitetsi laments that “it’s us who lost our clear dreams, it’s us who remain hating our skin and it’s us with no thoughts of a child; or grown-up thoughts” (xi-xii). Others focus on their personal degradations. In spite of his blustering style of narration, Birahima refers to his “fucked up life” as “not an edifying spectacle” (5). Agu admits that “I am knowing I am no more child so if this war is ending I cannot be going back to doing child thing” (93). My Luck regrets a similar fate, saying, “I have never been a boy. That was stolen from me and I

will never be a man—not this way. I am some kind of chimera who knows only the dreadful intimacy of killing” (143). In each case, the protagonists describe a pessimistic double-consciousness with respect to age. They are neither entirely children nor adults, and they doubt the possibility that they can ever recover their innocence or achieve maturity in the eyes of others. They are, to the detriment of the continent, broadly represented in the genre as a generation of young people without hope of integrating into their respective communities.

Nevertheless, as Elena Coundouriotis maintains, most child soldier stories are recovery narratives. However, some protagonists ultimately do not recover. Mad Dog is killed in the final chapter of his novel. My Luck is already dead, wandering across war-torn Nigeria as a ghost. As I note in chapter three, Birahima is doomed to repeat his experiences *ad infinitum* because of the circular structure of his story; the first and final lines of the story are identical—they serve as a preface for his narration—and as such his military service is perpetual, never-ending. Still, many protagonists do have the opportunity to return to civilian life, which is to say their place in society as it is understood in the West can be restored. This cautiously positive conclusion is integral to the marketing category to which they belong. As I document in the previous chapter, the function of the genre requires that the majority of these characters must persevere no matter the depravities that they may experience. What connects most child soldier stories together in this regard is that while rehabilitation may begin in Africa, the process must be completed in Western states in order for recovery to be successful. Characters who eventually migrate to the West (with assistance from its humanitarian agents) can to an

extent become children again, whereas those who remain on the continent apparently cannot recover their childhoods.

Conventional wisdom in the U.S. and other Western states suggests that childhood is in an irreparable decline. Rather than interpret the unconventional behaviors of many children as evidence that our conceptual framework for them is inadequate, it is commonly believed that childhood itself is under threat.¹⁰ However, recent data on the actual experiences of American children demonstrates that these concerns are unjustified, not unlike Western beliefs about the recruitment of children in Africa. The lives of children in the U.S. have improved over the past few decades in nearly all relevant categories. Serious violent crimes such as aggravated assault, rape, robbery, and homicide against young people have decreased significantly since their peak in 1993, and overall since 1980, as have rates of injury-related deaths (Federal Interagency Forum 144, 146-7). Child maltreatment, including abuse and neglect, has also lessened since 1998, the first year an entry is provided (117). Behaviors commonly associated with pre-maturation have also decreased. Cigarette, alcohol, and drug abuse by young people have declined since 1995, before which time the data is not comparable (152-154). Reported youth sexual activity and adolescent birth rates have fallen since 1991 and are much lower than in 1980 (115, 155). Threefold fewer children have committed serious violent crimes in 2010 than during past three decades (156). Finally, the number of school-associated homicides, of particular concern in the U.S. due to a number of high-profile incidents, were in 2008 at their lowest levels since 1992 (Robers 89).

According to every quantifiable measure, a majority of children who live in the

U.S.—and the West generally—do so in relatively protected circumstances. Some Americans may fear for the physical, mental, emotional, and moral development of their children, but the conditions in which they mature are clearly favorable to what the protagonists and other under-age characters in child soldier stories must endure. Many of the African children who are familiar with the U.S., at least in the abstract, recognize this fact.¹¹ Laokolé maintains that if she lived in the U.S. she might have already enrolled in college, whereas in Africa she faces the continuous threat of violence (268). When the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) offers to send Keitetsi to the West she reflexively chooses the U.S., despite knowing almost nothing about the country; its reputation as a safe haven from violence is enough for her (263). Suffice it to say, it is not coincidental that when rehabilitation is possible in these stories it occurs in the countries of their intended reading audiences. Recovery is gradual and involves four basic stages: removal of the child from the military setting; treatment of the emotional and psychological traumas they experience; adoption by a Westerner; and resettlement in the West. As their respective narratives conclude, most protagonists are engaged in this process.

Keitetsi is one of the characters most affected by their military service and therefore the least likely to rehabilitate, yet her narrative suggests that even the worst offenders can do so. She leaves Uganda once she realizes that her involvement in the civil war has had a profoundly negative influence on her personal development. She originally intends to travel to the U.S. under false pretenses, but eventually ends up in South Africa instead. She finds work as a bar assistant in a strip club, another social space intended for

adults, but by leaving the NRA she begins the recovery process. Four years later, around the age of twenty-three, she makes contact with the UNHCR and begins therapy sessions, in which she is told “that the bad things I did was never my fault” (263). Her desire to relocate to the U.S. is discouraged as a UN official explains that the organization would make the decision on her behalf. Keitetsi is uncharacteristically pliable as these events unfold. Far removed from the battlefield and treated as if she were a child, in spite of her (adult) chronological age, she is content to let others decide her fate. Denmark eventually accepts her refugee application but she is only comforted by the decision when she learns the country is located in Europe and not Africa. Keitetsi identifies as an African and former child soldier; she even continues to use her *nom de guerre* after her decommission and does not reveal her given name in the memoir or other promotional epitexts. But she is also convinced that she cannot rehabilitate in Africa.

In order for Keitetsi to reclaim her childhood she must, according to the conventions of the genre, divest of all manifestations of adulthood. One example of this process occurs when she permits the Western humanitarian bureaucracy to determine where in the West she should live. However, the other notable instance is likely disconcerting to many readers: she makes the symbolically necessary decision to abandon her children. Keitetsi is not a responsible mother by almost any measure, though it is important to note that she did not receive any guidance on how to do so, nor can she model her own behavior on that of her parents. Unlike many peers who have also had children at a young age while enlisted in the military, she knows the father of her first child. But although she is fond of him, she is also incapable of maintaining a stable

relationship with the fellow soldier. She also finds it impossible to act as both mother and combatant; on several occasions she gives her son to family members to take new assignments. Still, when Keitetsi decides to end her military service and flee Uganda, rather than taking him with her, she leaves the infant in the care of Moses Drago's girlfriend, a woman that she barely knows and is not especially fond of. Moreover, she provides no information whatsoever about her second child, not even a name. Once Keitetsi is granted asylum she seems to abandon both her children to an unknown future.

Free from the responsibilities of parenthood, Keitetsi can herself become a child again. She describes the moment she begins to feel this way when the Danish man whom she refers to as her 'father' takes her to an amusement park: "[He] stood and watched me swing, just like a child. I was wild with every game there" (271). Recreation of this kind is integral to Western conceptions of childhood, as well as a foundation of humanitarian organizations like Right to Play, which tries to provide diversions for children in countries affected by war. But not all play is regarded equally. Keitetsi describes playing at war with fellow students at the end of a school term. Several child soldier protagonists trace their initial attractions to the military to watching other children march in uniform during parades.¹² Yet once they become soldiers play is generally abandoned. My Luck and Ijeoma do engage in a variation of 'Rock, Paper, Scissors' as they wait for battle, what Roger Caillois might call a 'ruled game' (14-15). In the chaos of warfare this activity might offer child soldiers a temporary sense of order. But for My Luck and Ijeoma play is mechanical rather than recreational. They no longer appear to be acting as children do. The scene that Keitetsi describes at the end of her memoir is different. She

demonstrates what it is to *be* a child as most American readers would understand that concept. And her playfulness is possible because of the specific conditions of her rehabilitation—she is far from Africa.

WHICH VERSION OF CHILDHOOD RINGS TRUE?

Children are represented in a variety of ways in African writing, of which child soldier stories are but one example. Some of the continent's most popular works focus specifically on childhood experiences, like Camara Laye's memoir *The Dark Child* (1953), Cheikh Hamidou Kane's novel *Ambiguous Adventure* (1961), Wole Soyinka's memoir *Ake: The Years of Childhood* (1981), Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel *Nervous Conditions* (1988), and a variety of others. They are in some respects a variant of the much broader tradition of the coming-of-age story, which have been studied extensively, both individually and as a genre.¹³ Maxwell Okolie writes that the earlier works are responses to Africanist discourses of that time and best understood in the context of the Negritude movement, which largely focuses on the expression of 'authentic' African identities (30-31). Even so, they are not idyllic. Rather, they portray the ordinary challenges and achievements that many other Africans share. Notwithstanding child soldier stories, there are fewer contemporary works available to American readers that depict childhood in the present day. U.S. publishers seem to have determined that there is no appetite for such works in the country and, as I indicate in the first chapter, African writing on any topic is considered a niche market. Novels or memoirs about normative African childhood are apparently no more compelling to most American readers than

stories about children who face more common difficulties on the continent than military service, including economic insecurity, malnutrition, preventable diseases, and so on. For these reasons, most American readers have little idea about the lives of children in Africa aside from what is represented in the narratives under consideration here.

Child soldier stories do offer glimpses of alternative African childhoods. Most notably, child soldier characters often positively describe their lives prior to recruitment, though not necessarily in the same ways as experienced by many American children. Compulsory school attendance is regarded as a common childhood experience in the U.S. that is not necessarily shared by these young people, for example. Birahima and Mad Dog willingly leave their schools after the third and fourth grades, respectively, while Akallo is kidnapped from her boarding school dormitory. Beah and My Luck are both forced to abandon their formal educations due to violent conflict. But the fact that these specific characters either cannot or choose not to attend school is not because their communities do not value formal education. Instead, the outbreak of war compels this change in their lives. Keitetsi is the only character who does not compare her upbringing favorably to her time as a child soldier. While she acknowledges that military service has been harmful to her, she characterizes her life before enlistment as worse. Still, her experiences as a young civilian are not typical of the genre. Her abuse began at home, perpetrated by her own family members. Nearly all the other protagonists enjoy the loving support of one or both parents, remember their pre-war childhoods fondly, and yearn to return to them, even if they understand that their wartime experiences may preclude this outcome.

Perhaps the clearest indication in these narratives that children who become

soldiers are unusual in this respect is their concurrent juxtaposition with other children whose childhoods differ significantly. With the exception of Laokolé, these civilian characters are relegated to the margins of the works as secondary, one-dimensional characters. They are rarely given names or described in more than a few lines of text. Their purpose is to demonstrate by comparison how debased child soldiers have become, usually through scenes in which the former are victimized by the latter. Yet the most revealing of these encounters occur later, when the protagonists try to re-integrate into civilian life. The most powerful examples occur in the memoirs by Keitetsi, Beah, and Jal, all of whom return to school after their having been decommissioned and are shunned by their fellow students who, as civilians, do not possess the same wartime experiences. Jal writes, “I knew I was different because I was a soldier, and although other children never knew my secret, I think they could sense it” (199). Child soldiers are not normal and this difference marks former combatants as outsiders among other children who may share chronological ages with them but relatively little else. Child soldier stories deliberately focus on these exceptional characters—what they say, what they do, how they think, how they interact, and why they become who they are. Too often, the fact that they are not truly representative of the African child is obscured as a consequence.

CHAPTER TWO | ENDNOTES

1. For summaries and critiques of this ‘self-evident’ viewpoint see Jo Boyden, Eric Heinze, Çiğdem Kâğıtçıbaşı, A. Bame Nsamenang, and Jeffrey W. Trawick-Smith, among many others.
2. I examine these characteristics in much greater detail later in the chapter.
3. While the average age of menarche is twelve or thirteen, some research identifies pubertal development in statistically significant numbers of American children as young as nine (Parent, et al).
4. In San Francisco, Miami, and New York City—among numerous other American municipalities—it is illegal for adults to enter most public playgrounds without the accompaniment of a minor.
5. Children are implicitly defined in the books Exodus (Exod 30:14) and Numbers (Num. 14:29) as age nineteen or younger, but this claim is also contested in Christian doctrine depending on the context.
6. This attitude has changed in the U.S. during the past two decades as many states have passed more exacting juvenile prosecution and sentencing procedures. See David S. Tanenhaus and Steven A. Drizin.
7. This particular meaning of ‘boy’ has multiple resonances: its use to describe a male servant predates the contemporary definition as a male child or youth by more than a century. Equally significant in this case, it was used in British colonies like Nigeria to refer to non-white slaves or laborers (OED).

8. Laokolé is an intelligent teenager, but her verbose monologues, for example on pages 136, 146, 157, and 273-274, clearly demonstrate the frequent intrusion of the author's own voice.
9. This list does not include attempted rapes. Moreover, the memoir includes the vaguest of implications that her father may have raped her as well.
10. Of course, these fears have been expressed throughout Western history. A trio of studies published in 1982 by Neil Postman, Valerie Polakow Suransky, and C. John Sommerville, each identifying different causes, inaugurated this most recent era of moral panic.
11. Beah is a notable exception. His familiarity with New York City comes from American rap music and he is surprised when, after arriving for a UN conference, his experiences do not reflect the violent imagery of the American cultural export. Jal describes visiting Washington D.C. as a lobbyist, where he learns that children in the city also confront violence, and draws a telling comparison: "I was a war child from Africa and they were the war children of America" (251). But he does not suggest that the experiences of American children as whole are equivalent.
12. Children around the world imitate soldiering. Iona and Charles Opie distinguish among different examples of war games (338-340). However, their analysis seems less relevant in the context of non-Western wartime and post-war societies.
13. Examples include Wangarĩ wa Nyatetũ Waigwa, Walter P. Collins, Joseph R. Slaughter 228–56, and various others. John Walsh makes this association explicit in his analysis of *Johnny Mad Dog*.

CHAPTER THREE:

AFRO-PESSIMISM AND THE PREDISPOSITION TO VIOLENCE IN AHMADOU
KOUROUMA'S *ALLAH IS NOT OBLIGED* AND OTHER STORIES

INTRODUCTION

Prior to the success of the child soldier story genre, likely the best-known literary depiction of children waging war is William Golding's 1954 novel *Lord of the Flies*, in which a group of British pre-adolescents are stranded on an uninhabited Pacific island. Their decline into violent sectarianism is so iconic that comparisons have repeatedly been made between Golding's work and the child soldier story genre, as well as the conflicts in which child soldiers participate.¹ Following this analogy, a character like Mad Dog is comparable to Jack and his hunters who embrace savagery, while My Luck and Beah manage to retain their humanity when confronted with fear and aggression, as Ralph does. Still, the comparison seems cursory at best. Golding's novel is a fable about the Hobbesian human condition. Conflict among his characters is the inevitable outcome of their own inherent nature. Golding ignores what he describes as "trivial" concerns like sexual tension and basic material needs that are necessary for survival to convey his point—his characters interact within a contextual vacuum ("Fable" 89). In contrast, child soldier stories are embedded within the explicit social and material realities of armed conflict in Africa. Child soldier characters are not sequestered from these conditions, they are instead a product of them. These children are either encouraged or compelled to fight on behalf of organizations that regard violence as an appropriate means of achieving

wealth and power.

These differences—and not any superficial similarities—are what make the comparisons between *Lord of the Flies* and child soldier stories so poignant. When an adult character appears at the conclusion of *Lord of the Flies*, the fight among the boys (which is re-framed as childishness) ends immediately. This abrupt conclusion is fundamental to the didactic lesson of the narrative regarding the tenuous bonds of ‘civilization.’ It suggests that when persons are removed from civilizing influences they will regress into primitivism. The characters who suffer from these changes are described throughout the work as ‘savages’ and, in the original edition and unedited reprints, more specifically in one scene as ‘niggers.’² Golding applies these terms deliberately.

Elsewhere he expresses his belief in a hierarchy of the races and that the relative stability of Western countries (notwithstanding the two World Wars) “must be because of the nature of the people who built [those societies]” (qtd in Biles 45). The important point here is that while Jack and his fellow hunters act like savages and the other children suffer as a consequence, their circumstances are temporary and will necessarily improve once they return to civilization. The same is not true for children who fight in Africa.

I show in this chapter that child soldier stories are not just concerned with the effects of organized violence on children who participate in it, but also the conditions that engender their recruitment in the first place. Their approach to this subject differs from their uncritical treatment of childhood; many stories challenge the view that ‘tribalism’ is the main cause of warfare on the continent. But as a whole, their representations of these conflicts resemble—and reinforce—the tone that has been established by decades of

unfavorable media coverage in the U.S. This negativity is based on the premise that conditions in Africa are not just bad, but that they will not improve. Organized violence serves as a representative example in this regard. Personal enrichment and revenge—not ethnonationalism—are the most common reasons given for why conflict occurs. Because child soldiers are regarded as not only agents but also victims of organized violence, and since the ideologies of their respective groups are usually depicted as flimsy, the warlords and commanders who lead them are most often singled out for criticism. Civilians and military personnel who show concern for child soldier characters are generally unable to provide significant help. But more importantly, according to the logic and tone of most child soldier stories, their help will do little good. Even when this pessimism is not explicitly expressed, it is ever-present in the genre.

ORGANIZED VIOLENCE IN AFRICA

Where does the impression in the U.S. that Africa is hopeless come from? Americans are surely influenced by representations of the continent from past centuries, but presently the most influential contributor to Africanist discourse is the American media. By the end of the twentieth century, reports of political repression, economic stagnation, corruption, public-health crises, and armed conflict predominated in media coverage on Africa. These accounts represent a continuation of years of discouraging accounts. For example, articles in *The New York Times* over a fifty-year period between 1955 and 1995 have been shown to be persistently negative in content and tone (Schraeder and Endless). The most optimistic year in this regard was 1990, which

coincided with the release of Nelson Mandela from a long prison sentence in South Africa and the end of the Cold War. But just five years later the frequency of negative reports increased to 85 percent, most notably with the 1993 botched humanitarian mission in Somalia and the genocide in Rwanda the following year (33). Additional research by Hlumelo Biko et. al., Jerry Domatob, Beverly G. Hawk, and Charles R. Stith and Marlon Millner shows that negative coverage is consistent across media formats and continues today. I do not mean to suggest that affirmative stories about Africa are never published. However, the majority of news reports about Africa—as well as other forms of media that also contribute to Africanist discourse, from movies to charitable appeals—suggest that it is a miserable place to live.

Negative media coverage about Africa is not in itself remarkable; the continent has clearly suffered from a disproportionate amount of tragedy and discord since the end (and also as a consequence) of colonial regimes. Rather, what distinguishes these accounts is their unceasing pessimism; many of these reports suggest that conditions in Africa are not just bad, but they are also unlikely to improve. This is the essential message of the influential 13 May 2000 edition of *The Economist*, for instance, which declares Africa to be “The Hopeless Continent” on its cover. David Rieff makes a similar point when he cautions that successes in Africa are isolated and therefore should not be mistaken as evidence of systemic change: “Neither the political situation as it actually exists, nor the prospects for the kinds of transformations that will have to take place in Africa, give one any particular grounds for such hope” (17). This view is known as Afro-pessimism, a cynical reaction to the perceived lack of social, political, or economic

progress during the post-independence era, as well as the subsequent failure of structural adjustment programs (SAPs) imposed by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. Repeated poor performances by African states in annual ‘quality of life’ surveys from international organizations such as the UN and Transparency International strengthens this cynicism, as does the characterization of egregious cases as typical, like the historic hyperinflation of the Zimbabwean economy or the notorious eccentricity of Idi Admin and Muammar Gaddafi.

Incidents of violence are the most frequent type of event used to justify Afro-pessimism; they are said to take place throughout Africa and are seen as the culmination of so many other problems that occur across the continent. They can take a number of forms—since the mid-1990s, organized conflict in Africa usually occurs as small-scale and peripheral insurgencies, political violence, and armed disputes over “livelihood resources” like water and land; none of which are particular to, or more prevalent on, the continent (Uppsala Data Conflict Program, Straus). However, more dramatic events—civil wars and large-scale mass killings—are what usually capture the attention of the American media and its audiences. Nevertheless, it is often difficult to determine which organized conflicts will generate the most interest. For example, Coghlan, et. al. estimate that as of 2007, ongoing hostilities during the Second Congo War have resulted in 5.4 million deaths, making it the deadliest conflict of any kind since the Second World War (16). In contrast, Degomme and Guha-Sapir estimate that nearly 300,000 deaths can be attributed to the conflict in Darfur, Sudan (297). Yet reporting about the former has been minimal (Soderlund, et. al.), especially in comparison to the latter. John Emerson

demonstrates that between 1998 and 2008, *The New York Times* published twice as many articles per year on Darfur as the Second Congo War, and this ratio is even greater if the date range is limited to when the latter conflict began in 2003. What this analysis suggests is that casualty rates alone do not guarantee widespread interest in the U.S.

Anneke Van Woudenberg wonders if this lack of interest in the Congo from most reporters (and, correspondingly, the American public) is a consequence of Conrad's literary legacy—the belief that violence is an inherent characteristic of the Congo in particular (qtd in Emerson). Of course, the association between violence and Africa in general is pervasive throughout modern history; European colonialism on the continent was chiefly motivated by a desire for natural resources, but routinely publicly justified as a pacifying mission. This sort of generalization about the violent impulses of African people, which is devoid of historical or socio-political context, is no less prevalent today. One recent example of this view is Robert Kaplan's article "The Coming Anarchy," which is notable largely because of the attention it received following its publication in 1994. Like Conrad before him, Kaplan uses events in Africa as a means to explore other matters. He maintains that violence in African states is lamentable but also to be expected because it happens in "places where the Western Enlightenment has not penetrated and where there has always been mass poverty," and therefore Africans will necessarily "find liberation in violence" (72). Yet this version of Afro-pessimism, which is rooted in the social evolutionist theories of the nineteenth century, applies equally to both the conflicts in Darfur and Congo-Kinshasa.

Nicholas D. Kristof, a journalist and op-ed columnist for *The New York Times* who

is widely regarded as responsible for drawing public attention to the conflict in Darfur, provides another explanation for these differences in reporting:

[The] Congo is essentially a tale of chaos and poverty and civil war. Militias slaughter each other, but it's not about an ethnic group in the government using its military force to kill other groups. And that is what Darfur has been about: An Arab government in Khartoum arming Arab militias to kill members of black African tribes.

Ethnonationalism—usually referred to as ‘tribalism’ in this context—is frequently identified as the main cause of Africa’s problems. In addition to Darfur, the genocide in Rwanda and civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone are also frequently invoked as evidence of this worldview, though many other complex situations in Africa are likewise simplified into what Kaplan calls “ancient tribal hatreds” (62) and what *The Economist* obliquely refers to as “reasons buried in their cultures” (17). Samuel P. Huntington does not recognize an ‘African civilization’ in his infamous macro-analysis of the cultural origins of conflicts around the world precisely because “tribal identities are pervasive and intense” on the continent (47). Tribalism is a useful concept for at least two reasons in this regard. First, the tension between ethnic and state-national allegiances offers a straightforward explanation for why civil wars occur in Africa; the apparent rigidity of tribal identification is thought to impair not only the consensus necessary for multi-ethnic states to function properly but also mundane interactions among citizens, who according to this view either embrace divisiveness or are powerless to prevent it. Secondly and more broadly “it invokes the ‘uncivilized,’ locating Africa in a time distant in

evolutionary scale from ‘our’ contemporary and modern time,” which helps distinguish examples of organized violence in Africa from those in Western countries, as well as the racially-motivated struggles of pre-Apartheid South Africa, which are more familiar to American audiences but relatively unique on the continent (Fair 15).

No matter the reasons cited for violence in Africa, the continent’s leaders and the warlords who oppose them are its most widely-criticized perpetrators, even among Africanist scholars.³ Many different polities emerged across the continent after the dissolution of colonial rule, but the more repressive forms seem to predominate—autocracies and oligarchies, one-party states and military juntas, and various others. In this regard, the widely-held perception that despots far outnumber democrats across the continent is accurate. Yet their prevalence and the negative characteristics that are thought to collectively define them are most important to the Afro-pessimistic worldview, not the specific circumstances of each post-independence regime. Foremost is the image of the African dictator as a solitary authority figure. They consolidate control over both the military and state; manage complex patronage networks to ensure loyalty; engage in various actions designed to perpetuate their cults of personality, such as the construction of lavish palaces and self-dedication of events and monuments; exploit public and private resources to ensure their personal wealth; and institute repressive policies aimed at suppressing actual and perceived dissent. Moreover, they are ultimately responsible for the military recruitment of children. External factors, such as the adverse influence of colonialism on existing systems of organization, the strict regulation of government policies in accordance with the aforementioned SAPs, and even the occasional support of

these brutal regimes by foreign states, are hardly mentioned in most Afro-pessimistic media reports. They are ignored because these conditions are less evocative of Africa's problems, particularly armed conflict, than the figure of the corrupted dictator and his equally violent supporters and opponents, all of whom act without constraint or sense of civic duty.

These are the main ways that organized violence in Africa is understood in the U.S. Conflict is seen as dramatic and widespread, pervasive because its root causes are primordial, and perpetuated by leaders who are empowered to prevent it. They contribute to the commonplace belief that Africans are to blame for their own misfortunes, not merely victims of unforeseen disasters or outside interference. This idea is conveyed in all of the eleven news reports excerpted for the Afro-pessimistic 1993 *Reader's Digest* compilation about the continent and its troubles; even the title of the piece, called "A Continent's Slow Suicide," suggests deliberate self-harm. Child soldiering is a manifestation of this destructive condition. African leaders are seen as mortgaging the future of their own communities by subjecting themselves (and their children) to unnecessary risk for immediate personal gain. The most obvious point here is that many child soldiers simply will not survive long enough to become adult citizens; their lives are squandered as disposable resources. But even when they do outlast the conflicts in which they fight, they may still be incapable of reintegrating into post-war society. This problem is not limited to child soldiers, but they are especially vulnerable. Many lack the role models or mentors they need to envision alternatives to violence. They cannot expect the acceptance of civilians who were recently their victims, directly or indirectly. And they

do not share the sense of collective national identity that might protect against future sectarianism. These difficult realities and the seemingly perpetual wars that engender them are one of the central preoccupations of their stories.

NARRATING WAR

Most readers are likely to understand the violence that is depicted in child soldier stories through their settings in Africa. Two thirds of the stories under consideration here are set in particular locations during specific conflicts, necessarily so in the case of memoirs. These works are relatively evenly distributed among many of the continent's best-known war zones during recent years. *Allah is Not Obligated* primarily takes place in the Liberian Civil War, though the protagonist participates in the Sierra Leone Civil War as well. *Moses, Citizen, and Me* and *A Long Way Gone* also take place in Sierra Leone. The Second Sudanese Civil War is the setting for *War Child*. *Child Soldier* and *Girl Soldier* are set in Uganda during the Bush War and its aftermath, and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) insurgency, respectively. All of these works are situated within the last two decades.⁴ Interestingly, some of the continent's most infamous conflicts in which child soldiers are known to participate are not represented in the genre. For example, there are no well-known child soldier stories about the Rwandan Genocide or the civil war in Somalia, despite the centrality of these two conflicts to Afro-pessimistic discourse. Nuruddin Farah's novel *Maps* concerns the Ethio-Somali War, but its young protagonist never actually becomes a soldier. Hip hop artist K'naan is widely described as a former child soldier in the press and his violent childhood in Mogadishu is featured in

some of his lyrics, but these experiences do not satisfy even the broad criteria of the CSI, nor has he publicly claimed this identity for himself. Scholastique Mukasonga's award-winning novel *Notre-Dame du Nil* was recently translated into English and is now available in the U.S., but while the tensions among the young characters augur the Rwandan Genocide, none of the students are actually soldiers.

Some child soldier stories are more ambiguous about their geographical and temporal settings. *Johnny Mad Dog* takes place at an unspecified time in an unnamed state in "Central Africa," which some critics assume to be Congo-Brazzaville, the war-torn home of its author (Cazenave 63, Torregrosa). Iweala acknowledges in an interview included in the 2006 Harper Perennial edition of his novel that he is influenced by events and contexts in Nigeria. But *Beasts of No Nation* is set in "West Africa," a generic location that is also mentioned in the summary on its back cover ("P.S." 11-12). The only signifiers of this region in the narrative itself are a brief mention of the Iroko tree (42), which is native to that part of the continent, and the *nom de guerre* of a fellow child soldier, 'Griot,' a term that is used throughout West Africa to refer to a traditional praise poet or historian.⁵ Neither of these references is significant to the events of the narrative. There is no mention of a specific geographic location for *Song for Night* either, although some readers may recognize references to the Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo ethnic groups from Nigeria, most importantly when the protagonist identifies himself as Igbo (90; 99, 112). The only large-scale conflict in post-independence Nigeria occurred between 1967 and 1970 in Biafra, which is the traditional home of the Igbo community, but there is no textual evidence to demonstrate that this is the conflict depicted in *Song for Night* or

Beasts of No Nation. Still, the strong association between Africa and child soldiering means that no matter their ambiguity, these stories are based in an instantly recognizable setting, albeit a more general one. The narrative authenticity of the works is conveyed just as easily when they are set in “West Africa” or “Central Africa” as in a particular country. Given the ways that child soldiering is usually characterized and its function in contemporary Africanist discourse, these narratives could take place *anywhere* on the continent and have the same effect.

Is any more specificity required in the descriptions of the conflicts and the groups that are involved in them? The few examples of organized violence that might be regarded as justified among a majority of readers, most notably the anti-Apartheid struggle in South Africa, are not represented in the genre. Consequently, the distinguishing characteristics of each armed group are not integral to the messages communicated in these stories. Nearly all of the young soldiers fight in armed resistance to a constituted government. Each of these groups ostensibly bears grievances that necessitate or justify an armed response. The most common, officially-stated reason is that they are fighting for freedom, but the particular circumstances of their oppression are rarely detailed. Keitetsi and her fellow young comrades are told that the government has falsely imprisoned other members of the National Resistance Army (NRA), but for these child soldiers—if not Keitetsi herself—the more compelling argument is that their parents may be among these prisoners, if they have not already been killed by government troops. This is true in other stories as well; most protagonists say nothing about perceived political or economic injustices that might be perpetrated by the ruling regime, but for

many the chance to avenge the deaths of their loved ones resonates with them deeply. Beah is the only character in the genre who enlists in a state military and while he becomes a soldier in an impromptu draft, he is encouraged to remain in order to retaliate for the raid on his village. The lieutenant who recruits him explains, “This is your time to revenge the deaths of your families and to make sure more children do not lose their families” (106). This argument is ironic in the context of a genre in which so many children fight with rebel groups for the same reasons, even in Beah’s memoir. When he and other child soldiers who fought for the government are taken to the rehabilitation center in Freetown they are confronted by young rebels who accuse the army of killing their families.

William Boyd insists in his review of *A Long Way Gone* that the reasons for revolutionary struggle are ultimately irrelevant to children like Beah, who are “conscious only of [the] immediate circumstances” of warfare, specifically its violent effects on their families. This assertion denies children political agency or ideology as a factor in their participation in armed conflict, and while it may accurately describe prepubescent characters like Agu and Citizen, others are more perceptive than Boyd allows. Many child soldiers, even those whose primary motivation for fighting is revenge, reflect on the numerous causes of the wars in which they participate. Some even comment upon the contradictions between what their leaders say about the revolutionary mission and how they behave in the field, especially during scenes in which the child soldiers are instructed to brutalize non-combatants. Just before My Luck’s commander forces him to rape a civilian, the boy says he “wanted to ask him what this skirmish, this fight, this

destruction of an innocent village had to do with our mission to defuse mines, but I knew better” (85). Beah poses a similar rhetorical question when he wonders “what kind of liberation movement shoots innocent civilians, children, that little girl?” (14). The question these characters do not ask, but which readers may consider on their behalf, is what kind of armed force compels children to perpetrate this violence? In this context, the most important characteristic that these groups share is their willingness to use child soldiers to achieve their military objectives and, in almost every case, their commanders do not seem reluctant to do so. The genre as a whole does not represent under-age recruitment as a decision that requires justification, but rather as an inevitable aspect of war on the continent.

In contrast, the genre is ambivalent in its portrayal of whether or not conflict in Africa is driven by ‘tribal’ differences. There is no mention of ethnicity in Iweala’s novel, which is in keeping with the naivety of its prepubescent narrator. Contrary to Kaplan’s overly broad observations about war in West African countries, ethnic sectarianism had no significant role in the Sierra Leone Civil War. Accordingly, there are no meaningful references to it in Jarrett-Macauley’s novel or Beah’s memoir. The Ugandan Bush War was also mainly a political struggle. Keitetsi explains that NRA leader Yoweri Museveni explicitly discourages tribalism during the insurgency and even adopts the non-native Swahili language for use among his soldiers. The only noteworthy mention of ethnicity in Keitetsi’s memoir foreshadows Akallo’s experiences one decade later; Keitetsi writes that the Acholi people resent the government and its army for allowing “rebels [to] abduct a lot of their children, who were then turned to serve as soldiers and wives” (227-228).

Akallo does not mention the ethnic dimension of the LRA insurgency and refers to her Acholi heritage just once in the final page of her memoir. Her co-author McDonnell provides additional context for the conflict, but because the narrative is evangelical in nature religious persecution is of much greater significance than ethnically-motivated violence. The Acholi are mainly invoked as a majority-Christian community that is threatened by the demonic LRA—which is supported by the ‘Islamist’ Sudanese government—and strategically ignored by the Museveni regime.

Some child soldier stories do emphasize the role of ethnic differences in the conflicts that they depict. However, their significance varies in each narrative. For example, My Luck notes that sectarianism has become reflexive in his country and that “none of us can remember the hate that led us here” (19). There are two different ‘tribal’ divisions described in Jal’s memoir and while he is primarily concerned with one the other is far more influential on the narrative itself. His personal motivation for participating in war is his hatred of *jallabas*, who for him are a conflation of the Arab panethnicity, *murahaleen* militia fighters, and the *jallaba* social class into one amorphous enemy. He identifies himself as Neur, but his anger toward the *jallabas* seems to be stronger than his ethnic identity. When he is told about a plan for some soldiers to defect from the Sudan People’s Liberation Army because its leader privileges his own Dinka ethnic group over others, he responds, “I did not want to fight my fellow soldiers, to waste energy on arguments between tribes, when all I wanted to do was kill *jallabas*” (165). He joins the ethnically-motivated schism in order to remain with his friends, all of whom starve to death during their withdrawal across the savanna to the Ethiopian border

where they expect to meet other disaffected soldiers. Nearly dead and faced with the prospect of cannibalizing the corpse of a fallen comrade, he entreats God and discovers food, a significant event that marks his religious awakening. In the following scene, he meets a humanitarian aid worker who becomes his benefactor after removing him from the battlefield. Jal comprehends 'tribalism' in Sudan as a conflict between northerners and southerners. Yet the most dramatic moments in the story, those that have the greatest effect on his development as a character, occur because of an internecine feud among southern Sudanese that he barely acknowledges.

Ethnic conflict is ostensibly the driving force behind the war depicted in *Johnny Mad Dog*. Yet the differences between the two rival factions are repeatedly undermined in the narrative. The most obvious example in this regard are the names of the communities involved and their respective armies: Mad Dog belongs to the Dogo-Mayi ethnic group and fights on behalf of its Movement For the Democratic Liberation of the People (MFDLP) against the Movement For the Total Liberation of the People (MFTLP), which represents members of the Mayi-Dogo ethnic group. Throughout the story Mad Dog offers a variety of reasons for why the two groups are at war, but none is meant to be convincing. One notable scene in which Mad Dog attempts to recruit his friend Giap to the MFDLP reveals the disparity between their rhetoric and the actual state of ethnic relations in the country. Mad Dog echoes the position that the MFTLP privileges the Mayi-Dogos at the expense of the Dogo-Mayis, that consequently the former are wealthy and the latter poor, that if a Dogo-Mayi becomes president his kinsmen would benefit, but also that the MFDLP wants to end tribalism because it is unpatriotic. Giap is not

convinced and counters each of these statements in ways that reveal them to be absurd. Even Mad Dog initially rejects these views. When MFDLP recruiters first approach him he says that the residents of the capital “never lived our lives in tribal terms” and that ethnic affiliation is not an appropriate reason to “swear blind allegiance to a politician” (86-87). Mad Dog is ultimately convinced to join the militia through a fallacious appeal to authority—he believes the rhetoric because he respects the intelligence of the person who espouses it. However, the fact that he continues his relationship with a Mayi-Dogo woman from his neighborhood demonstrates the limits of this exclusionary policy, even for an earnest ideological convert like Mad Dog.

‘Tribalism’ is represented as an important aspect of the conflicts depicted in at least some child soldier stories. But it is not used as an all-purpose explanation for organized violence in Africa, as is often the case of American journalistic accounts. Instead, ethnonationalism often serves as a pretense and is usually subordinated to what are regarded as pragmatic concerns. The primary motivation for most MFDLP fighters seems to be the opportunity to enrich oneself by looting, which Mad Dog mentions a number of times. Even his friend Giap joins the MFDLP for this more practical reason and encourages his fellow soldiers, saying, “To the victor go the spoils—this is one of the benefits of war” (6). Laokolé bemoans the fact that civilians are repeatedly victimized in this manner when one armed group loots during their approach to the capital city, while likewise their enemies will loot as they flee. My Luck admits that rebel and government forces both engage in this behavior in his country. Agu, Beah, Jal, and Akallo all describe how they engage in the practice. Keitetsi characterizes it as an employment opportunity!

Of course, characters may fight in a conflict for many different reasons, some of which may vary from the official ideologies of their respective organizations, or even contradict their own stated claims. Probably the most obvious justification, which is mentioned throughout the genre (although understated), is that they fight in order to survive a setting in which neither children nor non-combatants are spared from the effects of war. Because these narratives focus on their personal experiences, and taking into account their views and actions, the genre as a whole does not reinforce the impression that ‘tribalism’ is the primary cause of organized violence in Africa.

BAD LEADERS, HELPLESS CIVILIANS

My Luck asks, “If we are the greatest innocents in this war, then where did we learn all the evil we practice?” (143). The question is framed as a philosophical one in this story, but in the context of the genre it is also rhetorical. The Afro-pessimistic response to this question is that child soldiers are taught to commit evil in Africa, where wartime violence is imagined to be especially heinous and under-age recruitment seen as commonplace. None of the stories under consideration here consider the question of under-age recruitment from this same perspective; these narratives are ultimately concerned with the experiences of individual child soldiers who fight in particular settings. They do not address the practice of child soldiering in the general context—as a greater problem in one country or another, or else more generally as an African phenomenon—other than in broad post-narrative or paratextual items in a few of the memoirs. Child soldier stories tend to focus on a corollary issue: *who* would teach

children to behave in this way? By way of an answer they condemn the persons who seem most responsible for the militarization and indoctrination of young people—Africa's leaders, their proxies, and the rebel leaders who oppose them. None of the young protagonists in these works achieve the necessary rank or are otherwise well-positioned enough to meaningfully interact with the leaders of the armed groups that use them, with the partial exception of Keitetsi. The only figures of authority whom many child soldiers encounter are their immediate commanders. Therefore these characters receive a majority of the blame for the tragic circumstances of their under-age subordinates.

Readers will know through the narration of the characters' experiences and with a general awareness of the hierarchal nature of armed groups that child soldiers commit violence on the explicit orders (or to meet the implicit expectations) of their commanders. Their leaders are clearly responsible for the broader policy of under-age recruitment, but most do not directly participate in the training of child soldiers or narrated events on the battlefield. And yet former child soldiers who detail their experiences in memoirs often characterize their commanders in ambiguous ways. Beah fondly remembers his commander, Lieutenant Jabati, who bonds with him over their mutual appreciation of Shakespeare's play *Julius Ceasar*. When Beah becomes injured in battle the lieutenant orders that he be transported back to their base, a surprising decision given that child soldiers are so routinely treated as expendable. Irina Kyulanova explains that the choice to decommission and rehabilitate Beah leaves the boy angry and confused (31), but in the context of Jabati's partiality toward him the decision makes sense. When Jal first arrives at a camp close to the battlefield his commander John Kong prevents him from directly

participating in combat. He argues that the boy can best serve his country by attending school. “If we are attacked, then you can defend. But until then you are not going anywhere, little soldier,” Kong concludes. Jal takes part in a massacre in the city of Juba later in the narrative. However, Kong’s more general objection to his participation in war is characterized as genuine. These interactions show that in at least some instances, adult military personnel will use their power to protect child soldiers under their supervision. Notwithstanding the apparent ignominy of their roles as commanders of children, Jabati and Kong attempt to balance their social and moral obligations as adults against the operational ‘necessity’ of child recruitment.

However, these two characters are exceptional among the commanders who are portrayed throughout the genre. The memoirs by Akallo and Keitetsi, for example, reveal a very different relationship between officers and subordinates: both women are physically and sexually abused. This violence is not uncommon in child soldier stories, nor is it fixed to one gender or literary form; Agu and his companion Strika are also beaten and raped and all of the fictional works depict similar examples of brutality by individuals in positions of authority. These characters lack the complexity of their victims. There is no meaningful difference between Major Essien, who forces My Luck to rape in the assertion of his authority, and the Commandant, who forces Agu to rape as an act of war. Both characters demonstrate the awful nature of those responsible for orchestrating warfare in Africa. Neither is represented in ways that would encourage further curiosity among readers. With the exception of Giap in *Johnny Mad Dog*, no insight is given into the pre-war lives of these commanders to indicate whether they have

always behaved this way or were transformed by the harsh conditions of the battlefield. Giap seems to be an example of the latter. However, the imbalance between the one scene in which he serves as a rational counterpart to Mad Dog and the rest of the story during which he acts like a brute, as well as the absence of scenes that depict this transition, undermines any potential sympathy for him. Collectively, the commanders of child soldiers all resemble the same contemptible caricature.

The leaders of armed groups appear in some stories as well. The most notable example from the memoirs are Keitetsi's repeated references to Museveni, now the long-serving president of Uganda. She meets him once after her voluntary enlistment in the NRA, and directs much of her anger about her situation towards him. She condemns Museveni in several passages and the final chapter is a letter addressed to him, wherein she writes, "I played your game, but I didn't know the rules" and concludes with the signature "from your Child Soldier" (272-274). These criticisms contrast with the more muted observations about Colonel Ahmad Kashilingi, who is the only other noteworthy historical figure in the work. Keitetsi serves as his bodyguard until a dispute with Museveni results in his detention. As I describe in chapter two, Kashilingi treats Keitetsi like his own daughter and then repeatedly rapes her. Yet perhaps because she sees him as another victim of the Museveni regime (whose policies enable her enlistment) she does not condemn him with the same vehemence as she does the president. Jal encounters the SPLA leader John Garang for a moment but says nothing about him, allowing the criticisms expressed by his comrades to stand without further remark. Ironically, Akallo also briefly meets Garang when she flees from the LRA into southern Sudan. She

explains that the Sudanese government hired the LRA to oppose the SPLA rebels, and consequently that once Garang hears of her experiences he passes her along to a humanitarian group. Readers of both memoirs will know that although Garang is willing to decommission his enemy's troops he has no intention of doing so with his own child soldiers; Garang is no more humane a leader than Joseph Kony or Museveni, for example, in this respect. In summary, the representation of historical persons in non-fictional narratives is largely determined by the contexts in which they are known.

Fictional child soldier stories are not bound by these same constraints, yet the leaders of armed groups are not prominent in the novels either. The newly-installed President Dabanga appears during two scenes in *Johnny Mad Dog*. In the first, he delivers an obviously propagandistic victory speech on the need for the restoration of peace, which is rebutted by the behavior of his own soldiers and allied militias. The second revolves around his visit to a humanitarian camp where Mad Dog and Laokolé eventually meet. Before he arrives his soldiers attach labels with the name of the first lady's charitable organization on humanitarian supplies that were donated from abroad and coach residents of the camp—some of the same internally displaced persons they brutalized—on how to properly receive the leader in front of international news cameras. The portrayal of a Sierra Leonean head of state in *Moses, Citizen and Me* is much more subtle. At an unspecified time in the 1970s, Citizen's grandfather Moses is hired by the government to photograph the unnamed leader of the country at several cultural events. On each of the negatives he discovers "a faintly sketched figure hovering over the head of the president. It was the figure of a small boy holding a gun. [...] a small child barely

recognizable, rising as a bruise must in response to a blow, scar tissue to a wound” (119). Throughout the decade, Sierra Leone was led by the dictator Siaka Stevens, who indirectly employed young people to help suppress dissent against his regime but is not widely considered a perpetrator of child soldiering (Denov 55). This indirect reference to Stevens is the only one that appears in the work, nor are there any depictions of the president who served during the civil war, the leaders of the RUF, or even Citizen’s immediate commanders.

The most obvious explanation for this imagery is that the conditions that ultimately led to war in Sierra Leone can be traced to Stevens’ tenure. He is therefore indirectly responsible for the future recruitment of child soldiers, a practice that is foreshadowed in Moses’ photographs. This interpretation is bolstered by a conversation between Moses and the narrator in which the man “told of how the coup had begun and later we both heaped curses on all the incompetents who had ever been in power, everyone we could name” (13). More general condemnations of this kind can be found in other child soldier stories as well. For example, McDonnell’s chapters in Akallo’s memoir are rife with them. Both protagonists in *Johnny Mad Dog* criticize the ways that politics are conducted in their country. Mad Dog describes the current conflict as “the usual story: all we knew was that two political leaders were struggling for power ... We didn't give a damn, because we knew what the politicians of our country were like. Con men all” (83). The disheartening tone that exists throughout the genre indicates that these critiques are warranted. The negative consequences of corrupt politics and unscrupulous leaders are wide-ranging: individuals and their families are effected by what are generally

characterized as wars of opportunity and the traditional relationships between children and adults are severely disrupted. Adults in these stories cannot protect children from the horrors of war.

This is not to say that African communities have forsaken all children. Several individuals, both relatives and complete strangers, repeatedly aid Laokolé as she attempts to escape wartime violence. When she and her disabled mother flee to the UN embassy after rebel forces besiege the capital city, an anonymous man rescues the older woman from being trampled by a panicked crowd. Another man agrees to transport her as they make their way to an apparently safer city district, albeit in exchange for payment; ever charitable in her assessment of others, Laokolé acknowledges that he does so in spite of the significant risk to his own life. Following the bombardment of the compound where they shelter, and the deaths of her mother and aunt, another man compassionately rouses Laokolé from despondency and convinces her to continue. Escaping into the nearby jungle with other civilians, she is immediately taken in by a village woman who regards her like a daughter. The care that Laokolé receives throughout the story appears to influence her own behavior toward vulnerable people as it concludes. For example, she offers small acts of kindness to fellow refugees in the aforementioned humanitarian camp, fetching water for an elderly woman and giving her blanket to a mother and child. Her most noteworthy gesture is depicted in the final two chapters she narrates: she rescues an orphaned girl from a beating by Mad Dog and adopts the child as her own.

These interactions suggest that when organized violence disrupts social hierarchies it is still possible for the traditional, reciprocal relationships between adults

and young people to persist. Yet Laokolé's experiences are exceptional, largely because she is the only protagonist in child soldier stories who remains a civilian throughout the text, serving as a literary foil to Mad Dog. Moreover, the works almost never include examples of adult civilians who offer guidance or support to child soldiers during wartime. The former are rarely in a position to provide it while the latter are either not inclined or unable to accept it. Those few encounters that do occur are tainted by the realities of the conflicts in which they take place, such as when an older woman consoles My Luck while he rapes her, or in *Johnny Mad Dog* when a corrupt customs official condescendingly instructs a young soldier who has just looted his compound in how to open a champagne bottle. The hope that civilians may replace military commanders and re-assert their roles as caretakers of children, soldiers and civilians alike, during periods of organized violence is unrealistic. Many of the works observe that the collapse of the state is accompanied by the disintegration of social order and the erosion of traditional values. Few offer assurances that those Africans who may have the power to restore the conventional relationships between children and adults are willing or prepared to do so.

AHMADOU KOUROUMA'S FAILED STATES

More than any other work in the child soldier story genre, *Allah is Not Obligated* provides a macroscopic view of the perceived causes and consequences of armed conflict, from the corrupt relations among individuals to internecine feuds between competing factions looking to seize control of the wealth and power of the state. The novel is only superficially concerned with the sequence of events that constitute its plot

or the abnormal development of its protagonist due to his involvement in war. Instead, it comprises a series of entertaining but also brutal anecdotes about the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone, the violence and depravity that seem to define these respective conflicts, and the characters—historical and fictional—who are responsible for them. Birahima often conveys these accounts as he passes through the camps of the numerous armed groups that are involved in these conflicts: in Liberia this includes Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front (NPFL), Samuel Doe's allies in the United Liberation Movement for Democracy (ULIMO), Alhaji Kromah's splinter faction of the United Liberation Movement for Democracy (ULIMO-K), and Prince Johnson's Independent National Patriotic Front (INPFL), while in Sierra Leone they consist of Foday Sankoh's Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and Johnny Koroma's Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC).⁶

None of these organizations are said to be involved in the conflicts in order to advance a particular political ideology. Most are associated with specific 'tribal' communities, from which they claim to recruit exclusively, and threaten to kill members of other ethnic groups on sight. Birahima narrates several examples of ethically-motivated violence, prefacing each one with a variation on the statement that "this is the way it goes in tribal wars" (66, 86, 97, 98, and 104). But as in other child soldier stories, ethnic rivalries are not always as certain as they appear. Birahima identifies as Malinké, whom he says "are always welcome wherever we go because we're out-and-out defectors. We're always changing sides" (81). In practice, most militias will accept combatants from any ethnic group with minimal scrutiny. Both adult and child soldiers

move among the armed groups as needed with ease. Birahima reveals the true motivation for organized violence when he defines ‘tribal wars’ in Africa:

[I]t means that big important warlords have divided the country up. They’ve divided up all the money, all the land, all the people. [...] The funniest thing is that the warlords are all using desperate measures to hang on to all the things they’ve got, but the same warlords are doing everything they can to get their hands on more stuff.

The acquisition of wealth and power is ultimately more important to the leaders of these groups than ethnic purity. The same is true of many rank-and-file soldiers as well, including Birahima. Ethnonationalism is a means to this end for nearly everyone who participates in these conflicts, as it appears to be in a majority of child soldier stories.

The plot of the narrative is frequently punctuated by long digressions, in which Birahima offers (in his distinctive manner) the historical context for, and analysis of, the armed groups that he encounters. It is in these accounts that he describes their leaders, often in great detail. Each declares their commitment to principles of national unity or religious morality, none is portrayed in a convincing or sympathetic manner. When their rhetoric is not challenged directly it is contrasted with the brutality of their actions. Taylor is “a barefaced liar, an out-and-out thief, a crook” (61). Doe orchestrates a coup to overthrow the government, tortures and kills his co-conspirator, rigs the ensuing presidential election, and turns the country into a sectarian state before he loses control. Johnson dismembers Doe’s body after capturing him at the headquarters of ECOMOG, the multilateral force that is charged with keeping the peace among warring factions.

Kromah controls a number of refugee camps and defrauds the humanitarian aid agencies that support them. Sankoh begins his own civil war with the help of Taylor, one in which his troops amputate the arms and hands of civilians (adults and children) with the intention of intimidating others into not participating in future elections.⁷ Koroma and the AFRC cannibalize the dead bodies of their defeated enemies. The foreign leaders who offer these warlords assistance, often in retaliation to one another, such as Sani Abacha of Nigeria, Muammar Gaddafi of Libya, and Félix Houphouët-Boigny of Côte d'Ivoire, are described in a similarly condemnatory manner.

Birahima briefly meets Johnson when he first joins the INPFL, but otherwise he does not encounter the leaders of the armed groups that recruit him. Neither does he interact in a meaningful way with his commanders, though two are described in some detail. Colonel Papa le Bon supervises NPFL fighters in the Zorzor district in northern Liberia. He presides over the region as an authoritarian—he collects illegal duties on products that enter the country from Guinea, organizes kangaroo courts and administers trials by ordeal, maintains a harem of women whose husbands are jailed to prevent dissent, and personally oversees the training of child soldiers. When Colonel Papa le Bon is killed by one of his own wards, Birahima flees to the northeastern city of Sanniquellie, which is controlled by General Onika Baclay Doe on behalf of the ULIMO faction. Doe extorts local businesspersons under the pretense of keeping them safe and, like Colonel Papa le Bon, orchestrates summary trials and executions. When her authority is challenged she responds with brutality and demonstrates little concern for the lives of the child soldiers under her command. The differences between these characters are largely

superficial—their military affiliations, attitudes, and other personal characteristics have no bearing on their core function in the narrative: to embody the corrupt values that are common to all groups that compete for control of the country. Therefore, while Colonel Papa le Bon and General Onika Baclay Doe have distinctive presences in their respective scenes, they are best understood as representing the same stock character.

Like his commanders, Birahima is also a product of his chaotic environment—primitive, antisocial, dangerous. He somewhat fondly remembers his pre-war childhood, but readers will note the lack of positive adult role models during this time. His father dies when he is still an infant and his mother succumbs to a crippling ulcer during his adolescence. His older sisters are completely absent from the narrative. His grandmother is a welcome presence but she exerts no direct influence on him or his behavior. The only significant adult presence in his life before he leaves his village in Côte d'Ivoire near the border with Guinea is his surrogate stepfather Bala. Rather than attend Quranic or secular schools, Birahima spends time with Bala learning the methods of the indigenous *feticheur*. His devout grandmother is so concerned about the potentially negative effects of these lessons on the boy that she orchestrates his departure from their village to join his aunt in Liberia, a decision that will lead to his recruitment as a child soldier. The person chosen to accompany Birahima is a *hajji* businessman named Yacouba, who has recently returned to the village from the capital Abidjan. Yacouba has become wealthy by engaging in a number of dubious activities as a money launderer, fortune-teller, con man and—in what is a deliberately ironic gesture—a *feticheur* like Bala. What distinguishes the two characters is the nature of their relationships with Birahima and their reputations

within the community.

Yacouba uses an assumed name to evade the Abidjan police, and although the sardonic narration of the story precludes readers from knowing whether members of the community are aware of his misdeeds, their reflexive use of his pseudonym indicates a willingness to overlook unsavory character traits for the pretense of piety; he represents himself as a virtuous Muslim and is widely viewed as a successful professional, therefore he is regarded as an appropriate guardian of Birahima for the trip. His grandmother and the other members of their community are meddling, but Yacouba's behavior is of a much greater concern. For example, both try to convince Birahima to leave his home for Liberia, but while his grandmother says that his aunt will feed the boy well, Yacouba explains that "street kids like me could be child-soldiers [...] They had money, they even had American dollars. They had shoes and stripes and radios and helmets and even cars" (37). Yacouba exploits his naivety to gain a willing accomplice in his own efforts to benefit from the wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Birahima never questions the motivations of his adult companion, nor is he intellectually or emotionally capable of doing so. After all, Yacouba encourages his child soldiering and, in the absence of any other exemplar, serves as a model for his actions. Birahima's transgressions as a child soldier are not depicted in the work as aberrant, but rather as socially-sanctioned behavior.

NO FUTURE FOR AFRICA

The negative impressions that child soldier stories often give about conditions in

Africa are predictable, given their subject matter. Child soldiering is both a consequence and reminder of the near-collapse of social and legal norms. When characters express any kind of positivity they do so in spite of their circumstances, not because of them. These narratives contribute to Africanist discourse through their characterization of civil wars across the continent as unjust, portrayal of important figures and groups as self-serving, and complication of the notion that violence is driven by 'tribalism'. But their greatest significance lies in their affirmation of the view that African communities simply cannot recover from these events. As I describe in chapter one, the fates of child soldier protagonists are varied: some successfully rehabilitate, others show promise of this outcome, and a few die on the battlefield. But with the exception of the memoir by Akallo and McDonnell, whose religious worldview is based on the certainty of divine intervention, none of the stories suggests that the future of Africa itself looks promising. They tend to convey their Afro-pessimism in one of three ways: 1.) with conspicuous silence, 2.) by reinforcing the idea that the causes of war show no sign of resolution and that its effects are long-lasting, or 3.) through repetitive rhetorical and/or structural elements that function as metaphors for endless conflict.

Many child soldier stories do not address the post-war futures of their respective settings at all. Afro-pessimism is one of the central problematics (in the Althusserian sense) of the genre. The works do not explore the matter because their premises and conclusions are self-evident. Instead, as I discuss in chapter two, they salvage the concept at the personal level and ask whether individual child soldiers can rehabilitate. While it is possible to imagine an alternative life for some of these characters at the conclusion of

their narratives, Africa itself seems to be treated as a lost cause. The second point is evident from much of the textual analysis that I provide in this chapter: there are several factors to the conflicts that cannot be easily resolved, terrible leaders greatly outnumber the good, and well-meaning civilians lack the agency needed to return order to their communities. A few of the stories acknowledge that the scorched earth military policies of some armed groups will further impede efforts at post-war reconstruction. My Luck notes that both rebel and government forces lay explosives, “but we do it in such a hurry that no one bothers to map these land mine sites, no one remembers where they are” (23). The MFDLP deliberately destroys orchards in *Johnny Mad Dog* in order to starve their opponents and decimates entire districts in the capital city to prevent the ‘traitors’ from hiding among non-combatants. Laokolé characterizes the rebel campaign as nihilistic, saying that “soldiers destroyed for the sake of destroying, killed for the sake of killing, stole for the sake of stealing” (15). However, their actions are not just unrestrained or punitive in nature, but also operational. They demonstrate a kind of Pyrrhic logic that might ensure victory, but decimates the country’s infrastructure as well.

When child soldier stories communicate Afro-pessimism in a more explicit way they often do so through the use of a variety of repetitive forms. As I note in chapter one, several works refer to the cycle of violence in which children whose lives are devastated by war have little choice but to become soldiers themselves. Some characters even draw upon this experience to recruit new soldiers, as when Lieutenant Jabati tells Beah and other enlistees, “This is your time to revenge the deaths of your families and to make sure more children do not lose their families” (106). Quite the contrary, not only does he

perpetuate the same violence that results in his enlistment, but he is doubly affected when war breaks out again after his rehabilitation, which leads to the death of his uncle and the ruin of his adoptive family. Verbal repetition and the duplication of incidents is even more central to Dongala's novel. Many events are narrated from the perspectives of both Mad Dog and Laokolé, each with their own interpretations, and in several cases they even repeat the same words and phrases at the beginning or end their respective chapters. One notable scene, in which Mad Dog tries to clarify with his commander whether they should describe themselves as rebels or constituted authorities, demonstrates the perpetually unstable conditions in the country. Laokolé explains on several occasions that armed groups frequently compete with each other for power, but that for civilians who must endure these conflicts they are largely indistinguishable. Many readers are likely to adopt a similar view.

Allah is Not Obligated features a deliberate excess of verbal and incidental repetition. Passages will often include many different forms of repetition simultaneously within a single sentence or paragraph, a strategy which adds to the overall effect of this rhetorical technique. Kourouma acknowledges the general influence of oral literature on his writing, remarking that for him verbal repetition "signifies that I could not find the exact word capturing the term I wish to bring forth," which requires readers to pay closer attention to a scene in order to interpret it (qtd in Ouédraogo 1339). Birahima encourages this behavior in the telling of his story through the use of numerous explanatory statements, some of which are accurate while others are ironic; the humorous effect of the novel is achieved when readers distinguish between the two where Birahima cannot.

However, repetition in the story is not always productive. To repeat a word once may be instructive, to create new meanings might help to reveal the true nature of events, but inordinate repetition can yield a negative effect. Birahima often emphasizes the truthfulness of a statement by declaring “*walahé!*” or ‘I swear by Allah’. And yet his excessive use of the term (he repeats it sixty-five times in total) negates its meaning. Patrick Corcoran contends that his fixation with semantics allows him to distance himself from the violent realities that his words express (321). The fact that Allah is the one who determines why events will occur—which Birahima emphasizes throughout the narrative—means that they are often inscrutable, both for the characters and, I would argue, readers as well. If it is not possible to explain why violence persists in this setting, then there is no rational basis for the position that it might eventually end.

Many of the definitions that Birahima provides are cynical reflections on the rotten condition of postcolonial African politics. This is also true of the frequently repeated incidents throughout the work. In some instances he merely recounts repeated historical failures, such as the countless negotiations between Sankoh and the successive governments who oppose him. Fictional events reinforce these negative impressions. Birahima describes several ‘trials’ and punishments of criminals in his narrative, each the result of the rape and murder (or attempted murder) of a prepubescent girl. In every case crimes occur repeatedly, followed by conciliation, and finally resolution. Yet not only has mob justice taken the role of the courts—which is one indication of state failure—but crimes such as the rape of children persist, and one gruesome murder follows from another. The effects of this repetition, verbal and incidental, culminates with the final

paragraphs of the novel, which is identical to the opening lines of the adventure.

According to the structural logic of the work, the corruption that results in organized violence, the conflicts in which Birahima fights, the suffering that he experiences and inflicts on others, will continue indefinitely with each telling of his story. According to the novel, poor conditions in Africa will never improve, nor will the lives of the child soldiers (and civilians) who must endure them.

Expressions of cynicism about the future of Africa are one of the distinguishing features of post-independence African writing. They are reactions to the failure of many countries to successfully transition from colonial oppression into postcolonial renaissance, the reasons for which are varied and contested. Organized violence is often a consequence of this failure and therefore a common literary subject. In this regard, child soldier stories are simply an extreme and topical example of this broader trend. Yet Afro-pessimism serves a more specific function within the genre—to frame the narratives as arguments that encourage particular conclusions. Organized violence is what differentiates child soldier stories from more traditional forms of misery literature. The redemption of child soldier protagonists is especially significant because the main cause of their suffering is characterized as endless and all-encompassing; this is what differentiates the genre from the more traditional narratives that take place in the U.S. The idea that warfare in Africa is irrational, suicidal, and perpetual serves as the reason why childhood must be unsustainable on the continent, along with the notion that those who should prevent it are either unwilling or helpless to do so. The lessons of Afro-pessimism bolster the idea that Africans are incompetent and provides a pretext for

humanitarian intervention, though as I explain in the following chapter several of the stories are critical of this practice. Nevertheless, it seems that Afro-pessimism is simply too useful a literary device in the genre to subject it to meaningful self-criticism.

CHAPTER THREE | ENDNOTES

1. See for example Steve Coll, James Fergusson, Aminatta Forna, Peter Hollindale, Tim Johnston, and Stephanie Nolen, among numerous others.
2. The racist implications this terminology is central to postcolonial criticism of the work by Stefan Hawlin.
3. See for example George Ayittey; Jean-François Bayart, Stephen Ellis, and Beatrice Hibou; and Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz.
4. The Ugandan Bush War ended in 1986 with the victory of the rebel group to which Keitetsi belonged, the National Resistance Army, which became known as the Uganda People's Defense Force after Museveni took power in the country. Much of the narrative takes place during the aftermath of that conflict.
5. The title of the novel is also an obvious reference to the Nigerian musician Fela Kuti, but given his significant influence across the continent this is not necessarily evidence that the story takes place in Nigeria.
6. Kourouma uses the alternative spelling 'El Hadji Koroma' in the novel. For clarity, I use the more widely adopted variation.
7. This violent act is symbolic; in Sierra Leone and many other countries, ink is applied to the forefingers of voters to prevent electoral fraud.

CHAPTER FOUR:

THE LIMITS OF HUMANITARIANISM IN AFRICA IN EMMANUEL DONGALA'S *JOHNNY MAD DOG* AND OTHER STORIES

INTRODUCTION

At no other time over the past few decades have concerns about child soldiers been so widely expressed and also so quickly obscured than during the public debate concerning the advocacy campaign *Kony 2012*. The film that has come to represent the campaign was produced by a marketing firm on behalf of the American humanitarian organization Invisible Children.¹ It explains how the LRA and its leader Joseph Kony forcibly recruit children in northern Uganda to serve as soldiers and sexual captives, and drives others, referred to as 'night commuters,' to leave their communities each evening to avoid capture. It also introduces viewers to the eponymous campaign, which intends to 'make Kony famous' in order to pressure American politicians to intervene in the insurgency. Finally, it functions as a marketing device for the non-profit charity, which relies on donations in order to fund its activities. The video was released in February and March of 2012 on a number of online platforms, most notably YouTube, where it garnered 100 million views in days, an unprecedented achievement at the time (Kanczula).² It was widely shared across social media, especially among its target audience of young people; the Pew Research Internet Project determined that 59 percent of respondents between the ages of 18 and 29 had either seen or heard about the campaign immediately following its launch (Rainie, et. al.). Public support by various celebrities and other notable figures

further bolstered interest, a deliberate strategy by Invisible Children (Basu). It would hardly be an exaggeration for Invisible Children to declare that *Kony 2012* was one of the most visible (if not entirely successful) humanitarian media campaigns in American history.

The adverse reaction to *Kony 2012* and the eventual decline of the campaign is just as remarkable as initial interest in it. Critics fault the video for its myopic focus on Kony, its simplistic and outdated portrayal of the conflict between the LRA and the Ugandan government, its patronizing tone, and its quasi-imperialistic call for U.S. military intervention.³ Invisible Children was also faulted for how it disburses donations and the evangelical affiliations of its founders. Teju Cole identifies the campaign as another manifestation of the “white-savior industrial complex,” whose proponents believe that “the world is nothing but a problem to be solved by enthusiasm.” Yet public attention ultimately waned after the release of the film. Subsequent advocacy efforts by Invisible Children received very little support and by 2014 the group ended most of its domestic programs due to insufficient funding (Carroll, Taylor). In spite of the criticism outlined above, *Kony 2012* was effective in at least a few ways. The campaign generated additional support for existing legislative efforts in the U.S. concerning the LRA and its recruitment of child soldiers (Arieff and Ploch). It also undoubtedly raised the profile of Kony, though Invisible Children itself also gained notoriety in the process. Most importantly for the purpose of this chapter, it fostered a discussion about humanitarianism in the context of child soldiering.

It is necessary to distinguish between humanitarianism and human rights

discourse as the terms are often mistakenly viewed as interchangeable. Human rights discourse concerns the relationships between peoples and the leaders or governments who regulate their behavior. It asserts that everyone is deserving of certain freedoms and protections that must be upheld no matter the context. Humanitarianism is aligned with this worldview in a general sense. But the term more appropriately refers to specific concerns, most notably humanitarian law, which establishes the norms expected during periods of organized violence, and humanitarian response, the ways that governments, inter-governmental agencies (IGOs), and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) attempt to alleviate the misery caused by these conflicts. The distinction that Michael Barnett makes about how the concepts are applied in practice is instructive to understanding the ways the child soldier stories address them: “Human rights typically focuses on the long-term goal of eliminating the causes of suffering, humanitarianism focuses on the urgent goal of keeping people alive” (16). The child soldier story genre generally focuses on the latter—after all, their characters are much more likely to encounter humanitarian aid workers in Africa than human rights advocates. Their assessment of what Alexander De Waal calls “the humanitarian international” (1997), the persons and organizations responsible for this kind of work, is generally scathing.

In the previous two chapters I explain how child soldier stories reproduce basic, pernicious stereotypes about Africa. In this chapter, I will examine the more critical work that they can accomplish, in which they invite readers to re-consider the relationship between Western humanitarianism and its intended beneficiaries—internally-displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees alike, as well as current and ex-child soldiers—from the

perspective of the latter. The fictional child soldier stories are more directly critical than memoirs on this subject. After all, the fact that some former child soldiers have been able to narrate their own stories to Western audiences is evidence that humanitarianism is sometimes effective in delivering assistance to the victims of organized violence. However, most of the narratives distinguish between, on the one hand, persons who embody humanitarian principles and do good work within the constraints of their circumstances and, on the other, what I refer to here as the humanitarian industry, which includes organizations (and their usually nameless representatives) that are either unable to provide the kind of assistance that is necessary in their respective settings or else make conditions worse in doing so.

Yet there is another noteworthy distinction made in child soldier stories, one that demonstrates a more productive kind of relationship between humanitarianism and its beneficiaries, one in which former child soldiers, specifically those who write about their experiences in memoirs, can become humanitarians themselves. Of course, their past experiences remain the same; what changes is their public association with the practice of child soldiering. After the end of the wars in which they participated their social status was seen as undesirable in Africa, irrespective of whether they were viewed as victims or victimizers. What humanitarian advocacy offers is the opportunity to positively transform their identities as former child soldiers into socially sanctioned agency. In other words, their previous enlistment is not a social condition to be overcome, but rather a special status that they can use in order to inspire humanitarian action. Their memoirs form the basis of this transformation by describing what they had done as soldiers, but also how

they overcame these circumstances and now advocate on behalf of others. Nevertheless, the numerous references to how the humanitarian industry fails serve as a reminder to readers that for every child soldier who perseveres there are others who do not and many who never have the opportunity. And the embrace of advocacy by some authors is not without its costs, which could hinder their ability to manage their public identities long after the publication of their memoirs.

THE HUMANITARIAN INDUSTRY AT A GLANCE

The origins of contemporary humanitarian responses to tragedy can be traced back to the release in 1862 of Henry Dunant's memoir *A Memory of Solferino*, in which the Swiss businessman appeals for the development of a politically-neutral organization to care for wounded soldiers on the battlefield. His efforts were influential in the establishment of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in 1863 and the 1864 Geneva Convention, a treaty that regulates behavior toward soldiers and civilians in wartime. The ICRC is a unique organization; it is technically a private enterprise, but in practice treated like an intergovernmental agency and given the same privileges and immunities afforded to them, as well as observer status in the UN General Assembly. More than a century after it was founded the ICRC released the first formal elaboration of its doctrine, known as the Fundamental Principles, which are a touchstone for many humanitarian organizations worldwide (Pictet). These maxims of professional conduct have been criticized over the years, but many observers embrace the first four as theoretically central to the industry: 1.) *humanity*, that efforts to alleviate suffering are

performed out of a sense of good will toward human beings; 2.) *impartiality*, that assistance will be given without discrimination on the basis of nationality, race, sex, religion, or ideology; 3.) *neutrality*, that the ICRC and its representatives will not show bias toward one group involved in organized violence over another or otherwise take sides in a conflict; and 4.) *independence*, that the ICRC and its auxiliaries will remain free from all forms of social, political, and economic influence.

Aside from the ICRC, there are three different types of organizations that provide humanitarian responses to disaster: IGOs, NGOs, and governments. Aid provided by governments can be driven by a variety of motivations, such as national policy interests, legal obligations, the concerns of citizens, or a combination of these and other factors (Lyon and Dolan). The U.S. government rarely participates in relief operations directly, but instead usually provides financial contributions to IGOs, NGOs, and other governments; it gave \$4.5 billion in humanitarian assistance during the 2012 fiscal year alone (Margesson 7, 9). IGOs receive their mandate from the UN; they are large and well-funded but also diplomatically constrained. Some of the best known humanitarian aid organizations in the world, like the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), belong in this category. NGOs are a more diverse category of actors that are comprised of private foundations, volunteer groups, and similar organizations, including Oxfam, Catholic Relief Services, Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders (MSF), World Vision, and literally thousands of others. The World Bank classifies NGOs as operational organizations that implement programs in crisis zones or advocacy organizations that 'raise awareness'

about a specific issue or event in order to alleviate suffering (Malena 14). This is a useful distinction for understanding the work these groups perform, as well as how they are portrayed in the genre, though it should be noted that many humanitarian organizations also participate in public advocacy when they deem it necessary.

IGOs, NGOs, and governments respond differently to humanitarian crises like organized violence depending on their capacities and missions, as well as the physical and cultural barriers that can sometimes inhibit action. The well-known *Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response* handbook includes many typical examples of operational activities, including the provision of safe drinking and cooking water, promotion of good hygiene and vector control in order to prevent the spread of disease, establishment of food security, management of malnutrition and other nutritional deficiencies, supply of adequate shelter and the facilitation of settlement, development of basic community infrastructure like schools and communal meeting areas, and delivery of essential health services (The Sphere Project). In places where child soldiering is a factor humanitarian organizations will also establish programs for their disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR), which consist of a range of context-specific activities designed to permanently remove children from the battlefield. Early DDR programs like the one implemented in Liberia by UNICEF were ineffective; young combatants were essentially used as test cases (Kelly). The UN has since developed integrated DDR standards and an Operational Guide to improve these programs (Inter-Agency). The values of humanitarianism as outlined by the ICRC are implicit in these guidelines.

While the goal of operational humanitarianism is to alleviate suffering, advocacy draws attention to it for broader ends. Advocacy groups attempt to mobilize interest in order to generate (or else demonstrate) widespread support for a vulnerable community or opposition to abuses. They also lobby influential individuals, such as politicians and celebrities, or other humanitarian groups, to join their causes. These efforts are usually directed at Western audiences and while the goals of humanitarian advocacy campaigns may differ, in each case their success is usually contingent on convincing others to take an interest in distant suffering. Television news reporting in particular has been leveraged for this purpose since the 1960s, sensitizing the public and providing organizations with cost-effective publicity and also the opportunity to make financial appeals to fund their continued activities. One of the most dramatic examples of humanitarian advocacy occurred in reaction to the 1983-1985 Ethiopian famine. The catalyst for the response was a television report by BBC News from a refugee camp that reveals the traumatic effects of a “Biblical famine” (Buerk). The broadcast depicted efforts by MSF and Save the Children to manage and document the crisis, and also represents a call to action. A number of well-known musicians were moved to form an ensemble to raise relief funds, followed by Live Aid, an unprecedented charity concert that generated roughly \$230 million (Fletcher 159). For every successful campaign like Live Aid there are myriad others that barely receive any notice. Still, collectively advocacy organizations have the potential to dramatically influence public discussions.

Western humanitarian responses to the Nigerian Civil War—both operational activities and public advocacy—were some of the most influential of their kind in the

twentieth century. They also revealed the tensions between humanitarian principles and their practice. The political, ethnic, and religious dimensions to the conflict did not elicit much interest abroad. What eventually captured the attention of the West was the famine caused by the Nigerian government's blockade of the region. Secession leaders in Biafra retained an American public relations executive to wage a media campaign that would influence Western perceptions of the conflict and mobilize sentiment against the Nigerian government and its Western allies. At the same time, humanitarian organizations used images of children dying from kwashiorkor to solicit donations for aid. The U.S. government officially supported Nigeria in the conflict and after a few failed attempts to negotiate access to the Biafran region it declined to intervene further (Goetz). The UNHCR refused to get involved because its mandate did not cover assistance for IDPs. The ICRC conducted operations but was constrained by its commitment to neutrality. Many NGOs (especially faith-based organizations) rejected this position and organized air deliveries of food aid in spite of the blockade. However, other goods for military use were also knowingly smuggled with this cargo and the agencies paid 'fees' to the secessionist forces under dubious pretenses, which in turn allowed the secessionist forces to buy arms and continue with the war effort (Pérouse de Montclos 72-74). It is now evident that although humanitarian organizations did help to prevent mass starvation in Biafra, they were also partially responsible for the continuation of the tragedy there.

These controversies and others in the subsequent decades have led to concerns about the industry as a whole. Pundits and policy researchers are the most vocal critics, though current and former aid workers have also publicly expressed their concerns,

which vary from the financial and logistical to the theoretical: humanitarian groups are said to be overly focused on the solicitation of funds (Maren) and contributions are often mismanaged (Hancock); aid is not distributed on the basis of the greatest need (Fearon); the perpetrators of violence are often harbored in humanitarian camps (Terry) and sometimes they will even intensify their brutality in order to attract aid (Polman); the outdated mandates of some organizations negatively impact their responses (African Rights); they are over-constrained by human rights discourse and risk being co-opted by governments (Rieff 2002); and ultimately humanitarianism frequently causes more harm in the field than it alleviates (De Waal 1997). But the most poignant criticism of humanitarianism comes from the beneficiaries of such efforts: IDPs, refugees, and the like. Notwithstanding context-specific issues, the experience of many aid recipients is that humanitarian organizations do not take their concerns into account when planning and executing operations. They are expected to gratefully accept whatever conditions are placed on the delivery of assistance. The 1994 Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organizations in Disaster Relief attempts to address this problem by recommending that its signatories collaborate with aid recipients whenever possible. The aforementioned Sphere Handbook also includes guidelines for local involvement in its minimum standards for operational activities. However, humanitarian organizations routinely fail to meet these relatively modest expectations in the field (Rubenstein 225).

These criticisms have not had an effect on broader public perceptions in the U.S. about the industry. Donors, and the American public more generally, rarely hear from

persons affected by disasters abroad, those who are best positioned to give an informed critique. These individuals are usually characterized in news reports as dependent and without agency, and used in fundraising materials as examples of grateful recipients of noble service. Keith Tester suggests that humanitarianism has become such a hegemonic institution in the Western world that “how it all works is significantly less important [to people] than the fact it sometimes does” (7). Individual organizations and campaigns may be judged unfavorably, as in the case of *Kony 2012*, but the humanitarian international at large maintains a positive reputation and continues to prosper. Relief aid has increased steadily from the 1970s onward and even risen dramatically since the 1990s, despite a substantial decline in the number of IDPs, refugees, and conflicts over the last two decades (Fearon).

HUMANITARIANISM AS A SERIES OF FAILURES

Examples of the humanitarian industry at work are relatively common in child soldier stories. Nearly all of the child soldier protagonists are either sent to demobilization centers for ex-combatants or camps for refugees and IDPs, all of which are usually run by humanitarian agencies. While it is possible to identify and distinguish among the organizations that are referenced in the stories, there is relatively little to be gained in doing so because there are few practical distinctions among them. The ICRC and a number of the better-known NGOs—including World Vision, Save the Children, and MSF—are all mentioned, but without further comment. The only NGO of actual narrative significance is probably unknown to readers; Beah’s memoir features the

Children Associated with the War (CAW) organization, which rehabilitates ex-child soldiers in Sierra Leone and attempts to reintegrate them into post-war society (Sommers 17). There are also few examples of foreign aid or intervention in the genre; My Luck mentions that the French government did not provide his group with arms as they promised, while France is acknowledged again in *Johnny Mad Dog* for donating shovels and lime for the disposal of dead bodies. IGOs provide most of the humanitarian relief that is depicted in the narratives, especially UNHCR and UNICEF. But although these groups are responsible for this aid infrastructure, they are not well distinguished from one another; instead, they represent the humanitarian industry as a homogenous whole.

The operational side of the industry is heavily criticized in most child soldier stories. The most common negative portrayal depicts the misallocation and misuse of relief aid. Jal reports that following the arrival of NGOs and IGOs at Pinyudu refugee camp in Ethiopia a black market emerges, in which donated supplies are used as a form of currency. He pretends to be the child of refugees and sells the food that he receives through his deception. However, a greater problem is that armed groups surreptitiously oversee the distribution of relief aid. The SPLA effectively controls Pinyudu for this purpose, while the splinter group SPLA-Nasir maintains similar control over a refugee camp in South Sudan. Warlords in Kourouma's novel also exploit humanitarian aid in this way. Colonel Papa Le Bon supervises an orphanage and refugee camp in northwest Liberia, contributions to which are actually used to pay child soldiers. Prince Johnson seizes a Christian convent with similar plans but is foiled when donors learn of his involvement. In Sierra Leone, Johnny Koroma coerces refugees into refusing assistance

from NGOs until they work with his faction. The scheme is successful and with all-too-predictable results: “Faced with the misery, the destitution of the refugees and their determination, the NGOs gave in. And we helped ourselves before thinking about the refugees” (209).

The general consensus among the stories is that humanitarian organizations and those who work on their behalf are simply unable to adequately meet the needs of the child soldiers who they encounter. The American aid worker Amy, who appears in the final chapter of *Beasts of No Nation*, exemplifies the image of the novice outsider. Even Agu, the most guileless protagonist in the genre, recognizes that she is out of her depth:

[S]he is always looking at me like looking at me is going to be helping me. She is telling me to speak speak speak and thinking that my not speaking is because I am like baby. [...] But every time I am sitting with her I am thinking I am like old man and she is like small girl because I am fighting in war and she is not even knowing what war is. (140)

The Western narrator Julia in *Moses, Citizen and Me* is another example of this figure. She and Bemba G establish what amounts to a DDR program for child soldiers in the forests of Sierra Leone to provide them with an ad-hoc education, structured recreation, and so on. They cast the children in an indigenized adaptation of Shakespeare’s play *Julius Ceasar* for an audience of local residents, humanitarian workers, and the international media. When the performance ends, the reformed children are handed over to UN personnel. Julia’s ministrations are a fantasy; they occur in her imagination and help her interpret the traumatic effects of military service on her nephew Citizen. In

reality, she is often overwhelmed and distraught in the presence of ex-child soldiers. Regardless, she imagines herself to be a humanitarian who can provide Citizen with the assistance that he requires and in the final dream sequence of the narrative, she brings him to London to continue with his recovery.

These fantasies are relatively harmless; in reality Citizen is treated by a nurse named Olu, whose efforts seem to have a positive effect. However, depictions of other Western humanitarians are more damning. Some aid workers appear indifferent to suffering that takes place in the camps, like the many UN representatives at Pinyudu. Others act paternalistically toward aid recipients; for example, Keitetsi is already an adult when she contacts UN representatives in South Africa, but when she asks to be resettled in the U.S. she is told that agency bureaucrats “would decide what was best” for her (263). In a few cases, humanitarians may even cause harm. The UN removes Agu’s mother and sister in order to protect them from the advancing rebels, but in doing so they also forsake the boy and his father; the man is killed and Agu is recruited shortly after the separation. Aid workers may not have intended to exacerbate the danger that Agu faces, but the effect is still the same: his child soldiering is in many ways a result of UN inaction. Birahima describes a more deliberate form of violence in the guise of humanitarianism, which is perpetuated in Liberia by the multinational armed forces known as the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG). They intervene at the request of the international community but, in effect, become yet another violent faction in the country, looting from and killing civilians. Consequently, Birahima defines humanitarian peacekeeping as “when one country is

allowed to send soldiers into another country to kill innocent victims in their own country, in their own villages, in their own huts, sitting on their own mats” (126).

To be clear, humanitarianism is not invariably portrayed negatively in the genre. Abani’s novel *Song For Night* does not mention such efforts at all, aside from the aforementioned reference to the broken promises of foreign assistance. My Luck is a ghost and therefore beyond immediate help, but even before his unspecified death in the story there are no references to IGOs and NGOs at work in the setting. Their absence could be interpreted as a critique in itself, but the narrative does not advance this interpretation in any way. Meanwhile, McDonnell is effusive in her praise for operational organizations that are featured in *Girl Soldier*. Her approval is conditioned by both the religious nature of the memoir and the organizations that are described in it. This praise is intended to demonstrate “how God’s heart of love and mercy has been at work” (34) in Uganda, which is evidenced not only by Akallo’s spiritual rebirth in the field but also her bodily salvation by the faith-founded NGO World Vision, as well as the efforts of other Christian groups that operate in the area. The positive tone of the work implies that they are succeeding, an affirmation of the authors’ religious beliefs and a negation of Kony’s own apostate Christian movement.

While other child soldier stories tend to be more skeptical of the positive influence of humanitarian organizations, many do distinguish between, on the one hand, the industry and its more hapless representatives, and on the other particular aid workers who have a positive impact. The latter characters are not always centrally important to the stories in which they appear. A local nurse named Esther is largely responsible for the

rehabilitation of Beah, but once he leaves the DDR center she is not mentioned again. Despite his care for Citizen, Olu is present for just a few pages in that novel; his main function as a character is to inform readers about what happens to the young man after the civil war ends. Nevertheless, they do represent an alternative to the more negative and general characterization of the industry itself. These two aid workers in particular also demonstrate that while many child soldier stories address the trope of the Western savior—after all, most of the humanitarian organizations depicted in them are based in Western countries—many of those who tend to the former combatants are Africans themselves. Moreover, not all of the Westerners who do so are racially coded as white. For example, Julia was raised by emigrés from Sierra Leone. And the most important aid worker to appear in *Johnny Mad Dog* is an African-American operations coordinator for UNHCR named Tanisha.

LAOKOLÉ AND MAD DOG: ALIVE AND DEAD, HUMANITARIANISM NOTWITHSTANDING

Dongala's novel offers the strongest criticisms of the humanitarian industry in the genre. Roughly a third of the narrative takes place at a UNHCR compound in the embassy district of the capital city, while its penultimate scenes are set in an IDP camp run jointly by UNHCR and MSF, but under the armed supervision of MFDLP soldiers. These criticisms are expressed either through the mistaken observations of Mad Dog or the embodied stereotypes of numerous one-dimensional characters. Mad Dog and Laokolé are themselves stock characters—representing evil and good, respectively—but

they do show at least some psychological depth. Most other characters in the narrative are flat; they include the oil company representative and IMF official who both regard themselves as more deserving of emergency evacuation than African civilians, the Western conservationists who are more concerned with protecting chimpanzees and gorillas from violence than helping their fellow human beings, and others. Characters who personify humanitarianism at its worst include the callous aid worker who triages Laokolé when she first arrives at the compound, the UN soldier who threatens to write a condemnatory report in response to aggression by MFDLP soldiers, and the military contractors who are sent by Western governments to rescue their own citizens from the compound and not only rebuff pleas from African civilians, but also kill some of them during the operation.

As in several other child soldier stories, humanitarian organizations in *Johnny Mad Dog* unwittingly provide assistance to groups responsible for organized violence. When Mad Dog initially enters the compound a peacekeeper confronts him, which is misinterpreted as an offer for “international help to chase out, expel from the compound, all of those refugees, who were in fact nothing but criminals” (128). The encounter is one of many that is meant to amuse readers and emphasize the unreliability of the narrator. However, the misunderstanding is also based on Mad Dog’s own previous experience—two pages earlier, MFDLP soldiers drive frightened civilians toward the embassy district, and neither UNHCR nor the other diplomatic missions will open their gates to them. Therefore, Mad Dog regards them as an ally. Other examples of this unwitting relationship show how problems arise when humanitarian operations are contingent on

the cooperation of disingenuous local partners. MFDLP soldiers use the IDP camp to attract Mayi-Dogo civilians, whom they execute despite their assurances to UNHCR and MSF that none would be harmed. Relief supplies from foreign charities are re-labeled to imply that an NGO affiliated with the new president's wife has provided them instead. Finally, the MFDLP government allows its soldiers to claim a percentage of these goods in lieu of a salary. Overall, the novel transforms the typical image of a respectable industry productively acting out the benevolent will of Western countries into one that passively bends to the machinations of the groups that are responsible for perpetuating the violence that brings them to the continent in the first place.

There are a few humanitarian figures who defy this negative characterization, most notably Tanisha. Her introduction lacks subtlety, as is customary in the narrative. When Laokolé first meets her she says, "I saw calmness, serenity, and what I can only describe as goodness—all of which immediately reassured me" (118). And, later, that a "boundless generosity flowed from her entire being" (143). In keeping with her role in the novel, Tanisha meets these expectations. She represents the ideal model of Western humanitarianism by practicing the values of the industry, including the ICRC Fundamental Principles. She demonstrates goodwill toward others by suspending her medical practice in the U.S. to operate in Africa. She treats all the occupants of the compound, IDPs and foreign nationals, with equality. And when some of the latter confront her because of her impartiality, she does not allow their threats to influence her decisions about the distribution of aid. The character also shows a fondness for Laokolé in scenes that are meant to humanize her. She is not an impassive bureaucrat and her

passionate morality is evident throughout the scenes in which she appears. A key demonstration of her commitment to Laokolé occurs as the compound is hurriedly evacuated before MFDLP soldiers attack. In contrast to the military contractors who ignore the appeals of IDPs, Tanisha invites Laokolé to come with her back to the U.S. She pleads, “I’ll get you a scholarship, definitely! [...]You’ve got a future!” (159).

Laokolé refuses the offer and decides to remain in the country with her family while instead, this decision reinforces the positive portrayals of both characters; the former because of her devotion to her mother, and the latter for making the offer. During this same scene the humanitarian industry is faulted by comparison. Mad Dog confidently enters the compound and threatens aid workers because he assumes they will withdraw, as they had done so during previous conflicts:

I knew what the UN was—yeah, I’d heard people speak about the organization and its soldiers. They were neutral. They didn’t make war; they kept the peace. But when things got hot and their lives were threatened, or if they simply thought they were in danger, they took to their heels and left you all alone in the shit. That’s what happened in Rwanda. So I decided to follow the same strategy—to threaten them, so they’d go away and leave us all in the shit, and then we could settle accounts with the [civilians]. (130)

They initially reject his threats, but Mad Dog’s cynicism is ultimately proved correct. Tanisha and the other aid workers are evacuated by military contractors and even she appears resigned to this outcome. Earlier, she explains to another aid worker that their refusal to leave “is the only thing that can prevent the refugees from being massacred!”

(154). This too comes to pass. Just as the international community left civilians to their fate in Rwanda, so too are these fictional civilians abandoned. Laokolé and her mother flee with hundreds of others to a nearby district in the capital, which is bombarded by MFDLP artillery, and her mother subsequently dies.

Paradoxically, her mother's death not only demonstrates the terrible consequences of the war and of humanitarian inaction, but is also a necessary precondition for her potential resettlement in the West. Laokolé is no longer constrained by her self-imposed commitments to family members and all that remains is the inevitable confrontation with her nemesis Mad Dog and reunion with her humanitarian benefactors. These encounters are staged in an artless example of eucatastrophe, "the sudden joyous 'turn'" in a narrative that sets about the concluding transition from despair into hopefulness (Tolkien 175). Arguably, Laokolé's lowest moment in the story is her abandonment by the Western conservationists in a jungle outside the capital where her aura of noble suffering finally breaks down and she degenerates into animality. Yet in her next chapter the character providentially awakes in the IDP camp, where her hope for the future is restored when she teaches rhymes that were shared within her family to the local children there. And of course not only does Mad Dog stand guard over this camp, but a colleague of Tanisha has been searching for Laokolé in the same location. Laokolé is relieved when told that she will soon leave the country as Tanisha promised, but she also feels guilty because "if everyone did the same, who would see to the future of the millions of children condemned to live out their lives here?" (302). She initially allays her conscience by allowing another woman to take her place for an interview that will be broadcast to

Western audiences. Nevertheless, there are two further symbolic acts necessary to complete the eucatastrophe.

Laokolé and Mad Dog eventually interact with each other in the camp, during a scene in which the former protects a young civilian girl from being beaten by the latter. Mad Dog abducts them both and, in another surprising turn of events, Laokolé kills him. Afterwards she expresses her “all-encompassing joy. Joy at being alive. Joy at having survived. Joy at continuing to live” (320). In a final gesture, she adopts the girl and confers upon her a new name: “I came up with the purest word of the tribe, the most beautiful word, a perfect reflection of the moment: *Kiessé!* Joy! My child, I name you *Kiessé!* (320-321). The entire story is structured in certain ways to sustain hope among readers, just as Laokolé has done: in spite of the terrible violence inflicted on innocents by malicious agents in dire conditions, hope is still possible as evidenced by the triumph of good over evil. However, it is also telling that humanitarian organizations, which in the West are typically seen as the purveyors of hope for communities in Africa that are affected by organized violence (and notwithstanding the positive presence of characters such as Tanisha), are absent from the conclusion of the work. Neither the industry nor its most benevolent representatives can protect Laokolé from Mad Dog, and at no point do they engage with the young soldier as the child that he is, one who might be rehabilitated. What the story suggests is that African characters are the authors of their own futures, whether hopeful or tragic, a lesson that is as much condemnatory of the humanitarian international as affirmative of the characters’ autonomy.

In this way, the inclusion of Western aid workers in the works goes beyond the

mere description of their various failures, or as a reminder to readers of the tenuousness of the privileged position that they enjoy in the U.S. public sphere, or to lower their esteem by contrasting the industry's lofty rhetoric with its organizational impotence. *Johnny Mad Dog* and a number of other child soldier stories offer an alternative to the dependent relationship between persons affected by organized violence and the aid workers who tend to them. The former are, in the idealized form, vulnerable and needy. The latter are committed and capable of helping them. In many works, these attributes are simply inverted. My analysis above largely focuses on the ways that humanitarian organizations fail to meet expectations of them, but it is also important to observe how characters who are normally seen as victims resist this characterization. Child soldiers often convey their own agency through violence. Civilians tend to express themselves in other ways. For example, Laokolé's personal identity is defined against (and also at the expense of) the humanitarian international, which, it could be said, is otherwise not the focus of the story. It is instead one among many elements that stress the positive and negative qualities of the primary characters. And more generally throughout the genre, Western humanitarianism is simply another component of its literary *mise-en-scène*.

ADVOCACY THROUGH A PRIVILEGED VOICE

That said, there is another way in which some child soldier characters productively engage with humanitarianism by transforming their subordinate social status into what Western audiences regard as a privileged identity. Humanitarian advocacy offers them this opportunity. This form of humanitarianism is far less prominent in the

genre than operational activities, in large part because most of the fictional narratives are set exclusively during periods of conflict where advocacy NGOs are not likely to be found. The few examples of advocacy in the novels concern the efforts of journalists to interview decommissioned former child soldiers in reports intended for Western audiences. The culmination of Julia's imaginary DDR program for child soldiers in *Moses, Citizen and Me* occurs after they perform their play and are greeted by Western reporters who want to record their personal experiences: "Whenever a journalist was free, they began telling their stories just as they had told each other [...] Since almost all had rehearsed using the beginning, middle and end technique, the journalists had no difficulty in keeping up" (211). In reality, when a reporter meets Citizen, the boy is reticent, giving only his name and age, and the admission that he was forced to kill his grandmother. Regardless of how the reporter uses this statement, Citizen does not understand it as a positive contribution for advocacy to end the military recruitment of children in Africa and elsewhere, but instead as a traumatic confession of guilt, which is evidenced by his physical collapse after speaking.

In contrast, Laokolé is made explicitly aware of her role in the advocacy efforts depicted in *Johnny Mad Dog*. She meets a passionate journalist named Katelijne in the UNHCR compound, who wants "to give a face to the suffering and misery I see here" (142). Laokolé agrees, but when Katelijne insists that her recently disabled mother be interviewed on camera—the reporter describes how they would "get a close-up of her haggard face" and "end with a close-up of her stumps. It'll be dramatic!"—the young protagonist reacts angrily before providing a more characteristically charitable

explanation: “She didn't understand that poor people like us didn't make a display of our misery. We had the right to keep it private” (147). The two meet again in the IDP camp where Katelijne requests another interview. This time, Laokolé directs her instead to a woman gang-raped by MFDLP soldiers. Her remarks suggest a dual purpose for humanitarian advocacy: “We've got to make the outside world understand what's happening here! [...] By remaining silent, we've become invisible. Well, I'm no longer hiding! I'm showing my face and declaring who I am: my name is Lea Malanda!” (303). The need to publicize war crimes and identify the perpetrators of these offenses is central to the efforts of advocacy organizations that focus on child soldiering, genocide, and associated issues. This interview certainly serves that purpose. But by emphatically declaring her name, Malanda also insists that viewers see her not only as a type (the rape victim, the IDP, and so on) but also as a distinct individual. Humanitarian advocacy therefore gives her the opportunity to counterbalance actions that are meant to dehumanize her, as well as Western perceptions of her that have a similar effects.

Liisa Malkki explains that when the beneficiaries of humanitarianism express themselves in this manner they assert “the ability to establish narrative significance to one's own circumstances and future, and, also, the ability to claim an audience” (393). For Malanda the effect of this gesture is limited because she is inconsequential to the story in *Johnny Mad Dog*, which is not her own; after she conducts the interview she does not appear in the work again. Yet it is essential for the former child soldiers who narrate their own experiences, especially in the memoirs. In most respects, non-fiction and fictional accounts of child soldiering are very similar in content, prevailing themes,

and so on. But they differ in one important respect: when the novels conclude *Mad Dog* and *My Luck* are dead, while *Birahima* is stuck in a circular social limbo. Only *Moses, Citizen and Me* provides readers with a glimpse into the life of a child soldier who has completed the DDR process and is, truly, a *former* child soldier. In contrast, all of the memoirs depict this transition, which is important not just for the personal development of the characters (and perhaps also the authors), but also for how child soldier stories function as redemption stories. The way these protagonists accomplish this end is by becoming humanitarian advocates themselves and in the process productively transforming their relationship to victimization.

Changes in their social identities follow a somewhat linear trajectory from their initial social positioning as civilians to child soldiers to decommissioned soldiers in rehabilitation to reintegrated former child soldiers in their own communities and finally as advocates in the West. Akallo explains in a radio interview conducted in the wake of the *Kony 2012* campaign that the reintegration of child soldiers in Africa is hindered by the public knowledge of their controversial pasts (Akallo). Beah, Jal, and Keitetsi illustrate this problem in their respective narratives, where each faces discrimination or further violence on account of their social statuses, and all find it difficult to re-integrate into civilian life. This conflict is most evident in the schoolroom. All three characters are ostracized by other students and Keitetsi and Jal find it especially difficult to meet expectations of them as obedient pupils after years of soldiering. This tension is most acute for Jal, who is expelled on several occasions for behavioral issues and is actually nineteen years of age at the final time of enrollment before he stops attending school

altogether. His social statuses as an adult and a former combatant clearly disadvantage his attempts to re-integrate and resume his life in Africa before recruitment.

Yet for the purpose of humanitarian advocacy in the West, their experiences are perceived much differently: to be a former child soldier in this context is a privileged identity and not simply a burden to be overcome. Beah demonstrates these conditions and his awareness of them when he applies to represent Sierra Leone at the United Nations First International Children's Parliament, which is his first role as a humanitarian advocate. When asked why he should be chosen over other applicants, whom he calls "city boys," Beah replies, "I have not only suffered because of the war but I have also participated in it and undergone rehabilitation. [...] They don't know anything about the war except the news of it" (187). The narrative ends as Beah leaves Sierra Leone for a second time, fleeing renewed violence and returning to the U.S. permanently. His subsequent role as an advocate in the West are documented in a biographical note that lists positions in numerous NGOs, including one he founded to provide assistance to other former child soldiers. Many readers may already know him as the most visible advocate against child soldiering in the twenty-first century. Keitetsi only vaguely mentions advocacy within her narrative, but as I explain in chapter one, she does participate in the interview and lecture circuit, and among other influences her speaking engagements at Harvard University provided the impetus for Iweala's novel. Akallo concludes her memoir with examples of her advocacy in the U.S. as a guest on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, speaker in a hearing at the U.S. Congress, and partner with World Vision.⁴ Likewise, Jal describes his participation at the 2005 charity concert Africa Rising

and performances for schoolchildren and Congressional staff in the U.S., among other efforts.⁵ The reason why they have these many opportunities is not simply because they experienced wartime violence on the continent, but specifically because of their unique positions as former child soldiers.

Possibly the most important form of advocacy they undertake, both for themselves and child soldiers who continue to fight in Africa and elsewhere, is to write about their experiences. While it is not practical or appropriate to make claims about any author's personal motivations, these memoirs can be read as representing "an imperative need to tell and thus to come to know one's story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself," which Dori Laub identifies in other survivors of trauma (78); for example, Keitetsi describes this as her main motivation for writing. The emotional power of the memoirs comes in part from their invitation for readers to use Dominick LaCapra's explanation, 'virtually' experience this trauma by placing themselves "in the victim's position while respecting the difference between self and other and recognizing that one cannot take the victim's place or speak in the victim's voice (125). In other words, it is possible for these stories to generate empathy in the reader (and not merely sympathy), which is the basis of ethical engagement. This argument is highly speculative, but it is also the foundation of so-called 'awareness-raising' efforts, the context in which child soldier stories are most frequently understood. What is more certain is that former child soldiers are granted an unparalleled legitimacy on the issue of the military use of children that is cemented by their past experiences; researchers and aid workers may know *about* child soldiering, but these individuals know

what it means to *be* one. Whether deliberate or not, their memoirs inscribe this public identity, assuring their credibility as advocates.

ARE THERE EVER FORMER-FORMER CHILD SOLDIERS?

Of course, the establishment of such a reputation is not without consequences. Keitetsi describes her work as a “final humiliation,” the effectiveness of which depends partly on how widely her story of “shameful abuse and inferiority” is disseminated and read (272). For the time being she, Akallo, and Jal still publicly embrace their public identities as former child soldiers on behalf of NGOs, as guest contributors, and so on. In contrast, Beah has attempted to develop a new identity as a novelist, but the critical reception of his fictional work reveals the difficulty of altering Western perceptions of him. *Radiance of Tomorrow*, published nearly seven years after his memoir, focuses on the efforts of a community to rebuild after the war in Sierra Leone. The novel is bittersweet and describes, but does not dwell on, past violence. Even so, persistent reminders of Beah’s role in that conflict as a child soldier not only appear in every mainstream review of the novel, but also throughout the paratext of its first edition—in a reference to his memoir on the front cover and the front jacket cover summary, reviews of his previous title on the back cover (which outnumber the advanced praise of the novel by three-to-one), and even the author’s own prefatory note. These marketing devices illustrate the problem that Beah faces after having become a well-known advocate on the basis of his social status. The humanitarian industry (operational and advocacy organizations), together with the American publishing industry, have provided him with

the opportunity to countervail the negative consequences of his military service.

However, in doing so he might have, to his personal and professional detriment, ceded the ability to manage his own public identity.

Not all former child soldiers are as willing to take on this role and accept its potential consequences as Akallo, Beah, Jal, and Keitetsi. In her sociological study of the recruitment and post-war rehabilitation of child soldiers in Sierra Leone, Miriam Denov mentions a decommissioned combatant who now lives in the West and insists on his anonymity. He rejects requests from publishers to write a memoir based on his experiences and invitations from various groups to speak about his past. He reasons that he “does not want to be known solely and unidimensionally as a former child soldier. Perhaps more importantly for him, such celebrity comes at a price and with a heavy burden,” the awareness that his victimization of others will have directly led to these opportunities (10). This brief anecdote raises several unanswerable questions—How is the informant already known to publishers and advocacy groups? How do they respond, if at all, to his refusal to speak?—as well as potential drawbacks to writing a memoir as a form of advocacy against the military use of children. These narratives are necessarily mediated through interpretation in ways which the former child soldiers cannot control. For this anonymous informant, the risks to his public identity and his conscience are not worth the potential benefits.

What are the benefits? As I have suggested throughout this chapter, their treatment of the theme of humanitarianism in Africa may be considered a redeeming feature of the genre. The stories offer a relatively nuanced critique of the perceived relationship

between Western humanitarians and their African beneficiaries: the former are not as influential or helpful as they may have hoped to be, while the latter are not as powerless as they seem. And while it is both impossible and inappropriate to predict whether readers will convert the emotional response that these stories offer into specific humanitarian action, the existence of the memoirs as a form of humanitarian advocacy demonstrates that the industry can, in some cases, be effective; some child soldiers have undergone rehabilitation. In her review of *A Long Way Gone*, Mary H. Moran cautions readers to remember that “the lives of most former child soldiers did not end in as happy and successful a resolution as did Ismael Beah’s. In no way does it diminish his own courage or his suffering to drive this point home” (198). This is true of other memoirs by former child soldiers as well. Their structure and the redemptive trajectory of their protagonists, which is rooted in their presentation as misery literature, can otherwise be misleading. But their interrogation of the humanitarianism is to be commended.

CHAPTER FOUR | ENDNOTES

1. The *Kony 2012* campaign, including the well-known introductory video, was designed by the marketing firm Fifty & Fifty, which works with non-profit and humanitarian organizations.
2. The number of times that the film has been accessed is one measure of success among many. Although it is not possible to enumerate a total, as of this writing the official version published on YouTube received more than 1.3 million views.
3. For a representative sample of published criticism on the campaign, see De Waal (2012), Max Fisher, Mahmood Mamdani, and Dinaw Mengestu (2012). The film was also poorly received among viewers in Northern Uganda (Bariyo).
4. Akallo is now the Executive Director for the advocacy NGO United Africans for Women & Children Rights, which she founded in 2009.
5. Jal has not always been welcome to participate in advocacy efforts on behalf of the continent. He describes speaking with Bob Geldof, the original organizer of Live Aid, about performing in the 2005 Live 8 benefit concerts. Geldof rebuffs Jal, saying “he needed people to watch the event and the Chinese would switch off their televisions if I came on” (242).

CONCLUSION

WHAT TO WRITE ABOUT AFRICA

The rhetorical successor to Achebe's 1977 essay "An Image of Africa," one that manifests a more contemporary style, is Binyavanga Wainaina's 2005 essay "How to Write About Africa." This satirical piece offers advice to Western authors on how to write about the continent for a Western audience, remarking that "Africa is big: fifty-four countries, 900 million people who are too busy starving and dying and warring and emigrating to read your book" (92). The essay was widely disseminated after its publication and has prompted numerous laudatory responses. His more recent criticisms about how the continent is represented also include African writers and audiences, but otherwise echo Achebe's original concerns: "Africa's image in the West, and Africa's image to itself, are often crude, childish drawings of reality" (2012). Their collective disapproval is not expressed on the basis of artistry—on whether representations of Africa might be entertaining, well executed, or conform to a preferred fashion. Rather, it is an ethical act, premised on the assumption that stories about Africa (in images and narratives) will have an influence on how readers perceive Africa. My analysis throughout this study of predominant themes in the child soldier story genre is based on this same premise. Ethical critiques of literary writing, and of stories about Africa in particular, are not necessarily consequentialist in their approach to the content of a narrative. For some critics, the problem is deontological: the inadequate representation of Africa, if it exists, is a problem for its own sake. But in either case, ethical criticism

requires that we identify the values conveyed in the works that we read and, just as important, that we make moral judgments about them and the genre as a whole.

A proper critique of the genre must look beyond the intentions of those involved in its production (writers, agents, editors, publishers, marketers, distributors, booksellers, critics, and readers), our sympathy or identification with individual characters, and even the values that these characters might express in the works. Rather, as critics we must determine whether the “invitation to *feel* in certain ways, to *believe* in certain ways, and to *judge* in certain ways” that the narratives extend in their entirety merit acceptance (Gregory 168). If we accept this form of criticism as legitimate (or are willing to suspend disbelief), then how to proceed with a judgment? This project has not been organized as an innocuous study of child soldier stories, but instead is loosely structured as an argument that is unavoidably consequentialist insofar as the idea that literary writing can exert an influence on readers is foundational to the discipline of literary criticism. The evidence for this argument is derived from my analysis of how the narratives engage with Africanist discourse through their presentation of predominant themes; each chapter functions as a kind of premise. And based on their invitations, what they ask readers to accept about the continent, my conclusion is that *child soldier stories do more harm than good to the image of Africa in the U.S.*

My main argument in the introduction to this study is a factual claim: no matter how readers respond to the practice of under-age recruitment, or its representation in the stories, child soldiering is not prevalent on the African continent. Similarly, my assertion that child soldier stories are popular and commercially successful is also factually

accurate, to the extent that evidence is available and can be evaluated. The remaining arguments throughout this study are inferential, which is, of course, the task of interpretation. But if it is agreed that fictional and non-fiction narratives from Africa are poorly differentiated and both are often understood to offer realistic representations of life on the continent, then my conclusion is warranted by the impressions that they convey: child soldiers are common in Africa, children cannot experience a 'proper' childhood in Africa, and the miserable conditions of everyone there are unlikely to improve because of the innate predisposition of many Africans to violence and corruption. Productive critiques in the genre that might potentially enlighten readers, such as its criticism of the relationship between Western humanitarians and aid recipients (as well as common perceptions of both groups in the context of their 'master-slave dialectic'), which I explore in chapter four, are certainly laudable. But the genre also reinforces racist stereotypes that are inherent in Africanist discourse. My conclusion is that meritorious elements of child soldier stories do not justify or obviate their more obvious structural flaws.

There is no way to know how and in what way the child soldier story genre will be regarded in the future, or if it will be discussed at all. It is certainly possible that it will come to be regarded as a notable contribution to African writing either in relation to other forms or in their own right, representing a trend or a continuation of existing traditions. Or they could instead be seen as a fad that briefly captured the attention of American publishers and readers before disappearing from view. Similarly, readers and critics may eventually return to the genre with new interpretations that are ultimately beyond our

horizons of understanding in the present day. It is also possible that perceptions in the U.S. about Africa will change or even improve, which could affect how child soldier stories are read. What we know for sure is that the initial period of creative output in the genre has ended for the time being. There have been no noteworthy new titles since the release of Jal's memoir in 2009 and no other evidence of a resurgence in the U.S. book market. The nine child soldier stories that I have examined throughout this study are the most popular, successful, and representative of their kind. As it stands, they demonstrate that the genre is much more likely to harm to the image of Africa in the U.S. than do any potential good—this is how they should be recognized and understood.

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