

Representations of Child Soldiers in Contemporary African Narratives

By

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the representations of African child soldiers in selected contemporary African narratives with a view to mapping the dominant factors that writers privilege in their depictions of child soldiering in sub-Saharan Africa. In its engagement with the African child soldier genre, this study posits that critical discussions of African child soldier literature have depended on the interpretive frameworks supplied by Western humanitarian discourses which oversimplify and de-historicize experiences of war in Africa. Such reductive decontextualizations of war realities, I argue, serve to champion a narrow vision of war in African contexts centred on a moral and humanitarian urge for Western intervention. Regardless of whether the *casus belli* legitimating those wars are genuine or not, those conflicts (and children's involvement in them) are understood within the same racist colonial and ethnocentric stereotypes about Africa that have been privileged in Western thought and the Western moral-political imagination for centuries.

Thus, in studying African child soldier narratives, I focus on novels whose settings feature African ethnopolitical conflicts – such as in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Congo-Brazzaville, Nigeria – notable for their exploitation of children for military ends. I maintain that these works are significant in the varying ways they reify and challenge the Western ideas of “child” and “childhood,” as well as privilege child soldiers as social actors whose intricate makeups disavow being simply understood as innocent victims or irredeemable perpetrators of atrocities. Moreover, I contend that these works also participate in age-old Afropessimistic depictions of a homogenous Africa where it is dangerous to be children, where human lives have no meaning, and where wars are waged senselessly.

Overall, my textual-interpretive analyses of the selected novels in this study emphasize the importance of some works belonging to the African child soldier canon to ongoing campaigns against the mobilization of child soldiers and the rehabilitation processes employed by international organizations and transnational NGOs concerned with children at war. In this regard, my critique of African child soldier narratives reveals that the understanding of prewar conditions is vital to initiating viable policies for the protection of children.

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Dedication

To the real and imaginary young people at war.
You task the mind and are not easily analytically graspable!

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Introduction

The main hypothetical current that courses through this study is that the idea of the African child soldier is much more shaped by human rights and humanitarian discourses than it is by the real experiences of children at war. The dissertation examines varied ideas of childhood, and children and warfare in Africa with a view to delineating the concept of child soldiering and the understandings of child soldiering informing the writing of African child soldier narratives. Pivotal to this inquiry is the appraisal of the discourses on African child soldiers that Western human rights and humanitarian groups¹ have consistently privileged and endorsed. The argument advanced throughout this study rests on the claim that humanitarian and human rights discourses on child soldiers are both heavily one-sided, indifferent to context and contain misleading distortions that suggest a disconnection from the experiences of children at war. Given the influential nature of humanitarian organizations on critical discussions on African child soldiers, it is necessary to re-examine the origins and force of the normative frameworks shaping our understanding of the African child soldier experience. While this study does not aim to discredit the humanitarian efforts channelled towards addressing the incidence of child soldiering, it seeks to explore literary representations of the child soldier image with a view to mapping the dominant factors writers privilege in their representations of child soldiering in sub-Saharan Africa. The study defines and explains the understandings of childhood and children's agency that writers project in child soldier narratives. This focus is important in view of claims such as the one Jean-Herve Jezequel makes to the effect that humanitarian organizations were at the forefront of coordinating the issue of children used in African conflicts as soldiers (99).² Both

¹ I make no distinction between these two groups.

² Humanitarian NGOs have also been carpented for privileging perception/generalization over experience/context in their dealings with and discourse on children at war. See Aviva Sinervo and Kristen Cheney's "NGO Economies of

Barry Ames (14) and Scott Gates and Simon Reich (6) have respectively noted that much of what has been written about child soldiering derives from humanitarian organizations. These organizations shape how we understand the practice of child soldiering and influence both the cultural productions and criticisms of child soldiering.

Accordingly, this dissertation engages with such questions as: What ideas about children and soldiering do African representations of child soldiers convey? To what degree are these representations attuned to the historical and political specificities of the contexts within which wars involving the use of children occur? What are the representational strategies adopted by writers in their attempts to shape an image of child soldiers? What is the significance of these works (i.e. why do they matter)? Which audiences do they target? What message do the paratexts and places of publication of these works communicate about their settings? Do these works revise or reinforce stereotypical images of Africa? In engaging these questions, I maintain that critical discussions of African child soldier literature have depended on the interpretive frameworks supplied by Western humanitarian discourses which oversimplify and de-historicize experiences of war in Africa. Such reductive decontextualizations of war realities, I argue, serve to champion a narrow vision of war in African contexts centred on a moral and humanitarian urge for Western intervention. Regardless of whether the *casus belli* legitimating those wars are genuine or not, those conflicts (and children's involvement in them) are understood within the same colonial racist and ethnocentric stereotypes about Africa that have been privileged in Western thought and the Western moral-political imagination for centuries.

Affect: Humanitarianism and Childhood in Contemporary and Historical Perspective" in *Disadvantaged Childhoods and Humanitarian Intervention* (2019), edited by Aviva Sinervo and Kristen Cheney.

Although children have been a constant part of war for ages, transnational humanitarian organizations such as Child Soldier International, Save the Children, Action Aid, Oxfam, Human Rights Watch, etc., promote a narrative suggesting that the participation of children in recent conflicts, especially in Africa, is something new. Children's participation in warfare is neither unique to modern warfare nor has it been foregrounded historically as an aberration as contemporary human rights and humanitarian discourses on the subject suggest it should be.³ In the humanitarian and human rights discourses, child soldiering is cast in negative light. A new social meaning is ascribed to the instrumentalization of children as soldiers so that the children involved end up essentialized as passive and disempowered victims. Mark Drumbl observes that the understanding of child soldiers as innocent victims "has achieved widespread traction within – and is avidly disseminated by – influential intergovernmental organizations and UN agencies, NGOs and other actors that populate global civil society. It has consequently come to dominate international discourse" (8). This social conception of child soldiering also contrasts sharply with earlier associations linking child soldiers with heroism, patriotism, bravery, and agency. The literature on children and conflict underscores the involvement of children in different wars as an historical fact (Collmer 2, Wells 239, Honwana 26-7). During the Middle Ages, people who in modern parlance are strictly categorized as children were celebrated for their supportive roles in the wars of the time (McBride 5). They functioned as pageboys to medieval knights and as "aides, charioteers and armour bearers to adult warriors in the Mediterranean basin; or as 'powder monkeys' who delivered cannon ammunition" (McBride 5).⁴ Peter Singer in *Children at*

³ Different scholars have underscored this observation in their works. See David Rosen's *Armies of the Young: Child Soldiers in War and Terrorism*, 2005, p. 8; Thomas Humphrey's "Child Soldiers: Rescuing the Lost Childhood," 2007, p. 114; Lorraine Macmillan's "The Child Soldier in North-South Relations," 2009, p. 36; Vera Achavarina and Simon Reich's "Refugees, Displaced Persons, and Child Soldier Recruits," 2010, p. 57; and Julie McBride's *The War Crime of Child Soldier Recruitment*, 2014, p. 5.

⁴ The roles attributed to those medieval children seem similar to some of those duties observable in the most popularly used definition of "child soldier" found in the UNICEF 1997 Cape Town Principles, one which has

War (12) and David Rosen (4-6) provide more explanations on the roles young people were responsible for in war in the Middle Ages.

In *Armies of the Young*, Rosen argues that age was not much of a determinant in the military mobilization of young people in different “preindustrial societies” (4). In his survey of societies from Africa, Europe, and to North America, Rosen observes that “[t]here is no single rule for determining when the young are fit to be warriors” (4). He further provides detailed accounts of wars in which children were mobilized at disparate ages and in varied capacities. For example, the battlefields of the American Civil War as well as those of the First and Second World Wars witnessed the presences of boy soldiers (Rosen 6-8). The same point can be made in respect of some African wars of independence like those of the Mau Mau in Kenya, Angola, Mozambique, and South Africa. In those wars, as the literature on children and war shows, children were involved at different levels for varied undertakings, including combat missions, but were neither essentialized as victims nor were they considered as unsuitable for warfare.⁵

What stands out in Rosen’s chronicle is that it is the roles that young fighters played in those wars and their motivations for enlistment, rather than their age, that mattered in the reckonings of their societies. The questions of whether they were victims of adult wars, were too young to fight, or innocent and in need of protection barely arose. Rather, those young combatants, especially those involved in the American anti-slavery war, were regarded as patriotic and celebrated as heroes, thus prompting Rosen to conclude that “current humanitarian

attracted critical contention mainly because of its insistence on a universal understanding of childhood, and which I will examine later in this chapter.

⁵ See Harry West’s “Girls with Guns: Narrating the Experience of War of FRELIMO’S ‘Female Detachment’” 2007; Jessica Schafer’s “The Use of Patriarchal Imagery in the Civil War in Mozambique and Its Implications for the Reintegration of Child Soldiers,” 2007; and Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Dreams in a Time of War: A Childhood Memoir*, 2010.

views of the involvement of the young in the military and war are different from the way that involvement was understood in the United States and Europe in earlier times” (*Armies* 6).⁶ These extant humanitarian views Rosen mentions here are those of transnational humanitarian and human rights organizations whose discourses on child soldier pathologize war and frame children’s involvement in it as inherently victimizing (9). It is to this discourse and its ideas of children, childhood, and war that I turn to now.

Dominant Conceptions of “Child” and “Child Soldier” in Humanitarian Discourse

The humanitarian discourse on war and children stresses the incompatibility of children and combat. The discourse conceives of all children in conflict zones as victims and therefore “conceptualize ‘child soldiering’ in terms of a clear violation of universal children’s rights and a breach of international humanitarian law” (Lee 3). That discourse, as some scholars have argued, is largely characterized by an interest in affect (Sinervo and Cheney 23, Manzo 638-9, Lee 7). This advocacy, morally sentimental⁷ campaign ignores children’s participation in previous wars. At the heart of that disconnect is the investment of childhood with a new meaning, one that signals depoliticization and represents children generally as essentially immature, innocent, and vulnerable. In this sense, childhood becomes “both a protected and empowered category”

⁶ In her introduction to the edited Johnnie Wickersham’s *Boy Soldier of the Confederacy: The Memoir of Johnnie Wickersham 14yrs* (2006), Kathleen Gorman notes that veterans of the American Civil War not only produced memoirs in which they memorialize their participation in the war as patriots, but also to “influence the way the next generation of Southerners learned about their cause and their history” (x).

⁷ What I invoke here is Didier Fassin’s notion of “moral sentiments,” which, as a vital element of the regime of humanitarianism, are “the emotions that direct our attention to the suffering of others and make us want to remedy them” (1). See Aviva Sinervo and Kristen Cheney’s “NGO Economies of Affect: Humanitarianism and Childhood in Contemporary and Historical Perspective,” 2019; Kate Manzo’s “Imaging Humanitarianism: NGO Identity and the Iconography of Childhood,” 2008; and Ah-Jung Lee’s “Understanding and Addressing the Phenomenon of ‘Child Soldiers’,” 2009.

(Sinervo and Cheney12). In his book, *Child Soldiers in the Western Imagination: From Patriots to Victims*, Rosen asks a pertinent question: “What has changed in our cultural imagination that has so profoundly altered our understanding of the compatibility – or rather, incompatibility – of children, the military, and war?” (8). In answer, Rosen identifies a shift in the notions of child and childhood. As he puts it, the transformed conception of childhood as “a highly distinct stage of life characterized by innocence vulnerability, and the need for protection remain central to Western understandings of the child, and have increasingly rendered childhood and military life incompatible” (8). This incongruity between childhood and military endeavour is reinforced in the oxymoronic phrase, “child soldier,” which as Rosen asserts is an invention of humanitarian and human rights groups (8).

In their respective works, Catarina Martins and Alcinda Honwana highlight the contradiction inherent in the child soldier model. “How can an innocent child become a soldier?” Honwana asks rhetorically (33). Martins on her part contends that the term is not innocuous – “what is at stake here is the political agenda that is created by interlinking both terms: one that underlines vulnerability and the need for protection with another that connotes extreme violence” (435). That “political agenda” is what Erica Burman references when she posits that “specific agendas are fulfilled ‘in the name of the child’” (47). I will return later in this introduction to the “political/specific agendas” matter – which Nancy Sherper-Hughes and Carolyn Sargent call “the cultural politics of childhood”⁸ – and how it influences the image of the African child soldier and their locales. At this point, however, it is important to first examine the concept of “the child” in that construct.

⁸ See Nancy Sherper-Hughes and Carolyn Sarge’s “Introduction: The Cultural Politics of Childhood” in *Small War: The Cultural Politics of Childhood*, edited by Nancy Sherper-Hughes and Carolyn Sargent, UCP, 1998, pp. 1-33.

As childhood studies scholarship proves, the concept of “child” has been a subject of strong interdisciplinary debates (Twum-Danso 8; Wells 16; Nieuwenhuys, “Keep Asking” 292; Kononenko 91). Those debates, ably energized by researchers in the fields of law, psychology, sociology, and anthropology, underline the idea of child and childhood as a complex subject. A child, as Jenks Chris suggests, is as familiar as it is strange (2-3). Two broadly diametrically dissimilar perspectives stand out in arguments over what a child is: one universalist; the other relativist/local (Kononenko 2016). They go by other nomenclatures such as “naturalist” and “social constructivist” models (Boyden 2007), and “caretaker” and “free-ranger views” (Huynh 2015).

The constructivist stance on children embraces a multidimensional notion of “the child” and “childhood.” Its strong claim is that ideologies of childhood vary from society to society. The understanding of childhood from this position is that a child is a social construct, one that is informed largely by conventions and not natural states. “[C]hildhood,” as Chris posits, “is to be understood as a social construct” (6). The emphasis in this view is not on age as a determinant of childhood, nor on childhood as an opposite of adulthood. The focal point is that the constructed nature of childhood compels awareness of the fact that the composites of class, culture, social values, economy, gender, among other factors, crucially determine how various societies view and understand childhood (Alanen 493; Rosen, *Armies* 8; Honwana and de Boeck 4, Ofosu-Kusi 4). Boyden and Levinson’s observation on the diversity of criteria for the determinant of childhood across societies is critical here. In their view, there are no universal criteria by which societies define childhood. Instead, for different cultures the idea of childhood may be created by a combination of “the commencement of work, end of schooling, onset of menarche, betrothal, and marriage among others [...] Further, children in different social classes within the same

society may reach adulthood at different stages, depending on their social and economic roles” (28).

From the perspective of the relativist idea of childhood, therefore, there are different childhoods, and not just one singular version of the experience. Speaking in favour of multiple childhoods, Ofosu-Kusi notes that “If social practices governing childhood and affecting the lives of children are also not universally consistent, then it is presumptuous to model children’s cognitive development on universally applicable stages of development” (3). This approach allows for the recognition of the forces shaping how various societies understand and regard its youngest members. When examined within the frame of the relativist understanding of childhood, the idea of “child soldier” becomes unsuitable and unreliable, for “the child” therein is both of an abstract nature and limiting in sociocultural scope. It is in this regard that one finds Jessica Schafer’s position noteworthy. In her view the “concept of ‘child’ soldier in the sense in which it is commonly understood, with the implications of childhood vulnerability and innocence, is not useful or accurate” for making sense of young people’s participation in violent conflicts (87).

It is my view that the child soldier concept, indeed childhood, when applied to all real-life, as well as representations of young people at war in pop-cultural productions and other art forms, encourages distortion and decontextualization of the complex realities of child soldiering. I mean childhood, essentialized as all that adulthood is not, is conceptually and otherwise inadequate for making sense of the sociopolitical lives of young persons associated with fighting forces. In the humanitarian and human rights discourse on child soldiering, a disregard of context supervenes and all young people in fighting forces are considered children who are victims of adults’ victimization and mistreatment. The homogenized sense of children in conflicts in those

discourses enable a misrepresented understanding of the roles and motivations of children who fight. Thus, I agree with the respective conclusion of Rosen and David Mastey that most of those defined as child soldiers in those discourses scarcely fit the definition of a “child” as this category is understood and mobilized in the West.⁹ The texts of the African child soldier narratives I examine in this study both reify and revise Western ideas of childhood. In certain ways, the texts implicitly question and reject the conception of there being anything like a singular version of childhood. Moreover, in my readings of these texts I demonstrate that most child soldier protagonists are only children because they are so described; their thoughts and actions contradict many of the assumptions and meanings standardly resident within the appellation of “children” and challenge its essences – vulnerability, immaturity, and innocence. Indeed, as most child soldier narratives – fictional and non-fictional – reveal, protagonists are often at first less comfortable with being regarded as children and are often reluctant to embark on the journey to recover the childhoods that their Euro-Western therapists claim have been lost due to their participation in, or exposure to, violent conflict.

Integral to the conceptualization of a child in the social constructivist model is a child as a proto-adult rather than as a pre-social being. This view of a child recognizes children as social agents capable of demonstrating initiatives. It challenges the one-way approach to understanding children, especially in times of social unrest. It calls for a careful study of children’s actions and inactions in any social context with a view to establishing how they exercise agency, and it insists on seeing children as “makers of social life rather than passive recipients of psychosocial development” (Ofosu-Kusi 7). In advocating for an acknowledgment of the voices of children

⁹ See Rosen’s *Army of the Young*, p. 8; and David Mastey’s “The Adulterated Children of Child Soldier Narratives” 2017, p. 46.

and recognition of their capacity to shape society as it in turn shapes them (i.e. children), the relativist school does not downplay the differences between children and adults (Huynh 50-51). Instead, it advocates seeing children not necessarily as the opposite of adults and therefore as “people in the process of becoming,” but rather as “beings-in-the-present with an identity of their own” (De Boeck and Honwana 4). When children are regarded as social beings with their own voices and identities, Patricia Holland rightly thinks that “adults’ definitions [of children] will of necessity be less rigid” (21). But when children are taken as the same kind of beings-in-the-world, lacking any distinguishing identity, their agency is ignored and their actions in conflict situations become subject of misrepresentations. This reality defines the universalist idea of a child.

The universalist viewpoints on what is a child, as Erica Burman implies, are products of specific cultural norms.¹⁰ In the essay, “Innocents Abroad: Western Fantasies of Childhood and the Iconography of Emergencies,” Burman asserts that “[a]lthough the dominant imagery of childhood is presented as universal, it is highly culturally and historically specific” (242). Those cultural norms informing a universalized notion of childhood belong to Western societies. As Honwana asserts, the idea of childhood that is generalized and rendered as universal originate “from a Western and middle-class view of childhood” (“Innocent and Guilty” 34). This universalized Western understanding of childhood conceives of childhood as a period of play marked by happiness, innocence, dependence, immaturity, vulnerability, and the need for protection.¹¹ It regards childhood as a fixed idea determined principally by biological and psychological particulars. It understands childhood to be the opposite of adulthood (Honwana

¹⁰ See “Local, Global or Globalized?: Child Development and International Child Rights Legislation,” 1996, p. 49.

¹¹ See Karen Wells’ *Childhood in a Global Perspective*, second edition, 2015, p. 16; Jo Boyden’s “Childhood and the Policy Makers: A Comparative Perspective on the Globalization of Childhood,” 1990, p. 186; and Erica Burman’s “Innocents Abroad: Western Fantasies of Childhood and the Iconography of Emergencies,” p. 239.

and de Boeck 3). This modern ideology of childhood insists on the homogeneity of childhood – i.e. the assumption that children everywhere share the same essential traits – and it downplays the significance of cultural and social diversities as possible sources for the constructions of childhoods. It is this default conception of childhood that defines children whose rights are proclaimed in the famous 1924 Declaration of Children’s Rights and a few decades later enshrined in the ratified 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (Boyden 191, Huynh 36). These documents also inaugurate a set of rights for children that require application the world over in obvious indifference to “the evidence that the conception of rights is intimately tied up with cultural values and the outlook of any given society” (Boyden, “Childhood and Policy Makers” 197). Without doubt, the objective of the CRC is not only the setting of global standards for what constitutes childhood, but also a universal protection mechanism for children, especially those in conflict situations.

As different scholars have argued, the CRC’s definition of a child as “every human being below eighteen years” (Article 1) is contentious. Criticisms of the CRC speak to how it ignores other sociocultural understandings of childhood and leans heavily on Western modern ideas of what it means to be a child, thus promoting a unilateral and imperialistic notion of childhood as one which is universally similar (Boyden 191; Wells 16; Denov 2-3; Lee 5; and Nieuwenhuys “The Ethics” 5). Although the three guiding principles of the CRC – provision, protection, and participation – seem uncontroversial and tend to capture the responsibilities of any society to its members, especially the young, its indiscriminate promotion of the rights of children universally ignores the fact that what constitutes rights in one place might be viewed otherwise in another

location.¹² In this respect, some have argued that the rights which are thought of as applicable to all children are mainly enacted for the Western child, the presumably superior child of a supposedly superior world against which other childhoods and worlds are measured.¹³ The “ostensible universality” of the appeal of that Western child, Burman cautions, must not make us forget its provenance (239).

In Olga Nieuwenhuys’ view, the human so described in the CRC is “an abstract child – *the child*,” whose qualities are unchanging and remain undifferentiated in any social contexts (“The Ethics” 5, emphasis as in the main text). This generic child, whose childhood and rights are promoted as universal, natural, and sacrosanct, is ontologically Western and serves the political purpose of bolstering Western hegemony. That domination plays out in the spirited activism towards the defence of human rights.¹⁴ Tony Evans strikes clearly at the core of this issue when he maintains that “human rights and interests remain inexorably linked” and that “the project to promote universal human rights should also be seen within the context of hegemony and power” (18 and 21). Understandably, what Western human rights and humanitarian NGOs do in their responses to sufferings and *violations* of rights of children at war and in their salvaging of troubled childhood is to “lend further legitimacy to the established [Western] order, rather than [...] challenge that order” (Evans 18). In their promotion of the essence of a Western childhood, human rights and humanitarian organizations participate in creating a world system that both preserves and serves Western hegemonic interests. Thus, in the name of the child humanitarian and human rights groups globalize hegemonic norms of childhood. Their

¹² I should clarify here that I do not mean to suggest that what is acceptable as matters of rights in a place is wrong because elsewhere it is not accorded the same treatment. In the case of the CRC, the notion of the childhood it universalizes is Euro-Western, suggesting a singular form of childhood.

¹³ See Olga Nieuwenhuys’ “Theorizing Childhood(s): Why We Need Postcolonial Perspectives,” 2012, p. 4.

¹⁴ The point here is not to suggest that the pursuit of human rights is illegitimate. However, the troubling issue is that the championing of human rights often comes with strings attached.

conceptions of children, and understanding of warfare, how children become soldiers, and what demobilization and rehabilitation mean, are all defined in such a way as to be consistent with their vision statements and advocacy policies. It is the sum of these advocacy and other narratives that I call “humanitarian and human rights discourses.” Put differently, humanitarian discourse embodies how transnational humanitarian organizations understand, depict, and discuss children and child soldiering, as well as the notion of war. We find evidence of this discourse in many NGOs’ statements and programs, as well as in legal instruments such as the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child which they lobbied for and contributed to enshrining.

Humanitarian Organizations and the Rhetoric of Stolen Childhood

Human rights and humanitarian consortiums, major constituents of International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGO) concerned with issues of freedom and relief of human miseries in situations of conflicts and natural disasters, have been identified as instrumental to the enactment of such legal instruments as the CRC, as well as the promotion of Western interests in the name of humanitarian endeavours (Burr 2002; Burman 1994; Sinervo and Cheney 2019; and Drumbl 2012). These transnational NGOs include Child Soldier International, Save the Children, Action Aid, Oxfam, Human Rights Watch, International Committee of the Red Cross, etc. Karen Wells informs that most humanitarian NGOs were involved in the drafting of the CRC, which sculpts a universal view of the child and favours a paternalistic attitude towards children (17). Save the Children, as Sinervo and Cheney make clear, was formed in 1919 on the premise that children were endangered and required salvific intervention. As they put it,

In 1924, Save the Children founder Eglantyne Jebb drafted the first Declaration on the Rights of the Child (Save the Children 2006, 17). Jebb argued that the principle of neutrality should be applied specifically to children in contexts of armed conflict, thereby cementing the notion of children's "natural" vulnerability as well as their place as exclusive victims—never perpetrators—of violence. (8)

Save the Children not only champions the universalist model of a child as a vulnerable, apolitical subject, it also promotes an inflexible understanding of militarily mobilized children as innocent victims. "Humanitarianism," Maureen Moynagh asserts, "is inclined to fix the child soldier in the position of victim" ("Making and Unmaking" 539). In humanitarian discourse of children and war, a kind of obsession with childhood as synonymous with innocence and agentic incapacity predominates. Because humanitarian discourse favours the Western notion of a child as "becoming" instead of as a "social being" with relative capabilities, especially when not juxtaposed with adults, it portrays child soldiers as children whose "becomings" were truncated by their involvement in armed groups. This position explains child-centric humanitarian NGOs' fixation on the restoration of the childhood innocence of former child soldiers. In their efforts to rid the battlefields of the Global South of children and make the use of young people as soldiers less desirable, human rights and humanitarian NGOs like Save the Children have developed an influential discourse that privileges Western predispositions regarding children, and masks children's resilience, abilities, and the sociocultural contexts of their military activities. To be sure, this discourse is largely inconsistent with the lived realities of children, particularly children at war. In most child soldier narratives and the critical responses to them, the dominant image and emphasis one finds are of child soldiers as innocent victims of adults' machinations and recklessness. Child soldiers, as this one-sided understanding of them underscores, are not considered morally and/or legally culpable. Accordingly, while this study does not seek to

promote the military enlistment of young people as a commendable practice, it does consider the humanitarian discourse on child soldiers, its emphasis on the passivity and innocence of young soldiers, and its influence on the literary criticisms of the child soldier narratives to be misleading, reductive, and supportive of a model of childhood that is inadequate for understanding children's military experiences.

In the memoirs of former African child soldiers, as well as in their fictional variants which I engage in this study, the dominant image one encounters is of child soldiers as *children* who were deprived of their childhood innocence through enlistment, forced or voluntary, in armed groups. For example, in Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone* (2007),¹⁵ the first widely circulated account of an erstwhile African child soldier demobilized from armed group and rehabilitated in the US, the preoccupation with the issue of lost childhood takes centre stage.¹⁶ The narrative arc of the various stages of Beah's soldiering encounter in the Sierra Leonian army bends stiffly towards the loss of his childhood and how the humanitarian group concerned with his case worked to retrieve it. Even before the reader opens the book, the cover blurb promotes the story as being about "Ishmael Beah's childhood," which he has decided to tell once safely out of the hell of the decade-long Sierra Leonean Civil War. The blurb proclaims that Beah's is "a story of the loss of innocence and the power of redemption" (*A Long Way Gone* 2007). In several places in the story, Beah reminds his readers of his and other fellow child soldiers' loss

¹⁵ The edition I reference throughout this dissertation is the 2008 edition published by Harper Perennial.

¹⁶ Beah's memoir was not the first memoir to be published by a former African child soldier. The first memoir was by the Ugandan former child soldier, China Keitetsi, simply entitled *Child Soldier* (2004). See Peter Wilson's "Beah's Credibility a Long Way Gone," *The Australian*, February 2008, <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/beahs-credibility-a-long-way-gone/news-story/44938c4253dcfa0600fc0750ad5c6da2> (Accessed September 29, 2019); and Gabriel Sherman's "The Fog of Memoir: The Feud Over the Truthfulness of Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone*," *The Slate*, March 2008, <https://slate.com/culture/2008/03/the-feud-over-ishmael-beah-s-child-soldier-memoir-a-long-way-gone.html> (Accessed September 29, 2019).

of their childhood innocence (50, 55, 85-6). “My childhood had gone by without my knowing,” he laments (126).

In Beah’s story, it becomes clear that with the right humanitarian intervention a lost childhood can be recovered. After uneasy sessions with the agent of a humanitarian agency working to rehabilitate demobilized child soldiers, Beah identifies with the anti-child soldiering mission of such agencies. At the United Nations First International Children’s Parliament he participated in as a speaker in 1996, Beah revealed that rehabilitation restored the childhood he lost to conflict: “I have been rehabilitated now, so don’t be afraid of me. I am not a soldier anymore; I am a child” (199). Given the roles he played within the armed group, especially his exposure to and participation in atrocities such as killing, Beah does not fit the image of a child as innocent being in the Western sense. In insisting on identifying himself as a child – perhaps on account of age – he denies his own agential capability. Regarding himself as a child despite his involvement in the violence of warfare indicates how deeply he has bought into the Western idea of childhood the NGOs subscribed to. Rather than his own lived experience, Beah accepts the humanitarian reason that compels him to view his soldiering experience in the light of victimization and the violation of his rights. By prioritizing childhood, recovery of its lost innocence through therapy, and defining children’s participation in armed conflicts as violation of their human rights, humanitarian organizations both infantilize young soldiers and underestimate their agency. In this regard, Rony Brauman’s view underlines this point sharply: “He to whom humanitarian action is addressed is not defined by his skills or potential, but above all, by his deficiencies and disempowerment. It is his fundamental vulnerability and dependency, rather than his agency and ability to surmount difficulty, that is foregrounded by humanitarianism” (47). The agency – actions and initiatives demonstrated to cope and survive

within armed groups – that child soldiers like Beah exercised while in the army seem not to really matter. What really counts is the issue of their lost childhood innocence that humanitarian actions must seek to recover. In her readings of the African child soldier stories, Eleni Coundouriotis concludes that most of the child soldier memoirs (and no less their fictions) are victim and recovery narratives because of their disproportionate focus on the young protagonists' victimization and efforts to restore their lost childhood. "The recovery narrative," she argues, "allows for the problem of responsibility in the war to be shifted onto the task of recovery" (192). As most of the stories show, this business of recovery is solely about explaining away the atrocities perpetrated by child soldiers and establishing their moral and legal non-culpability.

So, when Beah and other decommissioned child soldiers claim they are children again, they are asserting their legal innocence, which resonates in both humanitarian discourse and other international legal instruments which forbids the prosecution of child soldiers. Although Beah reluctantly hints at his moral blameworthiness because of the heinous acts he undertook while a soldier, he would later explain away his culpability, giving in to his therapist's urging. Other ex-child soldiers like China Keitetsi (*Child Soldier* 2004) and Emmanuel Jal (*War Child: A Boy Soldier's Story* 2010) also privilege legal innocence while distancing themselves from their atrocious deeds. For example, Jal wants his readers to understand that he was just a child when he participated in armed conflict: "I feel 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" (266). Jal's *mens rea*, that is his lack of deliberate intention to commit the crime of killing, underscores his understanding of his inculpability and insistence on legal innocence. Jal's fictive counterpart, Agu, in Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* (2005), is also embroiled in an act of maintaining his legal innocence. He privileges a

victim's identity and explains his crimes as actions that his leaders in the armed groups are answerable for: "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). As I demonstrate in chapter one of this study, the child soldier identity in *Beasts of No Nation* is fundamentally informed by the views and rhetoric of transnational humanitarian and human rights organizations campaigning against the military use of children. It is a story which champions the cause of childhood innocence more than it depicts the child soldier image complexly, as part of a complex ideological and social web.

The influence of humanitarian discourse of loss and the recovery of childhood innocence also suffuses the fictional accounts that make up the African child soldier genre. They dictate how former soldiers understand their involvement in conflicts and shape readerly appreciations of such accounts. Accordingly, the African child soldier genre can be described as a collection of narratives engaged in the sentimental, or what Holland calls the "spectacular presentation," of the childish innocence of their young narrators (8). Far more than the actual experiences and actions of the child warriors, it is the idealized innocence of the supposed childhood of young combatants that occupies a central place in them – just as it is in humanitarian NGOs' campaigns against child soldiering. In my analysis of the fictional texts in this study, I underscore the influence of the humanitarian rhetoric on the loss of childhood innocence on how some of the writers recreate the child soldier phenomenon. My argument is that the African child soldier genre is one of the sites where humanitarian organizations' rhetoric on childhood and its lost innocence through participation in armed conflicts finds full expression. Paradoxically, the child soldier genre is also a space hosting contestation of notions of childhood, innocence, and the (im)possibility of its recovery as the conversations between demobilized young soldiers and the

humanitarian agents chaperoning them through therapy sessions indicate.¹⁷ However, as the narratives show, these contentions around the loss of childhood innocence and its recovery are always resolved in favour of the position of the representatives of the humanitarian agencies. Regardless, the works I examine in this study are compelling for what they represent about the changing meanings of childhood and childhood innocence, as well as for how they highlight the gaps in the humanitarian and human rights discourses that shape them.

Humanitarian View of War and the African Child Soldier Story

The wars in postcolonial states deemed as claiming the childhood innocence of child soldiers and the settings in which those conflicts occur are another trope in the humanitarian discourse on children and warfare that shapes the representation of the child soldier in African child soldier narratives. In that discourse, the wars in which children are involved in are pathologized and regarded as purposeless. As Ah-Jung Lee posits, the notion that the wars in which those regarded as child soldiers participate in are some unusual wars (“new wars”) “tends to demonize the conflict in which children participate and thereby render their participation as irrational and illegitimate” (12). These wars, as Graca Machel describes them in her 1996 report on children at war to the United Nations, are known for their “abandonment of standards [and] a sense of dislocation and chaos.”¹⁸ In many child soldier narratives, the depictions of wars match

¹⁷ I advance in chapter five of this study this position of the African child soldier genre as a site of certain contestations by looking at the paratexts – specifically the cover pages – of some of the narratives in the genre. These paratexts are also important for what they have to say about the interest of Western publishers in African stories such as those of violence and human-right violations evident in child soldier narratives. Building on Akin Adesokan’s fairly buttressed claim in his study of new African works and their audience (2012), I conclude in my reading of these paratexts that the African child soldier genre is also a product of the Western book market.

¹⁸ See Graca Machel’s *The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children* https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/51/306 (Accessed February 2020).

this humanitarian view of violent conflicts. In most of those works there are portrayals of conflicts whose causes and objectives remain unknown.

Among the works classified as child soldier narratives, the African variant predominates. Their Africanness is exemplified by their authorship, the African provenance of their lead characters, and their war-ravaged African settings (Mastey “Relative Innocence” 353). While the child soldier phenomenon is not endemic to Africa, this continent has been described as its epicentre (Achvarina and Reich 57-8, Singer 19). Because it is the most “chronic location for the problem” of child soldiering, Africa has more and more attracted the *sympathetic* gaze of Western humanitarian and human rights organizations. As Sinervo and Cheney submit, “the African continent and its people (most especially its children) have long stood as an object for humanitarian intervention” (14). While these interventions seek to meet children’s needs, alleviate their sufferings, and demobilize those in armed groups, they do much more, thus earning the providers opprobrium. Several scholars have observed that the ways humanitarian NGOs like Oxfam, Action, Aid, Save the Children, and International Red Cross, and the Red Crescent Movement deploy the images of suffering and war-affected children in the Third World have been criticized for their privileging of affect and misrepresentations (Burman 1994, Manzo 2008, Wells 2008, and Sinervo and Cheney 2019). Such interventions commodify, generalize, and hyperbolize children’s suffering and victimization, and cast their societies as helpless, uninhabitable, and in need of external interventions.

In the child soldier narratives that I examine in this study, as well as others that make up the child soldier genre, Africa and its conflicts are typically framed¹⁹ according to Western

¹⁹ Here I mean “framing” in the same sense that Robert Entman conceives of it – as an act of selecting “some aspects of a perceived reality and mak[ing] them more salient in a communicating text in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation

clichés: as a backward, uncivilized place given to violent, barbaric, criminal, and irrational uprisings (Fair 1993, Krishnan 2017, and Scott 2017). The continent is depicted as a place where poverty and misery, deadly diseases, and brutal violence imperil and steal childhood innocence. When war happens, as it does in the undifferentiated Africa of most of the stories, it is without any underlying ideology or clear purpose, and conflict is abstracted from any known social contexts. Most of the children pressed into the service of conflict have no understanding of what they are fighting for; they are expendable tools of war, and they die for nothing in a conflict that continues in an endless, repetitive cycle. Much more than Africanizing the child soldier incident (Macmillan 2009, Rosen *Armies* 52) and de-historicizing its ethnopolitical conflicts (Coundouriotis 192), I argue that the African child soldier genre participates in framing Africa in orthodox colonial terms as “a foil to Europe [the Western world], as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar” (Achebe 2). In their bent towards Western notions of childhood, these narratives set up the West as an adult and Africa as a child, the latter as an antithesis to the former. Rendered differently, these stories frame the child soldier’s identity in ways that work well to metaphorize the African continent as a “child” – in the Western conception of it – who is immature, irrational, and dependent and consequently one which contrasts with the West taken as a mature and rational “adult.”

In reaching this conclusion, I rely on academic studies of childhood, particularly the works of Ashis Nandy (1984), Erica Burman (1994), Kate Manzo (2008), Lorraine Macmillan (2009), and Katrina Lee-Koo (2011); all of which provide trenchant analyses of the political meanings of such concepts as “childhood” and “adulthood.” For these scholars, the ideas of adulthood and childhood serve as metaphors that have been employed in the service of racism,

for the item described.” (52).

colonialism, and humanitarianism. As they argue, Africa, as elsewhere in the Global South, is treated by humanitarian NGOs as a child in need of the adult guidance of the Western world of the Global North. The discourse surrounding child soldiering “buttresses age old hierarchies between the global North and the South” in the manner in which it concretizes “notions of race, physicality, irrationality and barbarism to child soldiers and their societies” (Macmillan 37). Macmillan concludes that the child soldier discourse “has become a new modality where colonial themes can be played out” (45). Lee-Koo reinforces this point when she submits that “the construction of the ‘child soldier’ is a powerful icon which speaks less of children, their human rights and insecurities, and more of contemporary global North-South power relations” (740). Part of those colonial themes, as I have stated earlier, involves the understanding of Africa as “the intrinsically irrational, primitive *black hole*, where violence is an inextricable part of nature, and which will eternally be dependent on intervention from the [Global] North” (Martins 438). The metaphor of childhood, Nandi argues, has, over time, been used to rationalize colonialism and imperialism, adding that the “doctrine of progress, in the guise of models of biological and psychological development, had already promoted in post-medieval Europe [...] the use of the metaphor of childhood as a major justification of all exploitation” (360-1).

The story worlds of African child soldier narratives recreate the colonial theme that Martins and Nandy highlight. In those stories, Africa is presented as a “child” in constant need of salvific intervention by the “adult” West. The memoirs of erstwhile African child soldiers reflect this tendency more. In these works, Western intervention constitutes notable topoi. While most of the fictions of child soldier depict their homogeneous Africa as a space where it is dangerous to be a child, the memoirs demonstrate that the rehabilitation of children implicated in armed violence is not possible in that place. Although rehabilitation may begin there (that is in the

Africa of the works), the only guarantee that it will be successful is if those to be rehabilitated are flown abroad – to Western countries. Like a child, Africa can neither take care of itself nor can it protect those entrusted to its care. It needs the putative maturity and rationality of the Western world to survive, and so that its war-scarred children may regain their wellness. As the cases of Beah, Keitetsi, Jal, Grace Akallo (*Girl Soldier* 2007), Senait Mehari (*Heart of Fire: From Child Soldier to Soul Singer* 2006), Mariatu Kamara (*The Bite of the Mango* 2015), and other war-affected children such as the famous “Lost Boys of Sudan”²⁰ indicate, Europe and North America are the veritable grounds for effective, successful rehabilitation without relapse. All the above-listed authors and former child soldiers now inhabit Euro-American cities and have since had their stories written (most of them co-authored), published, and circulated in the West. The huge commercial success and readerly attention these works have attracted further lend credence to Kay Schaffer’s and Sidonie Smith’s assertion that Western publishers and media establishments see life stories of suffering and survival as commodities “for general audiences with diverse desires, and also for an increasing number of niche audiences interested in particular kinds of suffering” (11). It is, therefore, not surprising that most of these works were published in the West.

As authors of fictional child soldier stories such as Uzodinma Iweala and Delia Jarrett-Macaulay have noted separately, the memoirs of ex-child soldiers and the testimonies of agents of humanitarian organizations dealing with child soldiers have served as fountains of inspiration for their recreation of the child soldier identity and experience. Like the memoirs, the fictions also affirm a long-held image of Africa up to their Western readers as “the other world, the

²⁰ As a descriptor used to capture the displacement and orphaning of thousands of Dinka and Nuer children during the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983 to 2005), the term “lost boys” is both misleading and exclusionary.

antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality" (Achebe 2). In the blurring of lines between its fictions and lived experiences, the African child soldier genre encourages Western audience to read those works "in ways that flatter rather than challenge [their] preconceptions" about Africa (Spencer 41). These accounts are popular and influential in the way they shape and present the child soldier issue and Africa to their audience, especially in the West (Mastey "Child Soldier Stories" 13). Schaffer and Smith have also argued that the Western book markets' eagerness to commodify stories of pains and sufferings from other places serves to determine "the forms those stories take, and the appeals they make to audiences" (14). In addition to the roles of the Western book markets in the publication and circulation of these stories, I also examine the tensions these works produce in their varied representations of the notions of childhoods within the context of war, the intricate image of the child soldier, the historical contexts or lack thereof of the wars involving child soldiers, and the politics of humanitarianism.

In my critical consideration of African child soldier narratives, I prioritize those whose settings feature – specifically or in a generalized sense – the ethno-political conflicts in some of the countries in Sub-Saharan Africa notable for their exploitation of children for military ends.²¹ This focus is not to suggest that there is a paucity of literary productions featuring conflicts involving the use of children as soldiers in other parts of Africa. Rather, in terms of the prevalence of the use of children in war and their representation in literary works, countries like

²¹ As Karen Wells, among other scholars, reports, most countries in Africa have experienced brutal conflicts since the end of the Cold War ([2008] 237). But those wars have their roots in the colonial experiences of those countries (see *The Roots of African Conflicts: The Causes and Costs*, 2008, edited by Alfred Nhema and Paul Zeleza; and *The State of Africa*, 2006, by Martin Meredith). However, some scholars of African civil wars have described those wars as exceptional, highlighting a distinction between them and those waged by Western countries (See Mary Kaldor's *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era*, 1999; and Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler's *Greed and Grievance in Civil War*, 2004). Humanitarian NGOs' discourse about war and children parallel these views of African civil wars and aid their decontextualized presentations and pathologization of those conflicts.

Sierra Leone and Liberia in West Africa; the Democratic Republic of Congo (Congo-Kinshasa) and the Republic of Congo (Congo-Brazzaville) in Central Africa; and Angola, Uganda, Rwanda, and South Sudan in East Africa stand out (Wessells 2006, Zac-Williams 2001, Singer 2005, Richards 2005, Rosen 2005). These Sub-Saharan African countries are as famous for the brutality of their ethno-political conflicts as they are for their ubiquitous use of children as front-line combatants. The political affairs of these states, as Angela McIntyre maintains, are “characterized by state weakness and insurgencies, including Liberia (1989-1997; and 2001), Sierra Leone (1991-2002), [and] none of these conflicts has occurred in isolation from the rest” (80-81). In this sense, I share Akin Adesokan’s position that the child soldier genre is oxygenated by “the continent’s complicated wars, which are in turn produced by perennial struggles with natural resources, the international arms trade, and a modern history of unequal ethnic and social relations” (12). Thus, in my interpretive engagements of the texts I examine in this study, I dissect the vital questions they raise about Africa and interrogate the nature of the African war they represent, as well as their motivations.

The Study’s Methodology and Approach to the Child Soldier Genre

As I have noted in this introduction, the works I study in this dissertation are all of African origin: their authors are African, their story worlds are recognizably African, and they feature African wars.²² They are among the body of works I have thus far referred to as the African child soldier genre, which mainly comprises memoirs and prose fictions. My use of

²² To be sure, while child soldiers had been known to feature in wars in such places as the Middle East, Asia, and South America, a disproportionate number of the fictional and non-fictional publications on the phenomenon has been written by former African child soldiers and African writers. Whereas Africa is not the only continent where children had featured in warfare as soldiers, the child soldier is typically imagined and thought of as African (See Mark Drumbl’s *Reimagining Child Soldiers*, 2012, pp. 5-6).

“genre” here is in the sense that Tzvetan Todorov theorises it, this being “classes of texts that have been historically perceived as such” (198). These texts, as Kaelyn Kaoma explains, “share the theme of child soldiers and the necessity of stopping their use, and the content, which gives often-overlapping descriptions of the life of a child soldier, in order to make the reader feel the realities of this life” (198). Mastey and Adesokan have respectively classified these and similar works as an African literary literature. Adesokan gives a hint about what he thinks informs the fame of the genre. In his essay, “New African Writing and Question of Audience,” he observes that the African child soldier genre is “an intriguing category given much purchase by the widespread perception of the African continent as a place where nasty things happen” (11). The generalized Africa of the genre resonates with the colonial perception of the continent as a land where violence, disease, political instabilities, and hunger prevail. Similarly, in their respective works, Coundouriotis (2010), Moynagh (2011), and Mark Sanders (2011) have described the African child soldier narratives as a distinct body of works with identical particularities. In his “Child Sold Stories and Their Fictions,” Mastey argues that although the child soldier figure is not unfamiliar in African literature, it has assumed a more complex character in the new body of works that thematize the military use of children more specifically rather than generally or tangentially like other literary accounts (4-7). Mastey clarifies that those works which focus primarily on the mobilization of children as soldiers are cultural products “of a time when the military recruitment of children briefly entered into public discourse” (6).

To Mastey’s conclusion I would add that the interest of Western humanitarian and human rights organizations in creating an awareness not only of the rights of children, but also of what they consider the violations and victimizations of children through their instrumentalization as soldiers further helps to popularize the production of child soldier literature. The stories in the

child soldier genre contain elements that make them appropriable to the campaign against war, use of children as soldiers, and human rights violations. In addition, they meet the requirements of sellable stories of sufferings that have enjoyed widespread circulation in the West. In his book, *Human Rights, Inc.* (2007), Joseph Slaughter comes to the same conclusion about the commodification of stories of coming-of-age through the forces of personal misfortunes, pains, and traumas. These stories, mostly from “marginalized peoples” of the Global South, have gained increasing attention in European and American book markets. As Slaughter puts it, “[t]he largest audience for postcolonial *Bildungsroman* from the global South still resides largely in the literary industrial centers of the North, where the novels are typically published, distributed, taught, and consumed, and whose readers seem to have an insatiable appetite for the stories of Third Worlders coming of age” (37-8). Besides intimating those readers of the human conditions of the actual worlds those stories recreate (un)sentimentally, the texts may arguably serve to deepen in the rights-conscious readers a sense of duty and moral superiority. It is for this reason that Allison Mackey submits that “the narrator’s personal stories of suffering are called on to do specific political work within human rights networks” (101). Schaffer and Smith also contend that these works, like others in the genre which feature sufferings, displacements, loss, and violations, “arise out of or are enlisted in human rights activism” (10). Again, as Schaffer and Smith posit, [t]he market for personal stories, often telling of individualist triumph over adversity, of the ‘little person’ achieving fame, of people who struggle and survive illness, catastrophe or violence, seems insatiable to readers and viewers in the West, and is expanding with the media reach of global capitalism” (Schaffer and Smith 12).

Thus, because these fictional and nonfictional child soldier stories share many traits, I agree with Mastey that it is proper to categorize them as a separate genre of writing. According

to him, these narratives are identical in many ways, including in so far as their preadolescent protagonists are Africans recruited by government or non-state forces to be soldiers; they provide portraits of what life was like before enlistment and after demobilization; show the heinous atrocities of the child soldier; in some cases detail sociopolitical and economic developments that necessitate child soldiering; depict the loss of childhood (in the Western understanding of it) and the traumatic consequences of soldiering; and gesture towards the likelihood of redemption through a rehabilitation process often involving Western therapists and humanitarian groups' representatives ("Child Soldier Stories" 6). In addition to their commercial success, these works are also notable for the critical reception they have elicited. In varying ways and collectively too, they project the idea of a homogenous Africa recognizable from Western stereotypes. In this sense, the African child soldier genre shares some of the same Afropessimistic features that Evans and Glenn identify in Western-produced narrative films – some of which are adaptations of child soldier narratives – about Africa. As these scholars put it, those identificatory traits of Afropessimism include

the tendency to approach Africa with a totalizing gaze in order to generalize about regional or national problems; a propensity to dehistoricize (and thus externalize) events; the recourse to western psychological and familial models and plots (particularly with upbeat endings involving escape from Africa); a fascination with the details of violence coupled with an inability to explain its causes; and an avoidance of socioeconomic realities and political complexity, which makes it difficult to realistically project positive images of the continent's future. (15)

In these works, setting occupies a central position. And given their foregrounding of and pessimism about their African locales, they inspire – if any at all – little doubt that they are intended for non-African audiences. Moynagh gestures to this point when she claims, focusing

on child soldier memoirists, that “by the time that former child soldiers are in a position to narrate their stories to a writer or editor, they are undoubtedly practiced at producing many of the narrative elements that Western aid workers and journalists have come to expect” (“Human Rights” 46). These expectations inform some of the similarities observable in the works that make up the African child soldier genre.

The primary texts engaged in this study are what I will be arguing are four paradigmatic novels depicting incidences of child soldiering in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Nigeria, and Congo-Brazzaville. These novels have been selected because they represent the phenomenon of the military recruitment of children in these countries and, more crucially, because they provide compelling depictions and contextualizations and/or obscure the complexities of child soldiering. Although there are memoirs written by former child soldiers (many of which I have mentioned in this introduction) and other forms of cultural production such as films, journalistic writings, and photographs through which information regarding child soldiering in Africa has been disseminated, my preference for novels in this project is a consequence of my view that narrative fictions occupy a pivotal position when considering representations attempting to depict the defining realities of Africa (Ngugi 1972, Achebe 1974, Theodora Akachi Ezeigbo 1991, Kehinde 2006, Rosen 2015). In addition, fictional representations are more invaluable for the “opportunity they offer to enter into individual consciousness and to be in touch with a distinct personality” (Kearney 70). However, to enrich my analyses of the novels I examine in this dissertation, I foray into memoirs of former child soldiers when I deem it necessary. I do so in order to contrast representations of child soldiers and other salient features of the story worlds of these two narrative realms. I underscore the fine differences separating child soldier life stories from their fictionalizations.

The four novels I have selected to anchor my principal critical-interpretive concerns are Emmanuel Dongala's *Johnny Mad Dog* (2005), Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah Is Not Obligated* (2006), Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* (2006), and Chris Abani's *Song for Night* (2007). While Kourouma's and Abani's works tend to reimagine the participation of children more specifically as soldiers in violent conflicts in Sierra Leone and Liberia and Nigeria, respectively, the novels of Dongala and Iweala – in spite of certain clues that indicate that they have taken the civil wars in Congo-Brazzaville and Nigeria as their sources of inspiration – use nameless countries in Africa as their milieus. I include these two novels in the list of my primary texts largely due to the namelessness of their settings. I critically reflect on how this namelessness shapes the image of the child soldier each author constructs, and by extension each's construction of the image of Africa. On the cover page of Dongala's novel readers find the drawing of a hideous dog with the map of Africa hanging from its neck. I read this symbol and the work's setting as evidence of a generic view of Africa which is consistent with what is available in humanitarian discourse on African conflicts. I also engage such questions as whether writers like Dongala are sensitive to or disregard the historical contexts of the use of children in wars in the countries where child soldiers were rampant. Overall, I argue in my analyses that works in the African child soldier genre seem to reify the view that when the issue is child soldiering, "Africa contexts are fungible" (Rosen *Child Soldiers in Western Imagination* 52).

While the texts I treat in the chapters of this dissertation project a monolithic idea of Africa, creating the impression of a continent whose varied peoples and histories are indistinguishable, my use of the word "Africa" and the phrases "African child soldier," "African writers," and "African setting" rejects understanding the continent as a singular entity whose past and present comprises complex historical and sociopolitical events. Neither do I wish to be

understood as conceiving of child soldiering as a feature of all wars on the continent. Indeed, one of my objectives through this writing is to challenge the impression created in humanitarian discourse about child soldiers in Africa and in the works I study, especially in their paratexts, namely that the military deployment of children characterizes war everywhere in Africa. It suffices for now to say that it is not within the scope of my argument to engage substantially with the question of what does or does not constitute “Africa.” Instead, I deploy the term as a descriptor designed to capture the manifold elements of African realities represented in my selected texts.

Similarly, I acknowledge the limitations of oppositional categories such as “the West” and “Western,” particularly given their failure to highlight the complexities and interdependencies of those making up these groups. To be sure, my use of terms like “the West” and “Western” in this study is largely intended to underline the ideologically established gaze of countries like Britain, the United States, Canada, Germany, and France which expresses key interests, discursive demands, and desires on the narratives and experiences of people from the “Global South.” More than any other places, formerly colonial nations like England and France are known for being the main locations where child soldier narratives and other stories of human suffering occurring elsewhere have been published. Understanding this informs my deployment of the concept of “the West.” I do not use terms like this to mean that there exists an undifferentiated West. More crucially, my use of “the West” aligns with that of Wendy Hesford, who contends that “the term West denotes a historically and socially constructed category, a locus of power from which some nations have imposed values, norms, and narratives on other parts of the world” (4).

Taken together, all the novels I will be discussing are relevant to the study of literary representations of child soldiers, war, and childhood in works of twentieth- and twenty-first-century African literature, as well as to concerns with how these novels and memoirs do or do not ground conflicts and child soldiers in finely delineated historical and political contexts. Their diversity in thematic focus, formal features, evocations of place, and framings of childhood are relevant to any possible critical analysis of African child soldier narratives. Moreover, in varying degrees, some of these novels represent both boy and girl soldiers and so provide an opportunity for introducing gender as an analytical category into the body of secondary literature devoted to this kind of work. Notably too, the four texts at the heart of my study represent trends that I have observed in several other child soldier-related productions. So, where and when necessary, I draw from those other texts to buttress my central claims.

Within the scope of five chapters, I analyze each of the select texts listed above. The focus of chapter one is Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation*. I argue that the framing of the child soldier image in Iweala's novel is essentially informed by the views and rhetoric of Western, transnational humanitarian and human rights organizations campaigning against the military mobilization of children. My claim is that humanitarianism projects a questionable image of the African child soldier that may be discovered in Iweala's novel. As against how some critics have interpreted it, I contend that the notion of the child in this novel is one rooted in assumptions about childhood innocence. I argue that the drama of child soldiering staged in this novel aims fundamentally at protesting the innocence of the child soldier. It is for this reason that I read the novel as a work of exculpatory sermonizing (a sermon which seeks to absolve the child of any blame or wrongdoing for the violence they perpetrate). In chapter two, I further interrogate the child soldier image. I analyze Chris Abani's *Song For Night* as a work which

represents the child soldier as a hybrid figure, different from the one-dimensional image of the figure present in Iweala's novel. Contrary to popular criticisms of Abani's novella, which foreground the victimhood of the child protagonist, I contend that the hybrid construct of the child fighter Abani portrays reveals the child soldier to be a conscious initiator of actions. While the victimization of the child soldier in this novella is not in doubt, the empowerment he derives (paradoxically) from his victimhood does not seem compelling to critics of the novella. Yet, in this narrative the agony that results from the child combatant's experiences neither immobilizes nor further infantilizes him. The child soldier transforms his suffering into power which he then deploys in roles commonly identified with adults.

My chapter three features the analysis of Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah Is Not Obligated*. My main argument in this chapter is that Kourouma's novel provides a more nuanced image of the child soldier, one that offers insight into the consciousness of the child soldier set against the backdrop of the prevailing socioeconomic and political conditions that makes child soldiering inevitable. Kourouma represents child soldiers not merely as dependent, vulnerable beings, but as possessing some degrees of independence, maturity, and capacity for undertaking such responsibilities that are often associated with adults. My reading of the novel shows how the work discourages viewing child soldiers chiefly as innocent victims; depicts child soldiers as beings possessing meaningful forms of power and autonomy, and so agency; and portrays the futility of both the recovery of childhood innocence and attempts at rehabilitation in situations in which the conditions requiring child soldiering remain unchanged. The milieu of operation of the child soldier is the issue I engage in chapter four. The novel I dissect here is Emmanuel Dongala's *Johnny Mad Dog*. In my reading of this novel, I submit that when representing child soldiers, most African writers succumb to the pitfall of imagining (and then rendering) warfare in

Africa in a stereotypically Western way. Representing child soldiers as irredeemable sociopaths, Dongala presents wars in Africa as mere games between warlords blinded by greed and maddened by ambition. Conflicts in Africa, Dongala suggests, are not informed by lofty ideals, any more than they serve to sustain ideas of the common good. The enlistment of children in these wars, whether forced or voluntary, only shows how ruthless warlords can be. In addition to reflecting Africa in a stereotypical sense, I argue that Dongala's account distorts the image of child soldiers by showing them to be morally numb and mentally damaged. In his narrative, child soldiers are also hopelessly unsalvageable and children caught in conflicts are redeemable only thanks to non-African (i.e. "white") benevolence and rescue.

Finally, in chapter five, I examine the production of the African child soldier narratives in the West. More specifically, I focus on the paratextual materials of the four novels and other child soldier texts. The cover pages of Kourouma's and Dongala's novels are the entry points into my discussion of the paratexts of African child soldier narratives. I argue that the paratexts of these works are not innocent accessories of these books. Where these paratextual elements do not mischaracterize the contents of their works, they project a stereotypical image of Africa.

Framework for the Study: A Multidisciplinary Approach

I adopt a multidisciplinary framework in this study. The depth and range this approach affords are useful for engaging with the multipart image of the child soldier. Hence, in my analyses I draw from studies of child soldiers from diverse contexts such as law, psychology, anthropology, sociology, international relations, political science, humanitarian studies, and

African studies. The density of research in these fields shows, as Roos Haer rightly observes, that “the literature on the use of children in armed conflict has flourished” (79). The works of Ashis Nandy (“Reconstructing Childhood: A Critique of the Ideology of Adulthood”), Kate Manzo (“Imaging Humanitarianism: NGO Identity and the Iconography of Childhood”), Erica Burman (“Innocents Abroad: Western Fantasies of Childhood and the Iconography of Emergencies”), for example, provide searing critiques of the mobilization of the Western notions of childhood to aid colonial and humanitarian practices in the Global South. I use these works to inform my reading of the representations of child soldiers in the novels I analyze, making clear in the process that the images of children being projected – whether at or affected by war, or else living in poverty, or through disaster – can be used to comment on and maintain “prevailing colonial and paternalistic relations” (Burman 238).

Similarly, given that the child soldier is a political subject – contrary to the choice of humanitarian and human rights groups to depoliticize young combatants and frame children as apolitical²³ – and an inhabitant of unstable polities, and because the conflicts child soldiers are involved in derive from fraught (local, national, and international) politics, I draw on the works of William Reno (*Warlord Politics and African States*, 1998), Mahmood Mamdani (*When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda*, 2001), Martin Meredith (*The State of Africa*, 2006), Tunde Zack-Williams (*When the State Fails*, 2012), among many others. These works are fascinating for their compelling chronicles of the crises of state formation in Africa, especially in the countries constituting the scope of this project. These

²³ I show in some of the novels I analyze in this study that the child soldier is far from being a political novice when it comes to the politics of their society. While they may not possess a full understanding of the complex reasons for the war they enlist in, they recognize what is at stake. See *The Militarization of Childhood: Thinking Beyond the Global South*, 2011; and Jo Boyden’s “Anthropology Under Fire: Ethics, Researchers and Children in War,” 2004.

works privilege context-specific analyses and resist providing homogenized explorations of complex African historical realities. In other words, these accounts avoid the temptation of lumping together “the diversity of the continent and its complicated history,” which Simon Gikandi observes is often “subsumed by the desire for a larger narrative of culture and society” (xii). In that sense, they will be useful in the context of this project.

In another vein, the question of agency proves crucial in understanding the texts I will be discussing. My analyses of the child combatants in those stories demonstrate Marshall Beier’s conclusion that children in conflicts are not “the passive victims they are projected to be” (8). In numerous ways, the children at war in these texts exercise their agency, which becomes clearer to readers only when they are examined through a constructivist lens. When they are studied through the universalist framework of “childhood,” their victimization and not their capacity to initiate actions comes to the fore. In their essay, “Why We Fight: Voices of Youth Combatants in Sierra Leone,” Krijin Peters and Paul Richards argue that children demonstrate rational agency in both peace and wartime, and it is important to pay attention to their actions during conflict.²⁴ Among others, changing names or adopting *noms de guerre*²⁵ suggests some of the many ways children at war prove their capacity to act. Indeed, by identifying with armed groups and taking new names, children construct new identities that mark them as conscious beings. Neither suffering nor their victimization freezes or suspends young fighters’ agency. Rather, as I demonstrate in my analyses, the actions of children at war affirm Weiss’ assertion that pain and suffering serve to catalyze agency.

²⁴ See also Krijin Peters’ *Re-examining Volunteerism: Youth and Combatants in Sierra Leone*, 2004; Michael Wessells’s *Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection*, pp. 73-4, 2006.

²⁵ I examine this subject of war names more closely in chapter four of this dissertation.

I adopt Michel de Certeau's theory of tactical and strategic agency as enunciated in his *The Practice of Everyday Life* (PEL) to make sense of the agency I uncover in my readings of child soldier novels. PEL is relevant for studying how children at war negotiate their ways within the worlds of armed conflict. Young fighters in African child soldier narratives undertake various actions so as to assert themselves and survive the treacherous terrain of military/combat experience. Most notably, they demonstrate tactical and strategic agency which allows them to set other actions in motion in, among others, covert and overt ways. For de Certeau, PEL means "the ways in which users – commonly assumed to be passive and guided by established rules – operate" (xi). These users, meaning everyday ordinary people, are underrated and thought of as incapable of action because societal elites think of them as effectively circumscribed, constrained, and contained. They are thought to be mere "consumers" of all that comes from "producers," namely state officials, corporatists, the elite, and the wealthy members of society. However, de Certeau disagrees that the consumers lack agency. He claims that through PEL these supposedly docile people subtly take actions that allow them to get by.

de Certeau describes the nature of the agency the everyday people possess even in situations in which their passivity is most compelled. He calls this agency tactical, distinguishing it from strategic agency. While strategic agency is about determining and significantly shaping how things are done, tactical agency mainly involves devising ways of coping in a social space where the rules of existence are defined by agents and forces that are more powerful. As otherized beings, everyday people devise means by which they are able to operate in spaces within which they cannot determine or change the status quo. According to de Certeau, "the place of the tactic belongs to the other." Child soldiers are like everyday people. Within the armed groups that child soldiers operate in, they seldomly call the shots. Whether they are

conscripted or joined voluntarily,²⁶ they are subject to the conventions and rules put in place by their superiors. They exist within a system that, to borrow Catherine Driscoll's words, is "too vast to be their own, too tightly woven for them to escape from it" (386). Yet these young warriors find ways to cope, survive, and assert themselves. In so doing they prove to be much more than irrational, vulnerable, innocent victims that some have read them as being. Through their artful, seemingly nondescript, and unobtrusive exercise of agency, they cast off the cloaks of innocence. When they come into the theatre of violence, they may show timidity and a reluctance to commit atrocious acts like killing. But once they understand that their survival depends on it, they devise ways to kill and to avoid doing so. As some texts show, sometimes some child soldiers go beyond the bounds of given instructions so as to impress it on their commanders that they have fully bought into a group's cause, the acknowledgement of which buys them some breathing space. Using de Certeau's PEL to enhance my reading of children at war moves me towards the conclusion that while war may affect child soldiers terribly, it does not entirely rob them of the capacity to act as autonomous beings.

It is crucial to point out that several scholars have read the texts I am examining here in different yet still perceptive ways. Most of those readings involve comparative analyses of both the fictions and nonfictions of the African child soldier genre. They theorize the uniqueness of the genre against the backdrop of an ascendant regime of child rights and human rights generally; they critique the discourses informing the story worlds in the works; engage their production and circulation, their authorship and intended audience; map out their thematic and

²⁶ In the humanitarian discourse on child soldiering, voluntary enlistment by children in armed groups is deemed impossible. Some critics assail this position. See Mark Drumbl's *Reimagining Child Soldiers in International Law and Policy*, 2012; Krijin Peters' *Re-examining Volunteerism: Youth and Combatants in Sierra Leone*, 2004; Myriam Denov's *Child Soldiers: Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front*, 2010; and Roos Haer's "Children and Armed Conflict: Looking at the Future and Learning from the Past," 2018.

narrative strategies, their aesthetic values, and deficiencies, among other cogent undertakings. It is against this backdrop that the critical reception of the African child soldier genre can be viewed as a site of ideological contestation between one bloc of critics favouring Western, transnational notions of childhood and childish innocence, and another comprised of critics who question these ideas and portray child soldiers heterogeneously, as members of groups whose values, motivations, experiences, agency, and roles in violent conflicts may be better understood contextually than sentimentally. However, these critical endeavours raise more questions in their individual criticism of the child soldier accounts. In my dissertation, therefore, I attempt an alternative reading of representative African child soldier narratives. In so doing I hope not only to broaden our understanding of recent wars in Africa, but also to provide critical insights into the deeper humanistic concerns of African writers imagining the realities of war occurring in different parts of the continent.

Chapter One

***Beasts of No Nation* as a Narrative of Recovery of Lost Childhood Innocence**

In this chapter I offer a reading of Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation*, which I take to be a novel whose framing is essentially informed by the views and rhetoric of Western, transnational humanitarian and human rights organizations campaigning against the military mobilization of children. My claim is that humanitarianism projects a questionable image of the African child soldier that may be discovered in Iweala's novel. As against how some critics have interpreted it, I contend that the notion of the child in this novel is one rooted in assumptions about childhood innocence. I argue that the drama of child soldiering staged in this novel aims fundamentally at protesting the innocence of the child soldier. It is for this reason that I read the novel as a work of exculpatory sermonizing (a sermon which seeks to absolve the child of any blame or wrongdoing for the violence they perpetrate). This kind of representation, I contend, not only distorts the image of the African child soldier but also eclipses any attempt to acknowledge the agency (and so moral and other responsibilities) of child warriors in warfare. I also posit in this chapter that narratives such as Iweala's participate in promoting the idea of children as passive recipients of adults' wills. I argue that what is depicted as recovery of innocence amounts mainly to the infantilization of young soldiers, as well as a decontextualization and de-historization of what has made child soldiering possible.

In the introduction to this study, I argued that the image of the child soldier available in most African child soldier narratives is a product of multifarious influences. Prominent among those influences shaping representations of the child at war is the humanitarian discourse about

children and conflicts. In that discourse, there is a heavy investment in the child¹ as an immature, vulnerable, apolitical, agentless, and innocent being. Texts of special reports on child soldiering such as the ones authored by agencies working with the UN and by humanitarian organizations such as Save the Children clearly promote the ideas of children's vulnerability and lack of agency². In addition to their strong focus on the susceptibility and innocence of the child soldier, humanitarian organizations in their discourse conceive of child soldiering "in terms of a clear violation of universal children's rights and a breach of international humanitarian law" (Lee 6). This focus ignores the manifold complexities of both the recruitment and roles of children within armed groups and conflict situations. In different contexts – "[f]rom the iconography of campaign literatures to photographs used by the media and portrayals in popular cinemas," – the image of the African child soldier is one of an innocent victim of adult's violence, politics, and society (Beier 2). In most works depicting African child soldiers (novels as well as memoirs), the atrocities perpetrated by child protagonists are rendered in ways that suggest that only adults – either rebel leaders or the adult members of the society of the child soldier – must bear the burden of accountability and responsibility for the child's actions.³ In this sense, the initiatives and the self-generated moves of the child soldier while in the armed group appear insignificant as they are made to give way to the image of a violated innocence. With childhood in these accounts rendered as pure, the purity of the child soldier becomes impure or contaminated only by their association with armed groups – whether they are porters, cooks, messengers, sexual

¹ Marshall Beier also reminds us that the child who is often understood as innocent originates from "a culturally specific ideal that is increasingly irreconcilable even to the sites of its emergence" See "Introduction: Everyday Zones of Militarization" in *The Militarization of Childhood: Thinking Beyond the Global South*, 2011, p. 4.

² See *Special Report: Child Soldiers* (2003), produced by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs; and *Child Soldiers: Care and Protection of Children in Emergencies* (2001), produced by Save the Children.

³ This notion is most evident in humanitarian discourse. For example, *Adult Wars, Child Soldiers*, a 2002 UNICEF special study, speaks clearly to the idea that all children in armed conflicts are victims of adult evils.

slaves, or most notably fighters. In other words, in this genre the victimhood of the young fighter is mostly located not in addition to the broader prewar socioeconomic and political realities of the child soldier but largely in their association with the fighting force that recruits them.

Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* (*Beasts* henceforth) stands out among the imaginative accounts of child soldiering whose depictions of the child in conditions of atrocity are influenced by this humanitarian rhetoric of victimization.

Iweala is one of the writers of African descent who take up the issue of children's involvement in conflicts as soldiers, popularized by the efforts of transnational humanitarian organizations working together with the international community and the emergence of testimonial accounts written (in collaboration with journalists) by former child soldiers. Mine is not the first study to examine Iweala's *Beasts*. Among others, scholars including Robert Eaglestone (2008), Alexandra Schultheis (2008), Madelaine Hron (2008), Eleni Coundouriotis (2010), John Kearney (2010), Maureen Moynagh (2011; 2014), Stephen Gray (2011), Allison Mackey (2013), David Mastey (2015; 2017), Brenna Munro (2016), and Sakiru Adebayo (2019) have studied *Beasts* from divergent perspectives.

Yet there is a difference between my reading of the novel and theirs. Whereas they compare Iweala's text with other novels comprising the African child soldier genre, I focus instead only on the novel in this chapter. And while these authors draw illuminating conclusions and make notable arguments in their analyses of the novel in comparison to others in the genre, my observation is that this kind of comparative approach creates gaps and also some "loud" silences that serve to make parts of the novel invisible to critics. My analysis of Iweala's novel aims to fill some of these voids. Besides, where manifestly necessary I draw from those studies – while also drawing relevant parallels from child soldier memoirs – and engage the positions

some of those critics take in their analyses of the novel. In this manner, my reading of the novel – as one which reflects the humanitarian reasons with respect to the African child soldier image – further enriches our understanding of it and makes a useful contribution to its flourishing critical reception.

Echoes of Humanitarian Discourse

Using a first-person narrative technique, *Beasts* relates the story of how a young boy by the name of Agu comes to be caught up in the vortex of war in an unnamed West African country, and eventually becomes a child soldier. The novel begins *in media res* with Agu escaping the bullets of soldiers who descend suddenly on his village, maiming and killing anyone in their path. The *in media res* plot used as a technique in this story is significant in the way it works to direct the reader's attention to the plight of the young narrator. It invites interest in understanding what is responsible for the state of distress, pain, and disruption the narrator is engulfed in. The plunging of the reader into Agu's story suddenly, from the middle, works well to reflect the suddenness of the outbreak of the undecipherable war that disrupts his life. Things happen repeatedly suddenly and swiftly in the novel – war breaks out all of a sudden, Agu is recruited suddenly, and even the rebellion that results in his demobilization from the armed group occurs unexpectedly. All of these, too, work well to create the picture of a society trapped in the peat bog of dizzying chaos and normalized rudderlessness – a constant feature in the African child soldier genre. Agu narrates his punishing experience of soldiering in an armed group led by a man identified only as Commandant. This "leader man," as Agu thinks of him, is portrayed as erratic, paedophilic, and psychopathic (5). While hiding in the bush he has escaped to following his recently killed father's instructions, Agu is discovered by one of Commandant's

child soldier – Strika. From then onward Agu's journey into soldiering begins until he and others desert the group after the Commandant is murdered by Rambo, his new second-in-command who orchestrates a mutiny against him. In his state of shock, Agu is forced to go with the group as it makes its way deeper into the forests. His initial belief is that the group will save him from the killers of his father. But the displaced boy soon learns that his life is in for a more terrible turn.

Neither Agu, nor any of the over one-hundred young combatants in the armed group understand the meaning of the war Commandant is prosecuting. What Agu remembers the Commandant describing as the goal of the war when he is recruited is reported thusly: "If you are staying with me, I will be taking care of you and we will be fighting the enemy that is taking your father" (11). As the story goes, this boy's soldiering experience does nothing to address the loss of his family and the disruption to his education. Rather, Agu lets his reader understand that within the armed group he is more "like slave tree because I can never be doing what I want [...]. I am just following order and not having to do anything else" (42;103). He stresses how war bestializes everyone in the group: "Everybody is looking like one kind of animal, no more human" (45). Through the device of flashback and elaborate descriptions of past events, the reader is informed about Agu's prewar life, education and aspirations, family, and other critical details that are useful for challenging his assertive portrayal as an innocent victim of militarism.

The events and words Agu witnesses and hears within the group remind him of life before war disrupts his family. Agu is fascinated with biblical war stories of the kind that his mother reads to him nightly, before their separation. Peering into Agu's prewar life is crucial since existing criticism on the novel barely acknowledges a connection between his exposure to militarism through a book he has been taught to consider "the only book that is mattering," and his actual exposure to and perpetration of violence (25). If loss of innocence comes with

exposure to militarism and violence, one may reasonably ask whether or not the boy's enchantment with the stories of Cain's murder of his brother Abel, for example, or Job's multitude of traumas arising from the violent deaths of his children, or else David's vanquishing of Goliath, have together exerted a powerful early grip on his youngish mind. Indeed, so persuasive and gripping are these stories that Agu pictures them mentally again and again, imagining "how Goliath is laughing until David is cutting off his head. I am seeing all of these thing when she [my mother] is reading and thinking that I am wanting to be warrior" (25). This part of Agu's story suggests that if his participation in Commandant's killing force deprives him of an innocence, as some critics have concluded, then that process of loss has roots embedded and nurtured way back before he becomes a child soldier. However, in Iweala's narrative, Agu's recollection of his pastime of reading the Bible seems intended to suggest the decency of his upbringing as a morally conscious, God-fearing child. Put another way, Iweala uses Agu to reinforce the idea that it is his forceful recruitment into an armed group that corrupts and damages his childhood innocence, transforming him into a beast with an enormous capacity for ruthless killing.

The humanitarian discourse influencing pop-cultural (re-)productions of the child soldier such as those contained in *Beasts* barely concerns themselves with the experiences of children prior to their absorption into armed groups and consequent deployment as combatants.⁴ In that discourse, the site for the corruption and/or loss of innocence in child warriors is the armed group, and by extension the battlefield. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) 2003 report on child soldiering, entitled *Special Report: Child Soldiers*, links

⁴ In chapter three of this study wherein I examine Ahmadou Kouroumah's *Allah Is Not Obligated*, I argue that the novel is foremost among one or two in the African child soldier canon which establish a link between prewar socioeconomic experiences of child soldiers and their participation in combat. In other words, the novel underscores socioeconomic malaise as a precursor to the deprivations and discomforts of soldiering.

children's involvement in warfare with failures to protect their innocence, stating that "[c]hildren belong in schools and in their families. It is our responsibility that they are protected from the horrors of warfare" (6). A "normal" childhood, as this text implies, is one that is shielded from "the horrors of warfare." The report suggests that the corruption of childhood innocence is less possible outside of the contexts of conflict. Jimmie Briggs, in his book, *Innocents Lost: When Child Soldiers Go To War*⁵, clearly leans on the view of humanitarian agencies and international media that the loss of childhood innocence begins and ends with a young person's exposure to warfare. In his preface, Briggs makes this point:

Several years ago I picked up a copy of the *New York Times* to find an all-too-familiar image staring back at me. In a front-page color photograph a Liberian gunman knelt in a city street, howling in anger while pointing an automatic rifle at the photographer who captured his image. More chilling than the weapon he held was what he wore on his back: a pink teddy-bear backpack, a telling symbol of his lost youth. (xi-ii)

In addition to noting its acknowledgment of an emerging stereotype of the African child soldier (Briggs's "all-too-familiar image"), it is worth pointing out a couple of issues with this excerpt. First, there is the matter of its concern with childhood rather than with the child. For Briggs, the idea of childhood is "[m]ore chilling" than even the weapon of violence. And he is not alone; the emphasis of most transnational NGOs on childhood and its loss, especially in Developing World contexts, suggests that for those organizations childhood as a concept weighs more than the child and their existing realities. As Erica Burman has argued, humanitarian NGOs' excessive focus on the loss of childhood in the Global South does things other than address the condition of children in need, maybe especially those caught up in conflict. The idea that children such as the

⁵ It is worth noting that child soldiering generally in the humanitarian discourse is seen and engaged with as a problem. The titles of studies and works – such as Briggs' – on this phenomenon tend to signal this point.

one Briggs references are innocent victims or else have lost their innocence implies the culpability of others: “The point is that the innocence connoted by the imagery of children works to confirm the failure of the rest of their peoples and cultures to provide for [and secure] them” (Burman 243).⁶

The second observation on Briggs’ statement is that there is no interest in what motivates the young gunman into armed combat, how he joins, and neither is there any attempt to reflect on what his lived experience was before enlistment in an armed group. For Briggs, the backpack tells the whole of the story of how the young man’s association with armed conflict has robbed him of his childhood. This view can only be advanced at the cost of the exclusion of any meaningful conception of the boy’s agency. Yet the Liberia of the time he refers to was one engulfed in a protracted period of ethno-political instability such that there was hardly any remarkable difference between peacetime and wartime. Unless one sees the young Liberians of the time as apolitical and incapable of *deciding* to join the battle – as Briggs thinks in the case of that young gunman – then it is not out of place to conclude that the depoliticization of children is equally what is invoked by those (most notably humanitarian agencies) who choose to see children’s participation in warfare as equating to a loss of innocence. Yet, as James Marten observes, “[e]ntering the military is not necessarily a matter of leaving behind [or losing] childhood, but of exchanging different modes of premature adulthood” (6). Where children’s involvement in war is processed mainly through the lenses of human rights and victimization

⁶ Carol Bellamy, the fourth Executive Director of UNICEF, a staunch international advocacy agency committed to the rights of the child, not only proclaims in her response to the Sierra Leonean civil war that conflict situations are where children lose their childhood, she also identifies child soldiers as a “symptom of the wider problem, the complete neglect of a whole generation” (See http://pangaea.org/street_children/africa/sierra.htm) In this statement there is a subtle deployment of innocence as an instrument of indictment, and with it an assertion of the culpability of the children’s society.

narratives, as is the case in humanitarian discourse and media chronicles⁷, the idea of innocent victim and of war as a baleful wind that strips child warriors of their innocence becomes far more important than young fighters' motivations, roles in, and experiences of soldiering.

This way of representing the child soldier, which is evident in Iweala's *Beasts* as well as in other child soldier narratives, does not make for a fuller understanding of the child soldier image and the variegated factors that make child soldiering plausible. To analyze Agu as a child soldier without paying attention to the "militarized logics and ideas"⁸ he has imbibed from the Bible before his conscription is to make him seem a blameless victim of supervening adult agency. Agu's enthrallment with the Biblical David act of violence against the Philistine Goliath may be thought of as mirroring childhood immaturity, or as Save the Children maintains in defence of children's shortage of agency in military involvement, a lack of "cognitive developmental skills to fully access risks and choices," the positive reception of David's act by the adults around him – especially Agu's mother – immediately provides a challenge to such a view.

In his comparative reading of the young David and another equally young biblical character, Jether, whom he identifies both as child soldiers, David Bosworth wonders why "scholars and others tend to celebrate David's heroism in his fight with Goliath when such praise appears to glorify child soldiering" (187). As young people of about the same age, both Jether and David are presented with the task of killing; but the former refuses while the latter accomplishes the task.⁹ However, the paradox, as Bosworth observes, is that, while "David's

⁷ Briggs bids his readers to see all forms of child soldiering as a "human rights violation issue" (xii).

⁸ Marshall J. Beier in his "War Stories: Militarized Pedagogies of Children's Everyday" makes a profound argument about how war zones are not the main sites where children experience militarism (see *The Militarization of Childhood: Thinking Beyond the Global South*, 2011, p. 96).

⁹ See 1 Samuel 17 verses 26 and 36; and Judges 8 verse 20.

victory over Goliath lives in cultural memory as a famous victory in which youth triumphs over experience and weakness over strength[,] Jether's reluctance to kill is almost entirely forgotten" (185). Viewed this way, the introduction to children of the story of David is not considered as part of a process towards acceptance of ideas of militarism. Yet, as Marshall Beier and Turenne Sjolander individually submit, children who are living far from conflict zones can experience militarism.¹⁰ But humanitarian organizations ignore this reality, suggesting that warfare is the point at which loss of childhood innocence begins.

Iweala's *Beasts* connects with memoirs of child soldiers in its focus on wartime as the main contaminant of childhood. To be sure, the nature of living and childhood experiences before becoming child soldiers is a common theme in nonfictional stories concerning child soldiering. Writing some years after their nasty experiences of becoming child soldiers, and having undergone different stages of rehabilitation thereafter, those erstwhile child soldiers still *remember* what their lives were before becoming child fighters. Although some of them convey the image of a generally paradisiacal childhood, present in their accounts are signs of childhoods corroded by the prevailing disturbing realities in their homes and countries. As the narratives of Grace Akallo, Senait Mehari, Emmanuel Jal, China Keitetsi, and Ishmael Beah show, life before becoming child soldiers is not all a walk in the park. Even when it seems as if the conflicts that would later snatch them away from their loved ones are far from them, stories of wars are not. For instance, in Beah's *A Long Way Gone*,¹¹ the former child soldier makes this point in the

¹⁰ See Sjolander's chapter, "The Killers Among Us: School Shooting and the Militarization of Childhood," pp. 217-236, in Beier's *The Militarization of Childhood: Thinking Beyond the Global South* (2011).

¹¹ It should be noted that Beah's memoir has been challenged for containing exaggerations and inventions that call into question the veracity of his claims as a child who was abducted and deployed as a soldier in the Sierra Leonean Civil War (see Gabriel Sherman's "The Fog of Memoir: The Feud Over the Truthfulness of Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone*" accessed on September 22, 2015, in <https://slate.com/culture/2008/03/the-feud-over-ishmael-beah-s-child-soldier-memoir-a-long-way-gone.html> ; and Peter Wilson's "Beah's Credibility a Long Way Gone" accessed

opening chapter: “There were all kinds of stories told about the war that made it sound as if it was happening in a faraway land. It wasn’t until refugees started passing through our town that we began to see that it was actually taking place in our country. Families who had walked hundreds of miles told how relatives had been killed and their houses burned” (5).

The war stories Beah hears and the disquieting images of war-displaced persons he sees must have their effects on his preteen mind. The Sierra Leone of Beah’s childhood is a boiling cauldron. David Rosen provides an important report on this view of what Sierra Leone of the early 1990s was. He notes that the “war in Sierra Leone illustrates the extraordinary difficulty of separating peacetime from wartime because of the manner in which children and youth were drawn into warfare grew directly from Sierra Leone’s particular history and culture” (*Armies* 58). The politics that prevailed in the country shortly after independence in 1961 were such that they enabled the pauperization of the larger populace and enabled the transformation of many children and youth into political thugs.¹² It is the slice of that dysfunctional state that Beah speaks to and for in the opening of his memoir as he recalls what life was like while he was growing up, before age thirteen when he became a child soldier.

As a narrative that “endorses human rights discourse,”¹³ Beah’s memoir makes a sharp distinction between certain tendencies of his prewar life and those of his time as a soldier. In terms of this Manichean construction, this Sierra Leonian former child fighter wants it understood that the time before recruitment does nothing negative to his childhood; exposure to

on February 2, 2008, in <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/beahs-credibility-a-long-way-gone/news-story/44938c4253dcfa0600fc0750ad5c6da2>

¹² See Peter Singer’s “The Enablers of War: Causal Factors Behind Child Soldier Phenomenon” in *Child Soldiers in the Age of the Fractured States*, edited by Scott Gates and Simon Reich, UPP, 2010: pp. 93-107.

¹³ See Maureen Moynagh’s “Making and Unmaking: Child -Soldier Memoirs and Human Rights Readers” in *Bibliography*, vol. 39, no. 4, 2016, pp.535-561.

soldiering is the principal depriver of the rights and idyll of childhood. As his memoir reveals, Beah as a child is already predisposed towards violence. Mark Sanders' position on Beah's prewar childhood underlines the disconnect between that period of the boy soldier's life and his action in armed conflict. Noting the formulaic design of Beah's narrative, Sanders concludes thus: "If the formula coincides with humanitarian advocacy in telling us that, having been recruited, the child is turned to violence through military training and brainwashing by manipulative adults, what we actually find in Beah's narrative is a child with preexisting propensity toward violence" (211). Similarly, Beah's parents' separation has a profound impact on him. The separation between those parents mirrors that of the state from the people, a development which is not without terrible consequences. At school, Beah is a bully, constantly fighting other pupils. He recounts that "[s]ometimes I stoned kids I couldn't beat up. Since we didn't have a mother at home, Junior [his brother] and I were the misfits in our community. The separation of our parents left marks on us that were visible to the youngest child in our community. We became the evening gossip" (42). Even before the separation of his parents, his father is barely a presence in his life.¹⁴ But the brief sunny moments that define his childhood remain indelible in Beah's memory all the time he is a child soldier. Later, after demobilization, he would long to return to this childhood but it is then clear that it is gone forever – contrary to his claim that rehabilitative therapy has restored it (199). Iweala's Agu also gives his reader the impression that therapy provides a pathway to the recovery of lost childhood. As Eleni Coundouriotis argues, the recovery of dispossessed childhood "allows for the problem of responsibility in the war to be shifted onto the task of recovery" (192). It is for this reason too that humanitarian organizations which seek to promote the idea of war as a major pollutant of

¹⁴ See pages 10, 76-79 of Beah's memoir. The edition referenced here is published by Harper Perennial in 2008.

childhood highlight the experiences of child soldiers as victims without paying any corresponding attention to life before soldiering.

The recollection Mehari has of her prewar life as captured in her life narrative *Heart of Fire* also indicates that war experience is never exclusively responsible for the adulteration or loss of childhood – even though her story, like that of Iweala’s fictive character, gestures towards the opposite. She depicts her anxieties in the unlivable space of her father’s house. The tension-soaked home she lives in before being sent off to join the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) – in an offensive against the breakaway faction known as the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) – is not much different from the situation of the Eritrean public. Just as many Eritreans could not find a home in their country during the Second Eritrean Civil War which took place between 1980 and 1981, Mehari notes that she does not find home, comfort, nurture, and shelter in her father’s house.¹⁵ Mehari is convinced that her father never likes her. When her father is introduced to her at age five, she reports that she “shied away from his greeting by hiding in Mbrat’s [her aunt’s] skirt” (1). Mehari makes clear that the feeling of dislike is mutual between both father and daughter. In her view, her father is deliberately opposed to her: “The longer I lived with him, the clearer it became that he had it in for me [...] My father did not beat me merely as a matter of course [...] but with a directed vindictiveness, regardless of whether I had done anything wrong” (48). In fact, but for her stepmother who was in the right place at the right time, Mehari’s father would have killed her with a machete (51).

Thus, before she and her sister are sent to the ELF, Mehari already underwent a series of adverse experiences that interfered negatively with the normal course of her childhood. Her pre-

¹⁵ See Chapter One of the memoir, *Heart of Fire*.

soldiering life is as disturbing as her life in the ELF as a child soldier. Moreover, Mehari recalls that during her prewar years, she directly witnesses large-scale violence in which children like her are blown to pieces by bombs disguised as dolls (44-45). The Second Eritrean Civil War was a war in which like adults, children were specifically targeted. So, before Mehari becomes sucked into the violence of ELF, her life is already defined by violence and all the stresses that can together make a life excruciatingly miserable. Mehari's exposure to violence as a civilian – like Agu in *Beasts* who as a young non-combatant is exposed to the violence of biblical war stories – resonates alongside Kennedy Amone-P'Olak, et al's claim that witnessing violence is itself a form of war experience which, like direct involvement in hostilities, can precipitate psychosis.¹⁶ In this case, in looking at how warfare robs young soldiers of their childhood, it is important to pay attention to the nature of experiences of those children before their involvement in armed conflict. Such an understanding becomes even more crucial for designing viable protection programs that address the conditions of children in war. Indeed, child soldier stories such as Iweala's novel, and life narratives by former child soldiers like Mehari and Beah, contain useful insights, however ostensibly insignificant they might seem, that nevertheless serve to contest the framing of war as entirely responsible for the corruption of childhood innocence.

Iweala's *Beasts* is structured as an account of a former child soldier bearing witness to atrocities that rob young people of their innocence. It is for this reason that Robert Eaglestone describes the novel as a “novelized testimony” (82).¹⁷ Agu prepares the reader for the testimony of his traumatic life as a child at war through a preamble that states: “It is starting like this” (1).

¹⁶ See “War Experiences and Psychotic Symptoms Among Former Child Soldiers in Northern Uganda: The Mediating Role of Post-War Hardships – The WAYS Study” in *South African Journal of Psychology*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2015, pp. 155-167.

¹⁷ Maureen Moynagh describes child soldier stories like *Beasts* as “memoir-styled novels.” See “Human Rights, Child-Soldier Narratives, and the Problem of Form” in *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 42, no. 4, 2011, pp. 39-59.

The use of the pronoun “it” in that utterance has no antecedent that is known to the reader. Apart from functioning as a curiosity-building device, it serves to indicate that the noun it references is something unnameable, a thing that “if I am telling this to you it will be making you think that I am some sort of beast or devil” (142). It seems as if Agu agrees to share his gory soldiering story only after he has been importuned by those who are eager to hear it. This view seems abundantly plausible when we examine Agu’s encounter with Amy, a humanitarian representative from America, that takes place at the end of the novel.¹⁸ Agu informs his readers that while at the rehabilitation centre Amy is always urging him 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). Amy is the symbolic audience eager to hear the horrific story of Agu’s victimization and rights abuses. Having agreed to tell the story, he then launches into the narrative, hence the opening: “It is happening like this.”

In Agu’s encounter with Amy, there is a disconnect between the two of them that indicates cultural differences. Agu is surprised that the aid worker urges him to share details of his unpleasant soldiering experience because in the culture that he comes from, such issues may not be addressed simply by talking and neither does the healing of any trauma get achieved through mere confession. In contrast, Amy’s persuasive insistence that the boy soldier should open up to her indicates her Western assumption that recovery comes through a confessional

¹⁸ Different critics have argued that human-rights compliant stories and narratives of victimization such as those of the African child soldier genre are mainly addressed to “human-rights-educated readers” in Western countries. This eager audience, who Western publishers fete, come to feel solidarity with the former child soldiers due to the violation of their childhood rights, and find proofs of their assumptions about the provenance of the authors in those works. See David Mastey’s “Child Soldier Stories and their Fictions” in *Interventions*, 2015; Maureen Moynagh’s “Making and Unmaking: Child -Soldier Memoirs and Human Rights Readers”; and Eleni Coundouriotis’ “The Child Soldier Narrative and the Problem of Arrested Historicization” in *Journal of Human Rights*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2010, pp. 191-206.

therapy. In other words, Amy is convinced that the most effective way that Agu can be assisted in “working-through” (in Dominick LaCapra’s sense of the phrase) his trauma is to get him to talk about it. She believes in what Leigh Gilmore calls “the therapeutic balm of words” (7).¹⁹ However, noting that the application of a Euro-Western method of dealing with traumatic experiences is not suitable for all contexts, as Amy in this story fails to realize, Sidone Smith and Julia Watson contend that “the critique of a psychoanalytically based talk therapy model of witnessing to trauma is especially pertinent” (284). Agu capitulates to Amy’s prodding to bear witness to his experience of trauma. He witnesses to his harrowing experience of war, thus confirming that Iweala’s novel is not interested in any critique of Western therapy as it concerns the rehabilitation of African child soldiers. Moreover, the lack of any representation of a local remedy for trauma and rehabilitation of demobilized child soldiers suggests a privileging of Western rehabilitative therapy as most effective. Iweala does not reflect the practice favoured in some African communities where purification rites are organized for children who have perpetrated atrocities in order to cleanse them before they are reintegrated into society. Coundouriotis’ observation in “The Child Soldier Narratives and the Problem of Arrested Historicization” is apposite here. Coundouriotis’ argues that “[w]hat we see in child soldier narratives where the act of narration is part of the therapy does not correspond to the experience of the vast majority of child soldiers. In real life, instead of storytelling, we find an insistence on rituals of purification” (193).²⁰

While former child soldiers like Beah, Keitetsi, Jal, and Mehari memorialize their soldiering experiences by writing memoirs in which they testify to the crimes children turned

¹⁹ The therapeutic balm of words that do the work of exculpation from guilt defines Beah’s experience at the rehabilitation centre after his demobilization from the armed group.

²⁰ For more on the processes and measures local population adopt to heal and rehabilitate child soldiers and war-affected communities, see chapter five of Alcinda Honwana’s *Child Soldiers in Africa* (2006).

into soldiers *are* made to commit, Iweala novelizes the phenomenon, creating a character who recollects his traumatic soldiering practice and the carnages perpetrated in the process as a violation of his childhood innocence. Eaglestone reads this novel alongside others as typical examples of contemporary African trauma literature. While such a reading is enlightening, the description of *Beasts* as a “a more traditional[/] conventional novel,” seems to sidestep its structural affinity with the presumably non-fictional accounts of ex-child soldiers and their emphasis on the trauma that comes with their victimizations and abuses.²¹ Structurally, the novel aligns with the formulaic layout of child soldier memoirs.²² Beah is hanging out with friends in a village when the Sierra Leonean Civil War that he fights in starts; Emmanuel Jal, Senait Mehari, and China Keitetsi all report in their various memoirs about their separation from their families before they join or are recruited as soldiers. Similarly, in Emmanuel Dongala’s *Johnny Mad Dog*, Ahmadou Kourouma’s *Allah Is Not Obligated*, and Chris Abani’s *Song for Night* familial disconnect presages association with armed conflicts. Agu enjoys an idyllic life until war unexpectedly breaks out; he experiences the disruption of his education and family life;²³ he is recruited as a soldier in an armed group to fight a war that is defined only by its brazen crimes, excessive violence, and brutalities; and he is finally demobilized and undergoes rehabilitative therapy overseen by an agent of a Western humanitarian group. In embracing the popular structure of the child soldier genre, Iweala produces a novel that is fundamentally oriented towards the same single story of child soldiering as mainly an experience revolving around the

²¹ Akin Adesokan in his readings of some of the new fictions by writers of African origin but based in the West and their audience, which he claims are Euro-Western, describes Iweala’s *Beasts* as “the paradigmatic text [of] the genre of the child-soldier novel” (11). See “New African Writing and the Question of Audience” in *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 43, no. 3, Fall 2012, pp. 1-20.

²² On the formulaic structure of child soldier narratives, see Mark Sanders’ “Culpability and Guilt: Child Soldiers in fiction and Memoir” (2011).

²³ Familial disconnection as a precursor to recruitment hallmarks another similarity between child soldier memoirs and their fictions.

abuse of childhood innocence and violation of children's rights that is ubiquitous in humanitarian discourse.

As Iweala's novel shows, Agu's path to the victimization that will result in the loss of his innocence emerges in the depiction of his recruitment. The act of recruitment is portrayed and works differently in the African child soldier genre. I observe a crucial distinction between representation of forced enlistment and unforced involvement in armed group. Works like *Beasts* which depict coerced recruitment does so in a manner that foregrounds victimhood and violation of childhood rights and innocence of the child protagonists. Whereas in narratives like Kourouma's *Allah Is Not Obligated* which represent association with armed group as *voluntary*, the agency of the child combatants supervenes. In the same vein, in child soldier narratives, conscripted child soldiers are depicted as longing for home (Agu for example, 127) while their counterparts who join armed groups of their own volition barely remember their family, whether dead or alive. Agu's presence in the nameless Commandant's armed group is explained mainly as a matter of subtle coercion, notwithstanding the fact that a life outside the armed group guarantees destitution and death. When he comes before Commandant who coerces him into joining his group, Agu appears as one who cannot distinguish his left from right, asking: "What am I supposed to be doing? So I am joining. Just like that. I am soldier" (11). Although he tries to think through his association with the group given his growing understanding of its orientation, he explains that he stops doing so because individuals like Luftenant, Commandant's second-in-command, discourage him from thinking. As Agu clarifies it, "Luftenant is saying, don't think. Just let it happen. He is saying that the second you are stopping to think about it, your head is turning to the inside of rotten fruit" (12). Agu does not resist this admonition; in the

manner he renders it, Luftenant's advice constitutes the heavy hands that lead him to do the things he would not necessarily do.

In talking about his recruitment Agu lays the groundwork for his legal innocence and exculpation from the felonies he commits as a member of the group. For example, he also remarks that after Commandant talks to him about how killing is like "falling in love," all he, Agu, does is "believing him," asking: "What else can I be doing?" (12). In this sense, he makes a case for his powerlessness and lack of agency. Throughout the story, this boy soldier represents all his actions as moves which others compel him to make. In other words, Agu maintains the image of his victimhood that is aimed towards reinforcing his claim as an innocent observer of adults' orders, a development that echoes the position of humanitarian organizations engaged with children at war. Coundouriotis comes to a similar conclusion when she observes that Iweala's novel suggests that "there are no victims' victims; the subjects killed by Agu are the victims of his commander" (196).

Iweala also depicts Agu's crime of killing as an act that he cannot be held legally responsible for. After his first act of killing, Agu protests his innocence. Although the action briefly devastates him and implies that he now understands that soldiering is not a call to gaming, Agu later takes full control of the business of killing, saying that the noise his first victim is making is "annoying me and I am bringing the machete up and down hearing KPWUDA KPWUDA every time" (21). What annoys Agu is not the act of killing but the response of his victim. It seems Agu is annoyed with the victim because they cannot understand that someone else, and not him, is responsible for this act of violence. This mindset constitutes another instance in the novel in which Agu resists being understood as culpable for what he does. Here is how he fights off the feeling of guilt that overwhelms him after the act above: "I am not

bad boy. I am not bad boy. 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 is right” (23). Here this character invokes a popular understanding of soldierly duty to justify his atrocity. By referencing and repeating a soldier’s obligation, Agu wants his audience to understand that he acts under orders. And like a soldier who obeys a superior’s orders, he cannot be held liable for what is an act of obligatory deference. Agu stresses this point further on another occasion when he reflects on the life of a soldier. In that reflection, he is convinced that to be a soldier is to be at the beck and call of higher authorities:

[B]ut I am knowing now that to be a soldier is only to be weak and not strong, and to have no food to eat and not to eat whatever you want, and also to have people making you do thing that you are not wanting to do and not to be doing whatever you are wanting which is what they are doing in movie. But I am only knowing this now because I am soldier now. (31)

The “weak” soldier Agu refers to in that utterance designates himself as well as other child soldiers. Because they are children, their weakness makes them unsuitable for warfare. Whatever they do is done at the behest of their commanders. Accordingly, weak soldiers cannot be held accountable for what others make them do. By constructing Agu’s reasoning in this manner, Iweala betrays the influence of the human rights and humanitarian discourse on his representation of child soldiering. Indebted to Western notions of childhood, children in that discourse are described as immature and incapable of initiative. Agu is benevolently represented as a child who lacks the capacity to do criminal things. Even when Agu says “I am soldier now,” signaling his possession of adult knowledge and experience, the overriding impression in this narrative remains that Agu is a child and a victim of adults’ perverse logic.

Most of what the reader knows about Agu's past comes through the device of flashbacks (24, 28, 31). Flashbacks function to reinforce his innocence, thereby marking the narrative as an exculpatory account. Shortly after Agu accompanies the armed group on a mission where he sees what it does, he says his association with them makes him feel like a "bad boy. So I am thinking how can I be bad boy? Me, bad boy—somebody who is having life like I am having and fearing God the whole time" (24). He recalls his life as a devout Christian raised by pious parents. By recalling his past, Agu seeks to convince the reader that he is naturally incapable of the atrocities he commits as a child soldier. Somebody, not him, must be responsible for these deplorable crimes. Additionally, the "gun juice" he and his fellow child soldiers are given to alter their minds supports his self-representation as a child soldier who is an innocent victim (43-44). In framing his experience this way, Agu expects readerly sympathy. His story is not devoid of the narrative components – chief among which is shockability – that appeal to Western human rights-informed readers. Agu's appeal to his readers for sympathy and understanding of his status as a victimized and abused subject calls to mind Valentino Achak Deng's observation in a memoir-like novel detailing his experience as one of the war-displaced Sudanese children famously known as "the Lost Boys." In that novel, written by Dave Eggers, Deng explains that "the tales of the Lost Boys have become remarkably similar over the years" because they have learned about how to shape their stories of suffering to meet the expectations of Western humanitarian agencies, journalists, and aid agents. He concludes that "sponsors and newspapers reporters and the like expect the stories to have certain elements, and the Lost Boys have been consistent in their willingness to oblige. Survivors tell the stories that the sympathetic want, and that means making them as shocking as possible" (21).²⁴ Given the way Agu's story of

²⁴ See *What Is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng*. Vintage, 2006.

innocence is narrativized, Iweala can be understood to subscribe to what is expected of the child soldier narrative genre.

After Agu has experienced and participated in raping grownup women civilians, he still insists on being a child. When Commandant takes the group to his hometown where, as he says, “women in this place is just too beautiful” (95), Agu denies his adult experience and says: “I am too young to be knowing about these thing even if I am knowing from how the men are talking about women that I am really wanting one to be making my soldier [that is, his penis] feel good. I am wanting one but not like how we are getting them in battle” (101). Time and again, Agu reminds the reader that he is a child. This repeated claim serves the narrative purpose of casting him as an immature being who is not responsible for his dastardly acts. The humanitarian predisposition to assume innocence based on age echoes in the portraiture of Agu. At the brothel in Commandant’s town, he is almost denied entrance merely because he looks like a child (109, 111-112). In different places throughout the novel, when Agu admits to his crimes, in the same breath he exculpates himself and places the blame on his superiors. One striking example of this vindictory doubleness occurs toward the end of the novel when he thinks about his atrocious actions but immediately rejects his responsibility for them. Agu says: “And then I am thinking of all the thing I am doing. 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). As an example of exculpatory sermonizing, a narrative which seeks to absolve the child soldier of any blame or wrongdoing for the violence they perpetrate, Iweala’s novel strongly reifies a notable part of humanitarian discourse on child soldiering which, as Moynagh stresses, claims that the fundamental innocence of children makes them susceptible to armed conflict and

its attendant corrupting influences in a way that obscures their responsibility for their actions (670).²⁵

Commandant's serial sodomizing of Agu also serves the narrative purpose of accentuating the young soldier's victimization. In being sexually violated, Agu is painted as a double victim. The same day he is made a soldier against his will is also the day he becomes an unwilling gratifier of Commandant's paedophilic sexual inclination (83-4). In addition to using him to prosecute a war without a meaningful objective (other than looting and raping), Agu is also made to endure an abuse that disturbs his mind. Commandant takes to Agu immediately, as soon as he sees him. He treats Agu specially and is oftentimes generous to him. When Luftenant accuses Agu of being a spy shortly after Strika discovers the boy in his hiding place, the one he runs to while escaping the soldiers who kill his father, Commandant not only sharply rebukes his deputy, he also ridicules him before the group (7). Agu testifies to Commandant's flirtation with him, saying on one occasion that "Commandant is sucking in his lip and touching my face softly softly" (11). This leader promises Agu many things and assures him that "[e]verything will be just fine, he is saying with his lip so close to my ear that I am hearing his saliva in his mouth [...] and feeling his hand on my face touching me softly" (11). The paedophilic warlord's engagement with this boy soldier is presented as an act of manipulation, one which makes the boy his personal victim. So strong is Commandant's hold on him that throughout the narrative Agu does nothing to upset or blindside him in any way, as child soldiers are wont to do. In fact, while other older soldiers constitute a threat to Commandant such that he begins "to be sleeping with one eye open," Agu and Strika become the eyes that ward off the dangers against the man

²⁵ See Maureen Moynagh's "Political Futurity and the Child-Soldier Figure" in *Interventions*, vol.16, no. 5, 2014, pp. 655-674.

(121). When Rambo's revolt against Commandant presents an opportunity for Agu to walk away from the group as he has thought of doing sometime – "I am thinking that I cannot be doing this anymore" –, he spurns it (135). The fear of Commandant weighs heavily on his mind. As he puts it, he does not support Rambo's rebellion "because I am fearing what Commandant will be doing to me if I am not protecting him" (123). This fear becomes even more disabling when Agu recalls that Commandant has previously killed some people who try to desert the group (119). While those soldiers exercise agency despite the likely consequence, nowhere in this novel does Agu make any attempt, disguised or overt, to exit the group. The crippling fear this character has of Commandant is meant to concretize his image as a victim.

In her enlightening reading of *Beasts*, Allison Mackey claims that Agu "finally decides to question authority and act out of conscience instead of fear" (110). This position does not seem tenable. A different form of agency, and not the one that changes the course of event, I argue, is what Agu demonstrates – I will return to this point shortly. Commandant is the only formidable authority in the group; nowhere in this novel does Agu challenge or question his decisions. As one of Commandant's guards – the other being Strika – Agu does not moot the idea of killing the guerrilla leader while he is sleeping. He sees the man as invincible until Rambo takes the initiative and challenges him, defying his authority and eventually assassinating him. If anyone in the novel is to be credited with the bold act of questioning authority "out of conscience," that person is Rambo. He courageously walks up to his intimidating superior and makes known his decision to quit the group with others. The exchanges between this deputy and his leader, as Agu reports it, reveals that Rambo has already desacralized Commandant before he goes to him, even if he still laces his response with words such as "sah" that suggest respect. The intense disagreement between Agu and Rambo interrupts Commandant's sleep and thus begins the

drama involving him and his subordinate: “What is all of this noise, Commandant is saying. Sah it is me, Rambo is answering. Idiot can’t you see I am sleeping. Enhen now sah I can see. Then shutup and go back to your post. No sah I am not doing that anymore sah. And why not? Because we are leaving sah. WHO AND WHO IS LEAVING?” (123). Rambo’s words here come from a state of courage. On the other hand, the capitalized utterance indicates that Commandant wants to obtain the identity of the defectors in his group so that he can liquidate them, as is his wont. But this does not deter the young soldier. Rather, as Agu notes, Rambo “is stopping his shaking and is puffing his chest” (123). Rambo’s shaking suggests that the fear of Commandant is something that is not limited to a section of the group. But this fear, in Rambo and others, gives way to courage as indicated in Rambo’s chest puffing.

Even though Agu has similar convictions as Rambo and his cohort about what it means to live in the group, he is not one of those encompassed by Rambo’s collective pronoun “we.” Evident in Rambo’s demonstrated agency is the theory of strategic agency Michel de Certeau articulates in his book, *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Strategic agency, as de Certeau theorizes it, changes the trajectory of things. It constructs a dynamic of power. It is the reserve of people who are willing to take to the open stage and press to work. And it should be noted that strategic agency is not an option only for the powerful; the less powerful who have developed the courage to operate in the treacherous arena of power can avail themselves of it as well. By challenging his boss, Rambo proves to be a strategic actor. His action changes the leadership of the armed group, making it possible later for others like Agu to find their way out of the group. In contrast, Agu’s decision never to bring to Commandant’s attention how awfully he feels about the sexual abuse he is subjected to and his wish to leave the group can also be construed as a sign of agency. However, this agency is tactical in that, as de Certeau differentiates it from strategic

agency, it only allows Agu to survive from one day to the next and to avoid being killed by Commandant. This form of agency, though – indeed more generally the idea of silence as somehow signifying agency – is productive in keeping Agu alive, it does not trouble the status quo. Although Agu thinks occasionally of acting strategically, nowhere in this novel does he translate it into action in the way that Rambo does. His exercise of tactical agency works so well that it escapes Commandant’s scrutinizing gaze. Taken together, both Rambo’s and Agu’s respective exercises of PEL accord with its features – it can be visible or hidden, taking place within the enemy’s space and within the reach of its radar, but nevertheless undiscoverable semantically.²⁶

To Commandant, Agu is not a human being. He is a thing, an object that is meant to be used and discarded when it is no longer needed. The first question Commandant poses to his group when he sets eyes on Agu for the first time is, “who is finding this thing? [...] Why is this thing here on the ground?” (5). No one answers him, but Strika who is just returning from the truck to join the group is met with the same question: “Is it you who is finding this thing?” Still locked in on this understanding of the new boy as a consumable, he asks Strika, “clicking his tongue [...], are you trying to eat this one or what?” (7). It is as a thing that Commandant relates to Agu. Commandant possesses the boy and makes him live at his (Commandant’s) whims. As a thing which exists at the pleasure of its owner, Agu’s agency is severely circumscribed.²⁷ On several occasion he laments that he is unable to disagree with Commandant because as his

²⁶ I lean on Kim Huynh’s insight on PEL in making this point. See “Children and Agency: Caretakers, Free-Rangers and Everyday Life” in *Children and Global Conflict*, edited by Kim Huynh, Bina D’Costa, and Katrina Lee-Koo, 2015, pp. 35-64.

²⁷ In his influential book, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (1982), Orlando Patterson underlines the parasitic nature of the relationship between slave masters and their slaves. In that relationship, the slaves are mere articles of possession that their masters could deploy to any use that pleased them. These masters thought of their slaves as natively alienated and socially dead people. Agu’s situation under Commandant fits that of a socially dead person.

possession he has no right to complain about anything he considers untoward (91). Just as people's love for what they own comes in different degrees, so too does Commandant's attitude towards his "assets." He rates weapons more valuable than young soldiers like Agu who comprise his ragtag army. Agu says that in the group "everybody is making sure he is having his own gun or knife because if you are losing his [Commandant's] gun or knife, then Commandant will be losing you" (90). Even under the leadership of Rambo, Agu still remains acutely conscious of his degraded value as a human in comparison to guns. He says: "I am wanting to be throwing gun away into the bush, but if I am throwing gun away, then Rambo will be throwing me away because gun is more important than me. I am always remembering this" (129).

The subordination of child soldiers to weapons of war in Iweala's story is meant to show how degraded and easily expendable child soldiers are. Here, Iweala's story does the same thing that a staunch humanitarian crusader against the use of children as soldiers, Romeo Dallaire, does following his traumatic experience as the head of the UN peacekeeping mission during the Rwandan Genocide. In his book, *They Fight Like Soldiers, They Die Like Children*, Dallaire declares that he is attempting to use the power of his imagination to help his readers "connect to the reality of child soldiers" (16).²⁸ As his book shows, Dallaire presents graphic images of the tragic circumstances of child soldiers, whom he, in another variant of the "innocent victim" narrative of human rights and humanitarian organizations, describes as "victimized perpetrators" (7). Ultimately, Dallaire wants his book and advocacy to make people understand that all child soldiers are victims (126-127). Iweala, like most authors of child soldier stories, imaginatively presents the ordeal of child soldiering to readers. That presentation, as I have demonstrated,

²⁸ Donald Dunson also favours the production of narratives that portray child soldiers as "victims of circumstance" (7). See *Child, Victim, Soldier: The Loss of Innocence in Uganda*, 2010.

echoes the humanitarian-discourse dogma that insists on a unilateral understanding of the child soldier as a blameless victim. Agu's repeated claim to legal innocence parallels humanitarian rhetoric of child combatants as legally faultless – "the international response to the child soldier issue," David Rosen contends, "has been to ignore context and to press on toward universal legal solutions to the child soldier problem" (300).²⁹

However, in Iweala's recreation of the child soldier image in *Beasts*, other important aspects of the child fighter that critics of the work have either sparsely regarded or overlooked altogether are present. Prominent among these are the image of the child soldier as a being who is still morally conscious despite their involvement in a criminal enterprise of killing and raping. Another issue that the novel thematizes is sexual abuse, which is not depicted as an experience peculiar to girls and women caught in the throes of war – although they are the most affected by it. In examining what she considers popular misleading portrayals of "children caught up in the cycle of war and violence," Mariam Denov critiques the one-dimensional representations of the child soldier image in international news media, policy and academic-oriented discourse, within which "child soldiers are exoticized, decontextualized and essentialized" (13). In those reports, Denov observes that the child soldier is either represented as morally depraved and irredeemably damaged, a helpless victim, or a celebrated hero. Denov posits thus: "Perceived to be lost in a cycle of unrelenting violence, irrationality and iniquity, children who have participated in armed conflict have generally been assumed to be permanently damaged" (6). Michael Wessells reaches similar conclusion when he observes that "[p]ublic media have often spoken uncritically

²⁹ See David Rosen's "Child Soldiers, International Humanitarian Law, and the Globalization of Childhood" in *American Anthropologist*, vol. 109, no. 2, 2007, pp. 296-306.

of a ‘lost generation,’ portraying entire generations of war-affected children as beyond repair and unable to assume socially constructive roles” (*Child Soldiers* 28).

While this image subsists in some African child soldier narratives, in some others it is reversed. This reversal is observable in Iweala’s *Beasts*, its overt orientation toward human rights and humanitarian principles notwithstanding. The image of Agu as a child soldier that is still redeemable ties in with Wessells’ assertion that “most children in war zones show significant resilience – the ability to withstand adversities without suffering long-term damage” (*Child Soldiers* 29). Unfortunately, the remarkable resilience and agency that child soldiers demonstrate are not accorded any serious attention during their rehabilitation process. The emphasis on victimization and recovery of innocence supervenes so much so that the demonstrated capacities of the child soldier while in active military service are ignored. Neither in *Beasts*, nor in any other works within the genre, does rehabilitation preclude the infantilization of child soldiers – even when all the actions taken by a young combatant within the context of armed conflict, and as a member of an armed group, challenge any attempt to understand that person as a child. Roos Haer in her essay, “The Study of Child Soldiering: Issues and Consequences for DDR Implementation” (2017), argues that the insistence on the childhood innocence of demobilized child soldiers is one of the flaws of the rehabilitation programmes designed by humanitarian organizations for those children. As she renders it, because of “their strong emphasis on victimhood, DDR programmes ignore the interplay between innocence, childhood and responsibility” (485).

Agu’s enculturation into atrocities does not empty him of his moral consciousness. At different points during his time in the armed group, Agu struggles with guilt. He feels the pang of conscience. He may have been separated from his family, particularly his mother who molds

his mind with scriptural instructions, but Agu has not parted with the lessons he has learned about the consequences of vices and wrongdoings. For example, when he is being pressured to carry out his first killing, Agu recollects the thought that fills his mind: “And I am thinking, I am killing, killing, then I am going to hell so I am smelling fire and smoke and it is harding to breath” (18). On another occasion he remembers that he wants to tell Commandant to excuse him from the group’s dealings because, as he graphically renders it, his mind is “becoming rotten like the inside of fruit” (89). This awareness of moral guilt, which wracks Agu at various times (42, 48), indicates that he has not totally become irredeemably depraved and morally damaged. It is for this reason that therapy, in this case based on Western medical principles, provides a path to recovery. Unlike Emmanuel Dongala’s eponymous protagonist, Johnny Mad Dog, who dies at the end of the story in a manner suggesting that he is unsalvageable, Iweala’s story gestures toward the possibility of redemption for the child soldier. In this sense, the novel challenges the understanding of children at war by some section of the Western media as morally deceased and irreparably damaged. That this novel, whose plot’s life derives oxygen from humanitarian narratives, signposts the child soldier as salvageable is not surprising. Human rights discourse, as Moynagh submits, is favourably disposed towards a narrative of innocence perverted and then reclaimed or rehabilitated.³⁰ Besides, most child soldier narratives, especially their memoirs, fit the description of recovery narratives. Their protagonists furnish readers with stories of how they recover their childhood innocence, their humanity, and how they recover from drug addiction.

In the foreword he writes in a book entitled *The Bite of the Mango*, written by a fellow Sierra Leonean, Mariatu Kamara, in collaboration with Susan McClelland, Ishmael Beah wants

³⁰ See Maureen Moynagh’s “Human Rights, Child-Soldier Narratives, and the Problem of Form,” p. 40; and “Political Futurity and the Child-Soldier Figure.”

journalists interested in stories of children of war to look beyond “the trauma people suffer” and tell their audience about the children’s “ability to recover and the humanity that remains intact” (8). For Beah, the recovery and the survival of the humanity of the children caught in conflict are the stories that matter. In my view, the narratives of recovery help the cause of human rights and humanitarian groups involved in child soldier matters. While the stories are used, as in the case of Beah whose memoir was promoted by the Starbucks Company, to sensitize the public to the horrors of child soldiering, they are also celebrated as proofs of the labours of humanitarian workers. In the case of the memoirs, that former child soldiers can tell their stories suggests that they have recovered and reconnected with normal life. Similarly, Agu’s story is not an on-the-spot report of his soldiering experience; he tells the story only after he has attained some level of recovery at the rehabilitation centre.

Iweala’s novel also represents another dimension of sexual exploitation in conflict involving children. As in other works of the genre, *Beasts* also features rape scenes and women portrayed as mere objects of sexual pleasure. But the novel goes further than that. Contrary to the popular view that only girls and women experience sexual violence in wartime, Iweala’s story shows that boys too are not excluded from it. To my knowledge, *Beasts* is the only work among others in the African child soldier canon that showcases this kind of experience. In the same manner that being a soldier distresses him, satisfying Commandant’s perverse sexual proclivities also troubles him. Agu lets the reader know too that the commander has also subjected Strika to the same nastiness (85). Unlike the case with memoirs such as those of Beah, Mehari, and Jal, in which the subject of sexual violence is hardly treated despite the prevalence of evidence in anthropological research confirming that sexual abuse is one of the commonest experiences of child soldiers, Iweala’s novel gives it more than a mere mention. The novel presents sexual

violation as an occurrence that boys, like girls, encounter in war situations. However, given the absence of girls in Commandant's motley army, the novel gives the impression that child soldiering involves only boys, that girls have no presence in contemporary armed groups.³¹ In this sense, Iweala's novel reinforces "the traditional perceptions of armed conflict as a phenomenon occurring between males" (Denov 11).

The only presence of girls and women in this novel occurs when Commandant takes his troop to his town. The brothel in that town is run by a "big Madam" who asks Commandant to let go of her daughter, adding "if is women you are wanting, leave this one. I am having plenty womens in the back if you are having plenty money to be giving me" (112). While these women are not formally a part of the armed group, their presence in this case is represented in the customary manner as though they are sexual objects existing only for male consumption. Apart from an unnamed girl who stabs Luftenant with his knife when he tries to have sex with her, claiming in her defence that she is only a girl and does not know "it is going to be like this (114),³² all the other girls and women in the world of this story are sequestered in anonymity and do not by themselves take any consequential actions. By invisibilizing and marginalizing girls, the novel projects the image of the child soldier as peculiarly masculine. It denies readers of not only any feminine component to the child soldier image; it also eclipses the roles, powers, and agency of girl soldiers in conflict zones. However, this absence does not define other child soldier fictions in the genre. In Chris Abani's and Ahmadou Kouroumah's respective novels, which I examine in chapters two and three of this dissertation, the female child soldier is present,

³¹ This absence is strange given that a major inspiration and material for *Beasts*, as Iweala reveals in an interview, is China Keitetsi's memoir, *Child Soldier*. It is not clear what informed Iweala's creation of an all-male child soldiering armed group in this novel, for in most fighting forces involving child soldiers, boys and girls are present.

³² This statement defies any easy interpretation. What is it that the girl does not know "is going to be like this"? Is it the nature of work in the Big Madam's group of sex workers or the weapon she uses to attack Luftenant?

not as the main protagonist in the sense of the male ones, and neither does she speak in the first-person as her male counterparts do. In other words, even in this context we find the girl soldier still being spoken for, given tangential roles, and often appearing or spoken of as a silent victim of male sexual predatoriness. Denov observes that this invisibility and erasure of girls in conflict contexts is also a feature of discussions and analyses of armed conflict (12). As Denov later acknowledges, this situation is changing with more scholarly works focusing on the varied roles of girls and women in armed groups.³³ Also, in some new fictional works, the experiences of girls abducted by armed groups and used as sex slaves and for other purposes are being fictionalized with the first-person narrators being girls. In these works, the stories of girls are not reduced to the margins and neither are they told by boys. Two examples of these works are Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani's *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree* (2018) and Edna O'Brien's *Girl* (2019), both of which recreate the April 2014 abductions of about 276 schoolgirls in Northern Nigeria by the Islamist terror group known as Boko Haram.³⁴

The meaning of war constitutes another defining elements of Iweala's *Beasts* that helps to strengthen its depiction of the child soldier as an innocent victim whose culpability is explained away by the more urgent need to recover their supposedly lost childhood innocence. In this novel war has no purpose; there is no relatable ideology driving the conflict. Only looting, raping, and killing for their own sake loom large as overriding objectives. Commandant's charge to his disparate young soldiers sums up this fact: "THE BLOOD MUST FLOW!" (40). Given that the war lacks any ideals or specific goals, the novel serves the view that the use of children to prosecute it amounts to an abuse and violation of their rights to peace and protection. Everyone –

³³ Roos Haer also makes similar observation; see "The Study of Child Soldiering: Issues and Consequences for DDR Implementation" (458).

³⁴ These novels deserve a special study that will do proper justice to their writerly visions.

children and adults – who is involved in it gains nothing and those who lose their lives do so for nothing. Like other child soldier stories, particularly Dongala’s *Johnny Mad Dog, Beasts* participates in perpetuating the rendition of African wars that most closely matches Euro-Western understandings, namely as barbaric, meaningless, and felonious conflagrations divorced from the rules of proper warfare.³⁵ The war in this indistinguishably nameless African country is without any historical or sociocultural context. Iweala is well within his writerly right to reimagine a sociopolitical occurrence, stripping it of any easily recognizable particulars; but producing a work that suggests that the subject of a literary endeavour originates in a social vacuum does smack of questionable aims. For its decontextualization and de-historization of what has made child soldiering possible therefore, Iweala’s novel implicates itself as embodying what Coundouriotis has aptly qualified as “arrested historicization,” this being, as she explains it, a “narrowing down of the historical scope of a long-standing convention in African literature” (192).³⁶

With its nameless setting, the novel encourages Western readers – the “decidedly Westernized implicated reader” in Mackey’s words – to whom it is addressed to see its war as a reflection of every African war. After all, as Mackey observes, novels such as Iweala’s “are meant to represent no one real person, while at the same time representing many,” and so the reading of “stories of suffering and violence has the potential to confirm preexisting stereotypes about Africa as a savage, inhuman landscape full of unimaginable horrors” (107, 108). Paradoxically, although its setting is not particular about any one actual African country, its narrativization of war props up the African continent as its focus. In this manner, the novel

³⁵ I examine this issue more elaborately in chapter four where I critique Dongala’s novel.

³⁶ Coundouriotis makes a fine, perceptive distinction between Iweala’s and Ken Saro-Wiwa’s war novel, *Sozaboy* (1994), whose pidgin English the former borrows creatively.

projects Africa as an immature, irrational child who is desensitized to violence and requires – as Amy’s character exemplifies – an attentive, rational foreign adult to salvage it. In other words, Iweala’s novel “produces a metaphor of an African childhood that is politically limiting as a characterization of the historical agency of the continent’s peoples” (Coundouriotis 192).

Iweala’s novel also celebrates the depoliticization of children. Agu and other child soldiers in Commandant’s lawless army are not only stateless; these beasts of no nation have no idea about the political situation of their shadowy country. All that Agu knows is that war breaks out abruptly without anyone “knowing what really happened” and “[o]ne day they are closing school because there is no more Government” (57). What the government politics and policies are, what its philosophy is, how it operates, and what it represents are not in any way hinted by anyone in the world of this story. The political life of the country does not exist. If children have political lives, as Robert Coles elucidates in his book, *The Political Life of Children* (1986), in this novel mirroring the lives of children in war, young people lack any kind of political consciousness. Neither the older men in the group nor the child soldiers have any recollection of a time in which the country had a viable polity – whether through direct experience themselves or through a handed-down story. This depiction of children as apolitical ties in well with Western humanitarian ideas about children being politically unaware. By “infantilizing childhood as a life phase that is unfettered by [political] awareness or responsibility, [humanitarian groups deny] political realities” of children (Boyden “Anthropology Under Fire” 249). We find this denial in Iweala’s fictional world. Apparently, in an attempt to show the impact of war on children used as soldiers, Iweala focuses on victimization and the recovery of a seemingly lost innocence once belonging to the child soldier, to the detriment of their political awareness and agency.

Beasts does not exist only as a novel. It has also been adapted into a film. The novel has achieved commercial success and critical acclaim and has also attracted filmmakers' attention for its powerfully and humorously dramatized presentation of the victimization of the African child soldier. This transmediatization has served to make its story more accessible to an even wider audience. Here I speak, of course, of Cary Fukunaga's adaption of Iweala's *Beasts* into a film. That film finds a space among other popular Western-produced films about African necropolitical discontents, among which war features as a destabilizing agent weakening the "postcolonial state's capacity to build the economic underpinnings of political authority and order" (Mbembe 32).³⁷ Those films include *Black Hawk Down* (2001), directed by Ridley Scott; *Hotel Rwanda* (2004), directed by Terry George; *Blood Diamond* (2006), directed by Edward Zwick; *The Last King of Scotland* (2006), directed by Kevin Macdonald; and *Jonny Mad Dog* (2008), adapted into screen from the novel of the same title and directed by Jean-Stephane Sauvaire.

What these motion pictures have in common is their depiction of Africa as an undifferentiated space within which violence, destitution, poverty, disease, and other pathologies reign unchecked. They depict Africa as still ensconced firmly in something like the Hobbesian *state of nature*, an existential condition where life is nasty, brutish, and short. All these cinematic recreations of Africa depict the continent as helpless and incapable of extricating itself from this "natural" state, and therefore intervention by Western humanitarian benevolent forces is required in order to save those living in it. A scrutiny of these films affirms Ulrich Hamenstädt's conclusion that "[m]ovies can be political and social statements. Often, they present a specific 'world view', as well as portraying common views of the world at the same time" (5). These

³⁷ See Achille Mbembe's "Necropolitics" in *Public Culture*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2003, pp. 11-40.

works are united in their projection of a Western worldview of African precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial wars as irrational, meaningless, and criminal (Rosen *Western Imagination* 48). In the case of Fukunaga's directed *Beasts*, excessive violence stands out as a prominent element of that war.

The force of the filmic art form allows Fukunaga to vividly portray the child soldier as an inhabitant of a space in which carnage has become normalized. Although artistically well realized, the film "tells the single story of African savagery to its Western audience" (Adebayo 9). The abstract nature of its setting encourages the view that child soldiering and the militarization of children are commonplace in all of Africa, as well as decontextualizes African wars and their motivations. While the film, in its 2hr:17min, captures the making of a child soldier as well as the destructive capability of war, it provides no clear indication of the objective of the war. Rather, the film casts war in that nameless African setting as inevitable, meaningless, lacking in ideology and political objectives; the war does not differentiate between civilians and combatants, and it is conducted in plain disregard of the rules of war. In the Africa of this film, war does not mean a "continuation of politics by other means," as German military theorist Carl von Clausewitz conceptualizes it. Fukunaga's work hardly discourages a view of African wars as different from those waged by Western countries. It encourages its viewers to understand ethno-political conflicts in Africa as "new wars"³⁸ characterized essentially by barbarity, and when they are not totally devoid of purpose they are propelled simply by "greed" and misplaced "grievance."³⁹ This way of conceiving of civil wars on the continent comes in handy when

³⁸ Mary Kaldor's concept; See *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era*, 1999

³⁹ On the "greed" and "grievance" argument, see Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler's *Greed and Grievance in Civil War*, 2004.

justifying child soldiers' victim status, thereby insulating them from responsibility for their actions.

What I have done in this chapter is provide a reading of Iweala's *Beasts* as a novel whose framing of the African child soldier reflects prevailing human rights and humanitarian discourse on children and war. More importantly, I contend that Iweala imagines child soldiers as innocent victims of their adult society. In this way, as is the case with some other texts in the African child soldier canon, the novel demonstrates the change that has taken place in literary portrayals of children who have been mobilized as fighters. Jean-Hervé Jézéquel speaks to this change thus:

During the American Civil War or the First World War, the participation of child soldiers was promoted and perceived through a very specific discursive register, that of the child hero. The actions of these children were "heroicised" and their eventual deaths seen as sacrifices in the name of a greater good, often the nation's. Conversely, the participation of child combatants in the African wars is always perceived in a negative manner, through the registers of the victimised child and the stolen childhood. (5)

Study of African child soldier narratives reveals a complete lack of any occasion for children to demonstrate or develop certain capacities from which heroism emerges. Their focus lies instead on the human rights and innocence of the child. Added to this is the representation of African war as criminal and meaningless.

Chapter Two

The Portrait of the Child Soldier as a Hybrid Figure in *Song for Night*

My focus in this chapter is on Chris Abani's novella *Song for Night*. I examine this work as one which represents the child soldier as a hybrid figure. Although this hybridity also reflects on the surface in the dual makeup of the child soldier as a victim and perpetrator of violence, it is more evident in the way this supposedly unusual combatant operates between traditionally delineated boundaries of adulthood and childhood. Contrary to popular criticisms of this novella, which foreground the victimhood of the child protagonist, I will argue that the hybrid construct of the child fighter Abani portrays reveals the child soldier to be a conscious initiator of actions. While the victimization of the child soldier in this novella is not in doubt, the empowerment he derives (paradoxically) from his victimhood does not seem compelling to critics of the novella. Yet, in this narrative the agony that results from the child combatant's experiences neither immobilizes nor further infantilizes him. The child soldier transforms his suffering into power which he then deploys in roles commonly identified with adults. In unpacking my claim that the pain the child soldier of this novella experiences empowers him to operate actively in what is traditionally considered an adult domain, I draw on Brad Weiss's seminal analysis of pain and agency as regards children and warfare. As Weiss asserts, pain as a mode of social consciousness can be productive and catalyze agency (112). This agential dimension of pain, a form of what Alcinda Honwana describes as "tactical agency" following Michel de Certeau's theory of PEL, allows child soldiers "to cope with the concrete, immediate conditions of their lives in order to maximize the circumstances created by their military and violent environment" (49). It is in this light that Abani's novella gestures towards an interrogation of the notions of "childhood" and "adulthood" and foregrounds the agency of militarily mobilized children, as opposed to their

childhood victimization mostly prevalent in the criticisms of this novella and in humanitarian and human rights discourses.

Song for Night is a recreation of the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War (1967-70).¹ The war came about because the military-controlled Federal Government of Nigeria opposed the secession from the federation declared by the leadership of the mostly Igbo Southeastern part of the country. While the number of the actual casualties of the war remains a subject of contention, it is estimated that “3,000 to 50,000 people died and 300,000 to one million were displaced” (Madhu 33).² Different Nigerian writers have represented the war in varied ways. So many are the literary accounts of that war that there exists a subgenre in the Nigerian literature known as the Literature of the Nigerian Civil War.³ For most Nigerian writers, the civil war has been and remains a source of inspiration. This reality is neither strange nor peculiar to Nigerian authors (Ogunpitan 2). Besides, the continual production of works representing the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War buttresses the point that the conflict remains an “unresolved problem for the national narrative” in the same manner that the Nigerian state is yet to come to terms with it.⁴ Among the novels that make up the Literature of the Nigerian Civil War are Cyprian Ekwensi’s *Survive the Peace* (1976), Chukwuemeka Ike’s *Sunset at Dawn* (1976), Buchi Emecheta’s *Destination*

¹ I am aware that some scholars prefer to refer to this event as “The Nigerian Civil War.” Which name is appropriate is not a question that falls within the scope of my project. As such, throughout this chapter I use the descriptor “Nigeria-Biafra Civil War” mainly because the novella I examine here creates a strong impression of the simultaneous existence of the two invented countries of Nigeria and Biafra.

² See also Toyin Falola and Matthew M. Heaton’s *A History of Nigeria*, CUP, 2008, p. 158, in which the authors claim that between one and three million lives were lost in the war.

³ To be sure, no one single event since the political independence of Nigeria has richly impacted the creative enterprise of the most populous Black nation like its thirty-month civil war. For more on this assertion see Marion Pape’s *Gender Palava: Nigerian Women Writing War*, 2011, and Susanne Gehrmann’s “The Child Soldier’s Soliloquy: Voices of a New Archetype in African Writing,” 2011.

⁴ See Madhu Krishnan’s “Biafra and the Aesthetics of Closure in the Third Generation Nigerian Novel” (2010).

Biafra (1982), Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* (1985), Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, (2006), Helon Habila's *Measuring Time* (2007), and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Roses and Bullets* (2011).

While Abani's *Song for Night* is like some of these accounts in its use of a child protagonist-narrator, it differs from them in its essentially complete focus on the child soldier issue.⁵ Its protagonist-narrator is not just a child in the Western sense of it, he is also a soldier who makes an adult decision to be part of warfare. In light of his privileging of the child's perspective, Abani's novella sits among the works of other African authors who embrace what Madelaine Hron in her essay, "Ora na-azu nwa: The Figure of the Child in Third-Generation Nigerian Novels" (2008), describes as an established literary practice of "adopting the child focaliser" when representing African socioeconomic and political realities (28). Hron also observes that in canonical African and Nigerian narratives, child narrators/protagonists are common and occupy a critical position in those works (28). Occupying a central position within such narratives, child narrators perform different functions and critics have studied their suitability and unsuitability for these roles. In the African child soldier genre, within which the child protagonist is also prevalent, the child as the protagonist-narrator functions as testifier to the horrors of wars, serves as a witness to atrocities, or confesses to crimes committed in the context of conflict. In the texts that I examine in this study, the child soldier as protagonist-narrator combines these functions, for most child soldier narratives structurally conform to the human rights narrative forms of testimonial, witnessing, and confession. Indeed, as Laura Murphy argues, narratives employing first-person narration are "a staple of the human rights

⁵ John Kearney includes Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* in his study of child soldier in contemporary African fiction, but in my view the novel does not belong in that group because High Tech, the character who can be described as a child soldier, is a minor character and the novel is not about his soldiering duties as is the case with Agu in *Beasts*, Birahima in Kourouma's *Allah Is Not Obligated*, or My Luck in *Song for Night*.

industry” (22). In Abani’s story, the child protagonist-narrator, My Luck, both testifies and witnesses to crime and confesses to heinous acts of violence during his soldiering commitment. Like others in the genre, Abani child-centred story bears “themes too large for adult fiction” (Hron 29). It is for the reason of its complete focus on the experience of child soldiering that Abani’s *Song for Night* merits its categorization and high standing amongst the narratives comprising the African child soldier genre.

While Abani may have sourced the material of this novella – his fifth work of fiction – from a major African ethnopolitical conflict, his writerly interest transcends the particularities of that apparently fratricidal hostility. A careful reading of *Song for Night* will show that the author is less interested in recreating the civil war as others have done than he is particular about representing the image of the child soldier. And that representation, as I demonstrate in this chapter, negotiates the thorny contours of the child soldier on the normative understandings that humanitarian discourse compels. And where Uzodinma Iweala’s *Beasts of No Nation* stages a humanitarian, unidimensional, and human-rights focused image of the child soldier, Abani’s *Song for Night* inflects that image, framing it as a hybrid which makes what Wendy Hesford calls “narcissism of pity” less achievable for the human-rights educated reader (48). In other words, Abani’s child soldier novella abjures the conditions of what Joseph Slaughter calls “the new literary humanitarianism – the Western desire for *Bildungsroman* of the non-Western other that is enacted through book markets” (314). I make this claim because, unlike some other African child soldier narratives such as Iweala’s *Beasts* and those written by former African child soldiers, the protagonist of Abani’s novella by reason of his death is no longer available to benefit from the conventional humanitarian efforts of demobilization and rehabilitation. Put differently, the novella is not concerned with the rescue and rehabilitation of the child soldier as

is the case in other narratives. The novella also diverges from the classic Bildungsroman character marked by their social formation, socialization, and education.

In one breath the portrayal of My Luck invites readerly sympathy, but that support is soon effaced in another breath as the details of My Luck's gruesome actions begin to unfold. At no point does the narrative encourage a sustained sympathetic attention to the child at the centre of a tragic development. For Abani, the use of the material of the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War is not an attempt to raise the unresolved issues that precipitated the war. In this sense, the charge of cloying sentimentality that has been levelled against some writers of Igbo provenance who have produced literary works on the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War is arguably untenable as a logical critique of Abani's novella.⁶ Abani's narratives, as Alexandra Schultheis Moore and Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg maintain, "are not sentimental, and they challenge readers to extend a recognition of shared humanity across facile divides of right or wrong behavior" (59). Likewise, Alexandra Schultheis, in a separate analysis of *Song for Night*, concludes that the novella "denies more vehemently the conventional satisfactions of narrative sympathy or humanitarian intervention within existing power structures" (38). Abani neither depicts the child soldier as an essentialized innocent victim, nor does he romanticize Biafrans as victims of a ruthless campaign mounted by a powerful and resourceful federal side.

In using the material of the civil war, Abani provides a complex, hybridized image of the child soldier as both a capable perpetrator and a victim of violence. As a liminal, hybridized protagonist-narrator, My Luck is neither entirely a perpetrator of violent crimes, nor is he

⁶ For more on Abani as a writer who belongs to the generation of writers who look back to Biafra through the lens of postmemory and represents the war through "the poetic freedom of generational distance," see chapter 4 of Christopher Ouma's *Childhood in Contemporary Diasporic African Literature: Memories and Futures Past*, Springer, 2020.

through and through an unblemished victim of adult manipulation and victimization. He inhabits and operates in a liminal space. He is neither fully alive, nor is he fully dead; he cannot be said to be a child, and neither is he an adult. And, as he himself puts it towards the end of the novella, “I have never been a boy. That was stolen from me and I will never be a man – not this way” (143). (It is instructive to note My Luck’s use of “boy” and “man” rather than say “human” or any other marker of identity in this utterance. In the Igbo tradition of his milieu, patriarchy reigns and masculinity is much more appreciated. It is not just enough to be a human; one must be a man, progressing from boyhood to manhood without interruption. But what makes My Luck’s case even more tragic is that war makes it impossible for him to be neither a boy nor a man. Here too is evident the disruption to growth and other forms of social progress that war makes possible.) Speaking about the use of historical contents, Abani, referencing the Indian writer Amitav Ghosh, holds that “What is most important [. . .] when writing, even in a historical moment, is not so much the particulars of that historical moment, but the texture of the characters’ lives” (“Abigail and My Becoming” n.p.). By taking readers into the child soldier’s world, the texture of life of that mode of being, and not unavoidably the material realities of the war the soldier is enlisted in, stands out as what matters. Put differently, the texture of the child soldier’s life is Abani’s writerly vision. Accordingly, Moore and Goldberg’s conclusion that Abani “expands on the idea of the writer as a person who possesses a rare ability to observe the world beyond the obscuring apparatuses of denial, privilege, or fear” is apposite (71). The world of the child soldier as it really is, rather than as it is privileged in certain discourses, is what Abani frames in his novella.

However, critics like Eleni Coundouriotis have an issue with the way Abani’s writerly strategy is executed. Coundouriotis contends that *Song for Night* is one of the child soldier

narratives which, by framing the child soldier's identity, sacrifices historical realism in the account of war. She views the novella's protagonist-narrator speaking from beyond the grave as one of the many "inconsistencies" that "destabilize the novel's historical reference," noting that its "indeterminacy of time and place [which] suggest the kind of flattening out of time that occurs in memory where the past is part of the present consciousness" (195). While I subscribe to Coundouriotis's argument that the application of the human rights frame when constructing the identity of the child soldier in some accounts eclipses the agency of the child fighter, decontextualizes what makes child soldiering possible, and of course symptomizes disrupted historicization, I view as unpersuasive her rationale for including *Song for Night* among the narratives she persuasively argues embrace the child soldier's identity as constructed in human rights and humanitarian terms. The novella does not fit the category of child soldier narratives that ignore history, "in part because they become trapped in a rhetorical effort to restore the childhood innocence of their narrator" (Coundouriotis 192). The protagonist-narrator of this work is not even rescuable. As I will go on to explain, the child soldier in Abani's novella is not given to mourning some lost childhood innocence or a recovery of it, and neither is victimization and denial of human rights a leitmotif of the novella. It is also for this reason that I choose not to group *Song for Night* together with Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* as Coundouriotis does in her instructive reading of child soldier narratives.

Unlike *Beasts of No Nation*, *Song for Night* does not privilege the human rights frame in its depiction of the child soldier. Rather, by portraying the nuance, details, and feelings of the child soldier's experience of life – a life presented as hybridized – the novella sidesteps the

normative human rights discourse on children at war as essentially innocent victims.⁷ The novella champions a human rights philosophy that does not “idealize either rights or the victims of human wrongs” as is the case in *Beasts of No Nation* and other representations of atrocities involving children (Moore and Goldberg 61). Similarly, the novella, although focused on the idea of the child soldier, is not invested in the question of age, or the stages of life. This is a child soldier story that is relatively disinclined to the notions of childhood, demobilization, rehabilitation and reintegration, victimization, recovery of lost childhood, or human rights. Rather, it is more about showing the innermost consciousness – or as My Luck describes it, “[t]he interiority of the head” (21) – of the child soldier with a view to shedding light on the roles he plays, how he demonstrates initiative, and what motivates him.

Abani’s *Song for Night* focuses on a child protagonist-narrator, My Luck, who joins what is an arm of the Biafran military at age 12. My Luck describes his and other young persons’ enlistment in the army thus: “I joined up at twelve. We all wanted to join then: to fight. There was a clear enemy, and having lost loved ones to them, we all wanted revenge” (19). When My Luck speaks of “a clear enemy,” referring to the federal army coordinated by people from the Northern region of the country, he invokes the defunct Biafran government’s popular classification of the Nigerian military government – and any group or country perceived to be supporting it – as enemy.⁸ This way of thinking permeates some of the notable imaginative

⁷ Although Abani’s *Song for Night* has not received the same level of scholarly attention that Iweala’s *Beasts of No Nation* has attracted, some of the available critical works on it suggest that the novella is different from other child soldier novels in both its aesthetics and political orientation. Among those critical works which take this view and on various levels question Coundouriotis’s conclusion on the novella are Hamish Dalley’s “Trauma Theory and Nigerian Civil War Literature: Speaking ‘Something That Was Never in Words’ in Chris Abani’s *Song for Night*” (2013), Alexandra Schultheis Moore and Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg’s “‘Let Us Begin with a Smaller Gesture’: An Ethos of Human Rights and the Possibilities of Form in Chris Abani’s *Song for Night* and *Becoming Abigail*” (2014), and Christopher Ouma’s “Childhoods of War: ‘Na Craze World Be Dat’” (2020).

⁸ See Arua Oko Omaka’s “Conquering the Home Front: Radio Biafra in the Nigeria–Biafra War, 1967–1970” in *War in History*, vol. 25, no. 4, 2017: 555–575.

accounts of the war too.⁹ My Luck narrates – or performs a soliloquy of¹⁰ – his harrowing experience of war, his role in it as an active participant and, to a relative degree, as a victim of its disorienting horrors – what he calls senseless madness (19 and 25). When the reader first encounters My Luck, he appears to be recovering from a momentary loss of consciousness caused by a blast from a mine accidentally set off by one of his fellow deminers, Nebuchadnezzar. My Luck “wakes up” to realize that his platoon has moved on, believing that he has been incinerated by the explosion (22).

In his introduction to the reader, My Luck reveals that it is not his voice that the reader hears, for “I have not spoken in three years” (19). Indeed, he says that the account of his soldiering experience, which he renders in the interior of his head and thinks of as “my inner-speech,” exists not in English but in Igbo (21). Soon the reader learns that the war has gone on for three years and My Luck is among the 20 young people who have been “selected for a special mission [...] to be part of an elite team, a team of engineers highly trained in locating and eliminating the threat of clandestine enemy explosives” (31). It is within this unit that his and fellow mine sweepers’ vocal chords are severed. This brutal operation is carried out on these young mine diffusers “so that we wouldn’t scare each other with our death screams” when accidentally stepping on a mine (35). Each of the thirty-seven chapters of the novella has a described system of signs the child soldiers in My Luck’s platoon use to express their thoughts. Some of the examples of these signs are: “Silence Is a Steady Hand, Palm Flat,” “Night Is a Palm

⁹ For example, in Chimamanda Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo’s *Roses and Bullets*, two of the numerous novels on the civil war, places and things connected to Nigeria are labelled as “the enemy planes,” “the enemy lines,” “the enemy zone,” and “buying from and trading with the enemy.”

¹⁰ Here I refer to Susanne Gehrmann’s characterization of the testimonial accounts of the protagonist-narrators of child soldier narratives as a form of soliloquy in the essay, “The Child Soldier’s Soliloquy. Voices of a New Archetype in African Writing” (2011).

Pulled Down over the Eyes,” “Listening Is a Hand Cupping an Ear like a Seashell,” “Town Is Hand Making Boxes in the Air,” and “Fingers Pinching a Nose Is a Bad Smell.”

Moreover, the novella deals with My Luck’s search for his military squad, although it is also clear that this will be a fruitless search for this young protagonist is dead. It should be noted that Abani’s novella is unique among the narratives, especially fictions, treating the African child soldier experience. It is the only work whose child protagonist speaks from the dead. Moreover, the novella’s frame of address, which allows the protagonist-narrator to address the reader directly in the second-person speech (“What you hear is not my voice”), is unlike any other narrative in the genre. If Iweala’s novel and memoirs of former child soldiers insist on the possibility of recovering lost childhood innocence, in Abani’s story the recovery of vanished childhood is not an option. It is for this reason that Allison Mackey reads the novella as an example of “an ‘anti-’ or failed coming-of-age story” (111).¹¹ Nonetheless, by travelling through the space of labile memory, My Luck attempts to chronicle his soldiering experience. As it turns out, the search motif becomes a narrative strategy in the novella. It is during this search across war-disfigured terrains that My Luck narrates his experience. Of that journey, which I claim is a narrative strategy for telling the child soldier story, My Luck says, “This trek of mine is getting more and more ridiculous, I think. I am mostly moving from one scene of past trauma to another” (146). The various places My Luck gets to on this journey revives his memory of what has been, what those areas remind him about the war, and his own actions in it. If the war-scarred landscape this protagonist traverses reminds him of things gone by, it also serves to remind the informed reader that they are ensconced in a fictionalized Biafran enclave bordering a

¹¹ Alexandra Schultheis Moore and Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg come to similar conclusion, claiming that the novella is a “*Bildungsroman* that is not one.” See “‘Let Us Begin with a Smaller Gesture’: An Ethos of Human Rights and the Possibilities of Form in Chris Abani’s *Song for Night* and *Becoming Abigail*, 2014, p. 73.

fictive Nigerian border. In other words, phrases such as “federal troops” (23), “US-armed federal troops” (28), “three years of a civil war” (31), “carved wooden guns” (31), “the northern scum we are fighting” (32), “worthless local money” (63), “nighttime markets” (89), “hunger-distended bellies with eyes washed out like the earth here” (90), “Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa” (90), “racist jokes about the enemy” (91), “the Yoruba and Hausa man” (91), “Sabon Gari” (92), “pogroms against the Igbo” (93) “the famous bunker” (118), among many other markers, erode any doubt about the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War being the main materials for the composition of the story of this novella.

More than Iweala’s *Beasts of No Nation*, therefore, Abani’s *Song for Night* tends to be more particular in recreating the specifics of the civil war while reinforcing the image of the child soldier as perpetrator as well as victim of violence in the context of war. Thus, Coundouriotis’s assertion that the novella’s setting “cannot be Biafra” misses the point, even though it is certainly the case that a car like a Lexus was not a reality of 1967 Biafra (195). As I have explained above, there is considerable evidence that Abani intends to make Biafra at the time of the civil war the sociopolitical milieu for his novella. But Hamish Dalley is right: “Having provoked our desire to read his novel as representing the civil war, Abani undercuts this frame by fracturing his temporal setting through repetition and anachronism” (446).¹² This fracturing, nay this supposed inconsistency as Coundouriotis thinks of it, arises not because the writer favours a human rights frame. Daria Tunca is of the view that the novella is not so pale in terms of its geographical or temporal specificities as Coundouriotis claims. The claim of geographical indeterminacy, she argues, is more valid for Iweala’s novel. I came to a similar

¹² Dalley has studied *Song for Night* as a representation of the civil war as a traumatic event. I read the novella as providing a portrait of the child soldier as a perpetrator and victim of war.

conclusion in my analysis of the novel in the previous chapter. Moreover, Tunca sees stylistic values in what Coundouriotis calls inconsistencies in the novella.¹³ And as I have noted earlier above, the child soldier experience, and not so much the specifics of the war, stands out as the centrepiece of the novella.

“I have never killed a man, but /I know how, I know I can”: Analyzing My Luck as a Hybrid Character

The concept of hybridity that I draw on in this chapter in order to read Abani’s child soldier figure to some degree correlates to Homi Bhabha’s idea of the term as a liminal space, “the inter [...] *in-between* space” (38). In the hybrid space, the formation of a new identity created by the interweaving of features of two dissimilar identities is possible. Although the new identity is a product of two distinct forces, it does not exist mainly by their defining attributes. This hybrid space, therefore, as Madelaine Hron explains it, expanding on Bhabha’s idea, is one of “possibility and, most importantly, resistance” (29). More broadly, my usage of hybridity functions to signify an admixture or mingling of two dissimilar tendencies. My appropriation of the concept serves to capture the composition of the child soldier as a conscious agent capable of both benevolent and violent actions. Inherent in the constitution of My Luck’s makeup is a person whose ability to act in noble and violent ways has nothing to do with his biological status. What is encountered in the personhood of My Luck in *Song for Night* is a character with a ruthless capacity for violence as well as an abiding ability for goodness. Within his armed group

¹³ See Tunca’s “Children at War: Language and Representation in Uzodinma Iweala’s *Beasts of No Nation* and Chris Abani’s *Song for Night*” in *Stylistic Approaches to Nigerian Fiction*, edited by Daria Tunca, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 146-74.

My Luck acts in both positive and negative ways to determine the course of events in the same manner that others, especially his superiors, act on him to shape some of his experiences. In this sense, this character resists any categorization that reifies an essentialized understanding of his person as only one thing – a victim.

Although by the time he reaches the age of fifteen he still falls within the category of a “child” in the Western sense, My Luck’s actions and voice as the protagonist-narrator of this story are seldom childlike. Following the observation of his girlfriend, he concedes that “I sound too old for my age” (19). My Luck’s voice is mature, assertive, and confident. It does not allow him to equivocate about his participation in war and the actions undertaken in the process. As his words and actions indicate, My Luck’s character resists pigeonholing as merely an innocent child, a death machine, or a blameless victim of adults’ actions. By its resistance to a unidimensional characterization of the child soldier image, *Song for Night* can be taken as embodying what Hron argues child-focalized works are, namely “resistant space, of complex, on-going negotiation and articulation of difference that is perhaps not as readily accessible in the stable, socially structured world of adults” (30). My Luck’s full measure as a child soldier can be grasped more meaningfully when he is examined as a hybrid being. Accordingly, what Tunca fathoms in the work as the “accumulation of misunderstandings and linguistic ambiguities, to the extent that the text lends itself to two distinct readings: one empathetic with the narrator, the other heavily ironic,” is what I understand instead to be an expression of the hybridity of the protagonist-narrator (153).

Hardly is there anything homogenous or linear in the story world of *Song for Night*. Its diegetic frame has no room for uniformity. The agency My Luck exercises is one which blurs the traditional lines between the child and the adult. My Luck comes from a home that abjures

homogeneity – his father is an Igbo Muslim imam, something uncommon in actuality, and he is one “who it was said betrayed his people by becoming a Muslim cleric and moving to the north to minister” (38). This composite identity of the man, as his son describes him, also makes him “a thing that people who would later become our enemies feared: a hybrid” (93). My Luck’s mother is Christian, and his paternal grandfather is a practitioner of traditional religion. The boy’s spiritual consciousness is of a triangular kind as he does not maintain a singular devotion to any of the three religions in his home. This triangularity of the boy’s religious consciousness underlines his makeup as one who cannot be essentialized. It can also be argued that My Luck as a hybrid child soldier who combines the two dissimilar images of the child and the soldier constitutes a threat to narratives and discourses which insist on the understanding of the child fighter as singularly a victim. Abani’s image of the child soldier invites us to think of the hybrid as a resistor, a threat to misrepresentation and any orthodoxy of purity.

Also, My Luck is not confined by the Biafran borders he defends; he wanders smoothly between areas of Nigerian and the Biafran control. In this regard, this boy soldier’s tendency towards blurring boundaries (conceptually and geographically) reflects one of the core characteristics of children at war. By their nature, as the oxymoronic elements of “child” and “soldier” suggest, child soldiers are transgressors of boundaries. They crisscross borders – whether traditional boundaries between childhood and adulthood or those implied in the contradictory constructs of childhood as innocence and vulnerability and soldiering as experience and ruthless capacity.¹⁴ In peacetime, but more especially in conflict situations, children occupy more than one position at once, “recreating their roles in the face of changing

¹⁴ For more on borders as not non-absolute barriers, see Ulf Hannerz’s “Epilogue: On Some Reports from a Free Space,” in *Globalization and Identity: Dialectics of Flow and Closure*, edited by Birgit Meyer and Peter Geschiere, Blackwell, 1999.

conditions” (De Boeck and Honwana 3). In similar vein, despite its presumptive claim of victimization and relative lack of resources and firepower in its fight against Nigeria, Biafra does not appear any less vicious in its campaign than the Nigerian federal side is in its brutal onslaught against the breakaway region. Thus, “[i]f we are the great innocents in this war,” My Luck asks dispassionately, “then where did we learn all the evil we practice?” (143). Of course, My Luck’s deadpan here can be interpreted either as a provocative interrogation of claims of innocence that the defunct Biafran Republic ascribed to itself in its fight against the federal side,¹⁵ or as a question aimed at that humanitarian discourse which inflexibly constructs a homogenous image of the child soldier as an innocent victim of the adult world. Either way, as its tone implies, the question proves significant in the way it invites us to understand that innocence – whether viewed as moral purity or inexperience – does not presuppose the absence of an inherent capacity for malevolence or malfeasance. As Jo Boyden and Joanna de Berry contend, “vulnerability does not in itself preclude ability” (xvii). And Mark Drumbl offers similar insight into the capacity of circumscribed actors to exercise initiatives: “Oppression, after all, does not axiomatically void the oppressed’s capacity for decision-making” (17).

It is not only in *Song for Night* that Abani privileges the concept of hybridity as a way of making sense of event of mass atrocities. In essays, interviews, and many other literary works such as poems, Abani dwells on the multifacetedness and complexity of the human person and encourages an understanding of the human as a hybrid with no infinite capacity for goodness or evil. Abani’s works stress the point that “inhumane behaviour is an undeniable aspect of

¹⁵ Indeed, it is possible to read My Luck as a symbolic representation of the no-longer-existing Biafran Republic (a child) and the Nigerian federal government as an adult which insists on providing guidance for the childish Biafra it considers as vulnerable, irrational, and immature. In this sense, although Biafra appears as a victim of Nigeria’s awesome power, the young republic is not totally without capacities to cause distress to Nigeria. It is in this light that My Luck’s poignant question becomes relevant.

humanity” (Mackey 109). In a TED Talk entitled “Chris Abani: On Humanity,” Abani reflects on his interest in telling stories about “everyday people.” He explains the elements of such stories: They are stories that “offer transformation, that lean into transcendence, but that are never sentimental, that never look away from the darkest things about us. Because I really believe that we’re never more beautiful than when we’re most ugly. Because that’s really the moment we really know what we’re made of” (2008). In *Song for Night* Abani explores the darkest things about the child soldier without trivializing the abuses he endures or obscuring the capacity of that character for positive actions. In a poem with the title “Histories” published two years after this talk, Abani further explores the idea of human beings as simultaneously capable of virtuous and vicious acts:

Boys are taught to kill early,
Five
when I shot a chick in my first ritual.
Eight
when chickens became easy.
Ten
when I killed a goat. I was made to stare
into that goat’s eyes before pulling
my knife across its throat.
Amen.
I thought it was to teach me the agony
of the kill. Perhaps it was
to inure me to blood.
To think nothing of the jagged resistance of flesh,
to make the smell of rust and metal and shit familiar.
I have never killed a man, but
I know how, I know I can,

I know that if the timing were right I would.
I am afraid that I might not feel sorry.
I am afraid that I will enjoy it. (77)

This poem underscores the thin line between a rite of passage and a ritual killing. More crucially, it bespeaks the multidimensional nature of human beings, which is often more evident in situation of mass violence. Unsentimentally, the speaker recognizes that they are not incapable of something as dastardly as killing a fellow human, or even deriving pleasure from it. In noting that they can kill if the timing “were” auspicious, the speaker also suggests that human beings are purposive beings – varied motivations inform our actions. But the issue of timing as evident in the line “if the timing were right” raises a question: Who or what determines the rightness of time for the act of killing? The presence of the verb “were” rather than “is” in the line suggests an impossible, unreal condition. This unreal condition implies that determining when it is right to kill is far from a straightforward matter. Moreover, in addition to the ambiguity of “timing,” that utterance does not presuppose the innocence of the speaker. Far from bothering about the question of innocence or morality, the speaker is more concerned about underlining their capacity for something dark. In this sense the speaker acknowledges their non-unidimensionality.

In an essay titled “Ethics and Narrative: The Human and Other,” Abani further emphasizes the ambiguous nature of humans and their complicated tendencies. In that essay he shares a personal story revealing the origin of the poem above as lying in his personal experience. Crucial in that article are the questions he raises about the last five lines of the poem and what they may mean: “What does the moment offer? Affirmation of something already suspected? Or something else, the recognition perhaps that we all stand at the edge of the same abyss?” As he explains it, standing in that delicate, slippery position, we come to a recognition of

ourselves as capable of noble and beautiful things as well as ugly and horrible acts. In peering into that self-reflecting gulf, we “face all of our darkness and all of our light simultaneously [...] To stand in that liminal moment when we have no solid ground beneath us, no clear firmament above, when the ambiguity of our nature reveals what we are capable of, on both sides. The intensity of that confrontation is the only gift the writer has to offer, the only redemption that is possible” (“Ethics”).

It is this idea of the human as deeply complex, not fully graspable, and not basically one-dimensional that is evident in the character of My Luck in *Song for Night*. My Luck represents a hybridized child soldier who recognizes themselves not solely as a victim (essentially an extension of others’ dark sides) but also as one who can and indeed does enact violence. In asking the rhetorical question “Who taught me to enjoy killing, a singular joy that is perhaps rivaled only by an orgasm,” My Luck does not invite readerly sympathy. Rather, he craves readerly appreciation of his two-sided personhood – he is a person who shudders at the sight of killing but who paradoxically also enjoys it (143). My Luck describes himself as “some kind of chimera who knows only the dreadful intimacy of killing (143). The equation of the violence of killing with the indescribable pleasure of sexual act in this novella seems to be the staple of the fictional prose in the child soldier genre. Emmanuel Donagala’s eponymous character, *Johnny Mad Dog*, Ahmadou Kourouma’s *Allah Is Not Obligated* boy protagonist, Birahima, and the paedophilic Commandant in Uzodinma Iweala’s *Beasts of No Nation* all freely celebrate and compare the excitement they derive from ruthless killing with feeling of intense pleasure from sex in a manner that autobiographical narratives of child soldiering do not. This difference suggests that fictional stories of child soldiering are more daring and more explicit in their depiction of things than are their nonfictional counterparts.

On many levels in Abani's child soldier narrative paradox predominates, bolstering the notion of the child soldier as a figure of contrast. My Luck informs the reader at the beginning of the novella that he has not spoken for three years because his vocal cords have been surgically severed (19). Despite this privation, the boy still speaks most eloquently about his soldiering experience. The pains and privation that come with the destruction of his voice box inspire him and his fellow mine diffusers to find an alternative means of expressing themselves. This new way of communicating, which My Luck explains is different from "the kind of sign language my deaf cousin studied in a special school before the war," is no less effective because "it serves us well" (20). After all, communication is deemed successful only when the recipient of a message is able to understand it. By creating a character who shares his traumatic experience of war through unconventional language, Abani affirms Leigh Gilmore's view that "trauma mocks language and confronts it with its insufficiency" (6). Moreover, by finding a way to subvert the demand for silence that has been imposed on them, the young soldiers in this narrative reclaim and assert their agency as self-conscious and fully realized human beings. Another paradoxical element in the novella deals with the war that My Luck and others enlist in. This protagonist-narrator observes that "[i]t has been three years of a senseless war, and though the reasons for it are clear, [...] none of us can remember the hate that led us here" (19). The irony of a just cause here transforming into senselessness suggests a profound derailment from the set objectives of the military campaign as such. The difficulty of remembering "the hate that led us here" likewise seems to indicate a blurring of the lines between victims and perpetrators. It suggests the possibility of victims transforming into killers and killers into victims.

Other instances of paradox subsist in the novella. The name "My Luck" may connote something positive, but the life of its bearer represents the opposite, prompting him to ponder if

he should change it to “Unlucky” (42). My Luck loses his parents to the pogrom preceding the war. When the war begins, he enlists on the Biafran side to defend it and avenge his parents’ deaths. While he is pleased to fight, he soon finds out that the logic of war is incomprehensible. In the same vein, My Luck’s fellow mine diffuser and girlfriend, whose name is Ijeoma, meaning “good life,” does not really have a good life as she dies young at fourteen in a manner “that cannot be explained or described,” suggesting the unrepresentability arising from the violence and horror of her death (54). Fearless and intelligent, Ijeoma dies in her prime, presaging the fate of the hurriedly constituted Biafran nation she sacrifices her childhood to defend. Within the limited time she operates as a child soldier, Ijeoma does her best in the fight against the enemy: she holds out against the terror of Major Essien (the commander of her platoon), and succours My Luck emotionally and sexually, ensuring thereby that “among all that horror, there was still love” (86). Nebuchadnezzar, another mine sweeper, is described as a person who “never enjoyed killing,” but he turns out to be the most “ruthless” among his companions, carrying out the “duty” of wet work “methodically and effectively. This kind of dispassion was frightening to us” (130). Michael Wessells clarifies this contradiction in the context of mass atrocities involving young people: “Killing produces a host of emotional and cognitive changes that enable additional killing and blunt potentially inhibiting reactions such as disgust and guilt” (*Child Soldiers* 79). Once Nebuchadnezzar understands killing as a matter of duty, or becomes fully aware of the “kill or be killed” logic of war, he casts off any inhibitions or reservations he may initially have had.

There is also the unstable and unconscionable leader of My Luck’s platoon, Major Essien, nicknamed John Wayne (32). More than anyone in the world of this story, John Wayne boasts about being a civilized man (33). Yet, there is nothing about his prosecution of the war

that comes, in the least, close to any sense of civility (34). He operates in a secluded moral universe where whatever is right is what gratifies his interests (35). He supervises the cutting of the vocal cords of My Luck and others, commits horrendous atrocities until My Luck finds him a burden to the group. In what is a decisive move and exercise of what de Certeau calls a strategic agency, this being the initiative undertaken by individuals who are willing to daringly redirect the course of things, My Luck puts an end to both the life and leadership of a man “who was determined to turn us into animals” (39). My Luck’s decisive action ensures a change of leadership in the armed group with a view to get it back on track and limit the avoidable casualties and self-satisfying distractions that the former commander joyously facilitates.

The buildup to, and more specifically, the circumstance in which My Luck kills John Wayne, “the officer who enlisted and trained us and supervised our throat-cutting and our first three months in the field,” is remarkable for what it reveals about this young fighter as a strategic initiator of actions as well as a victim (39). Shortly after their transfer to Major Essien’s platoon for the special assignment of mine diffusing, My Luck and his peers begin to observe that their leader has motivations that are inconsistent with the objective of winning the war. He issues conflicting, questionable orders and compels obedience to them. He justifies his orders in the following way: “This is from the manual, the same manual that they use in West Point, the same one they use in Sandhurst; the military manual for the rules of engagement – the rules of war, for want of a better phrase. These are rules even you can understand” (33). But that manual, as he would later inform his subordinates, exists only in his head – “that way it can never be lost, nor we. We can never be lost as long as we follow the manual,” he explains (33-4).¹⁶ Evidently, the

¹⁶ The portrayal of Major Essien’s character is both sarcastic and satiric. Abani seems to mock and satirize what some scholars have observed as the inadequacy of training and actual military experience of the commanders who coordinated the defunct Biafra’s field operations. See B.J. Dudley, *Instability and Political Order: Politics and*

manual proves to be ineffectual, for not only does the group break up and its members become maimed and killed, but Major Essien himself until he dies seems more like a military leader who has lost his mind than one completely in control of it. Drawing inspiration perhaps from that inaccessible manual, this commander forces My Luck to rape a woman as old as his mother simply for voyeuristic pleasure (84). “You are the only one who hasn’t raped anyone yet,” Major Essien observes to My Luck. Thereafter he orders the boy to rape the woman or die (85). In this manner and in many other ways, this “lost” military top brass victimizes the young members of his unit (103). It is during his time with this head of the team that the image of My Luck as a victimized child soldier comes into focus. Major Essien’s viciously excessive acts are not directed only at the young members of his platoon, they are also visited on unarmed civilians. My Luck recounts one of such troubling experiences:

I remember. A man John Wayne chased down into a woman’s kitchen, a man unarmed and afraid, and John pulled him out and made him butcher his children in front of us. In that kitchen as though he would make a gory feast of them, as though he was a host and we his invited guests. And as that man chopped with the machete, blood spattering his face, I flinched from the greed in his eyes. The greed for living that made him do that, and then when he was done and panting from the effort, John Wayne put his revolver point blank to the man’s head and blew his brains across the kitchen wall. (141)

This passage underscores John Wayne’s heartlessness. He makes no distinction between enemy combatant and civilians. In this regard he is an actor in what scholars such as Mary Kaldor term “new wars,” a conflict genre typified by African civil wars and other post-Cold War internecine

Crisis in Nigeria (1973), and Daria Tunca’s “Children at War: Language and Representation in Uzodinma Iweala’s *Beasts of No Nation* and Chris Abani’s *Song for Night*” p. 174.

conflicts and also present as the backdrop for Abani's *Song for Night*. Among others, these wars are often said to be unique for their targeting of civilians by means of murder, rape, maiming, and the conspicuous cultivation of torment (Kaldor 2001). Through the actions of Major Essien and indeed the manner in which the novella ends – no one survives and no grand purpose is served by all the death and destruction – the reader is encouraged to draw conclusions about the purposelessness of African war.¹⁷ And it is in this light that the involvement of children in such conflicts (“new wars,” or “small wars,” “low intensity conflicts,” or “asymmetric conflicts” as they are variously described in the literature on conflict)¹⁸ are construed and represented as acts of abuse and victimization in the discursive framings and the imaginative accounts about conflicts in which children are mobilized as soldiers. Major Essien's arbitrary and unjustifiable massacres, like the one in the above excerpt, are one of the ways by which he victimizes his young subordinates. So troubled is My Luck on account of the Major's behaviour that 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” (85). Under this capricious team leader's watch, as My Luck reports it, “[w]e had seen fathers shoot their children on our orders, sons rape their mothers, children forced to hack their parents to death—the worst atrocities—all of which we witnessed impassively” (103).

The identity of “victim” marks only one side of My Luck and his fellow child soldiers in this novella. My Luck as a conscious agent capable of acts of terror emerges more clearly when he kills his commander, Major Essien. On one of their missions, the squad arrive at a church

¹⁷ Robert Kaplan's argument that the prosecution of war cannot be said to be without purpose or function challenges the notion of African wars as meaningless as the proponents of the “new war” theory posit. See Kaplan's “The Coming Anarchy: How Scarcity, Crime, Overpopulation, Tribalism, and Disease Are Rapidly Destroying the Social Fabric of Our Planet” *Atlantic Monthly*, 273(2), 1994, pp. 44–76.

¹⁸ See Sabine Collmer's “Child Soldiers—An Integral Element in New, Irregular Wars?” 2004, p. 2.

where some war-displaced persons are taking refuge. Among these people is Faith, a seven-year-old girl, who Major Essien immediately considers sexually attractive, lecherously remarking that “[t]his one is ripe. I will enjoy her” (41).¹⁹ As he makes this remark, Major Essien sends a facial communication to My Luck, “as though he expected me to challenge him, like I did the first time he had forced me at gunpoint to rape someone” (41). In daring My Luck to challenge him, the boss indicates that he is aware of the inappropriateness of his treatment of the young girl but is indifferent to established codes of conduct. My Luck intervenes on behalf of the group and kills his superior. His action confirms Alcinda Honwana’s claim that child soldiers are not simply “empty vessels into whom violence is poured” (*Child Soldiers* 69). They are also conscious and rational beings who have the capacity to act in ways that either ensure their survival within armed groups or change their groups’ power structures. My Luck assumes Major Essien’s role and provides the group with a leadership that contrasts with what it has endured under their previous leader. When he takes stock of the atrocities he has committed as a soldier, My Luck is careful to note that his killing of Major Essien is not a source of regret: “I was numb to John Wayne’s death. Gladness would come later. For now, all I could think was that the only real casualty was Faith” (41). My Luck expresses similar sentiment regarding Faith on another occasion when he accidentally kills a woman, his first, the youngest wife of “the rebel minister for propaganda” whose “Lexus” Major Essien steals (103). On Major Essien’s orders, My Luck aims for the man but the woman “threw herself in front of” her husband, taking the bullet for him (103). My Luck and other platoon members feel bad about it, but Major Essien remains unperturbed.

¹⁹ This statement is similar to the one Commandant in *Beasts of No Nation* makes when he first sees Agu (5). Like that rebel leader, Major Essien too conceives of his victim as an edible thing to be consumed. He does not see the girl as a human being.

Still in the sense of asserting his identity as a conscious agent, My Luck carves on his right forearm what he calls “my own personal cemetery” (38). The cemetery is composed of crosses that represent “every loved one lost in this war” (38).²⁰ But what is more revealing about that *graveyard* is the other people it contains. As he explains it, “There are six X’s carved there: one for each person that I enjoyed killing. I rub them: my uncle who became my stepfather, the old women I saw eating the baby, and John Wayne” (39). My Luck’s confession here bespeaks his free agency. While it is true that there are occasions when he is forced to act against his will – “We followed orders, did what we were told, even when the training seemed at odds with what we thought soldiers should know (34) –, in this case he identifies himself as a person who *consciously* perpetrates actions that transform the situations he finds himself in. The gorgons he shoots, the ignoble stepfather, and the commander whom he kills all affirm his deliberate agency. My Luck does not prevaricate about his ruthlessness as a soldier; he recognizes it and claims it as acts affirming his consciousness as a social agent capable of transformational initiatives. In his offensive against the enemies they fight, the boy soldier enjoys the feeling that comes with deciding their fate through the wave of the knife and barrel of the gun. He reports himself thinking thusly: “I like to pretend that I do it [the final check to make sure the dead are really dead] to ease the suffering of the mutilated but still undead foes, that my bullet to their brain or knife across their throat is mercy; but the truth is, deep down somewhere I enjoyed it, revel in it almost” (22). What Abani’s child soldier here admits about himself, namely that he is a mindful originator of actions in a violent military space, highlights one of the conclusions that Honwana

²⁰ The representative tattoos on My Luck’s forearm are analogous to the funeral orations that Birahima in Kourouma’s novel gives in memory of fellow child soldiers lost to the carnage of war. Because these fallen fighters are easily expendable and not expected to be mourned, the actions of My Luck and Birahima signify defiance and a conscious exercise of agency. These two child soldiers’ respective actions also amount to celebrations of the humanity of their departed colleagues. I discuss Birahima’s funeral orations and their significances in the next chapter.

draws in her ethnographic research on child soldiers. According to Honwana, some child soldiers “undoubtedly found a thrill in killing, in wielding weapons and exercising life-and-death power over others more powerless than themselves” (*Child Soldiers* 71). Whether against the weak or the powerful, My Luck’s character challenges any easy description of his kind of person as being straightforwardly an innocent victim. Abani’s story makes clear the point that, “[a]lthough these boy soldiers cannot be considered fully responsible for their actions, they cannot be seen as entirely deprived of agency either” (*Child Soldiers* Honwana 69). To recognize the hybridity of the child soldier is to acknowledge their oppression as well as their transformative ability.

It should be noted that My Luck’s move against his “lost” boss becomes possible because of the accumulated experiences of pains the man has caused him and others in the squadron. In addition to forcing him to rape and undertake questionable missions, Major Essien is the one who also authorizes, as well as supervises, the harrowing surgical operation that robs his crew members of their voices. This is how My Luck describes the experience: “One by one we were led into surgery. It was exciting to think that we were becoming bionic men. I thought it odd that there was no anesthetic when I was laid out on a table, my arms and legs tied down with rough hemp. John Wayne [Major Essien] was standing by my head, opposite the doctor. I stared at the peculiar cruel glint of the scalpel while the doctor, with a gentle and swift cut, severed my vocal chords” (35). This passage paints a picture of gruelling pain and in this way underscores the victimization of the child soldiers. But rather than this painful experience constituting a weakness making it impossible for the child soldiers to undertake bad actions, it ironically becomes a source of inspiration for exactly these actions. My Luck explains that the silencing meant to be achieved by cutting the child soldiers’ larynxes is not achievable because “[w]hat they couldn’t know was that in the silence of our heads, the screams of those dying around us

were louder than if they still had their voices” (35). And silence, Honwana argues, “is an act of conscious agency” (*Child Soldiers* 80). One of the “screaming,” telling effects of that metaphoric voice that My Luck has is evident in Major Essien’s painful state of silence. My Luck chooses to kill the person who seeks to silence him, in essence reversing the process.

Brad Weiss’s idea of pain as a social mode of consciousness is relevant in making sense of My Luck’s action here. Weiss construes pain, especially those that social misery, subjugating policies, and dysfunctional polities eventuate, as somehow empowering. Pain, he asserts, is not the absence of “assertive capacity,” neither is it “weakness *per se*.” It is “being-in-the-world,” recognizing one’s situation and doing something about it: “As pain is an attribute of the person that bespeaks one’s subjugation – without which one would not be in pain – pain can become a means of access to the source of that subjugation. In other words, the pain that a subject endures makes them *available* to some subjugating force, and may, therefore, provide a means of dealing with – if not overcoming – that force” (105, 111-12; emphasis in original). The agency inspired by pain is revolutionary, disruptive, destructive, and liberating – for the person exercising it is one who works against the grains of an established order. My Luck translates his pain into action. He embraces this power as a means of ridding himself and his group of an oppressive commander and asserts his personhood as a conscious social actor.

My Luck’s predisposition to kill and commit other destructive acts coexists with his inclination towards empathy. In him is that hybrid construct of a desensitized murderer and a genuinely sympathetic victim. In two other separate self-appraisals of his conduct, this picture of My Luck as a hybrid figure becomes more apparent. He states: “I enjoyed it [killing], revel in it almost. Not without cause of course: they did kill my mother in front of me, but still, it is for me, not her, this feeling, these acts [...] I have killed many people during the last three years. Half of

those were innocent, half of those were unarmed – and some of those killings have been a pleasure” (22 and 79). Like the speaker in the poem examined earlier in this chapter, My Luck does not deny his dark side. He acknowledges his victimhood but does not use it to explain away his actions. In this manner My Luck proves to be different from other child soldiers such as Agu in Iweala’s *Beasts of No Nation*. As I have shown in my analysis of him as a character consistent with the ideas inherent in human rights and humanitarian discourses on child soldiers, Agu’s account of his atrocities always points responsibility towards people like Commandant. He wants his readers to understand that he is a victim who in the narrative present is incapable of any of the things he has done within the armed group he was part of as a soldier in the past. In contrast, My Luck’s account of atrocity perpetration is neither sentimental nor does it undercut his agency. As his words above show, My Luck may have witnessed his mother’s murder and the loss of his father to the carnage that precedes the war, but his actions cannot be justified on the grounds of revenge. He resists a limited understanding of his identity as a victim. In this wise the novella challenges the prescriptive notions of childhood and child soldiering available in the humanitarian discourse about war and children.

By not explaining away his atrocities, My Luck proves to be unlike the child soldier depicted in Emmanuel Jal’s memoir, *War Child: A Boy Soldier’s Story*. Like Abani’s character, Jal too witnesses the death of his family members before his father enlists him in the Sudanese People’s Liberation Army during the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983-2005). But despite his deliberate actions as a child soldier operating within the SPLA, Jal constructs in his narrative an image of himself as principally a victim. He insists on his innocence even though any claim he might have to such a designation is questionable given his experience of horrific events both before and during his time in the SPLA. Jal’s memoir reveals a child whose innocence is already

being eroded by the corrosive emotion of hate and violence he witnesses before becoming a soldier. Of this experience and destructive emotion, Jal says: [T]he day an Arab raised his hand to my mother was the day that set me on a path to hatred. I was too young to give the feeling a name, but each time I thought of what the man and his kind had done, I felt my stomach and my heart beat faster” (6). The incident Jal recalls in this passage happens when he goes on a trip in a truck with his family. On the truck is a group of three Arab men who do not conceal their irritation at having to travel with Jal’s family. As Jal remembers it, “[t]he man looked at me angrily whenever my eyes met his, and his friends spoke softly to each other as they stared at us” (4). Soon, the Arabs rob the family of their food and begin to eat it. Jal’s uncle asks them to return the food, but the Arabs respond by rushing at him with blows flying into “his face and body as Mama tried to pull him away” (5). For intervening, Jal’s mother receives a heavy punch to her mouth. Jal tries to fight back but is overpowered by one of the Arabs who throttles him.

The violence and injustice experienced by the young Jal make any claim to his later innocence indefensible. As proof I offer Jal’s own reflection on the truck episode: “Looking back, I can see that the seed of hate was sown inside me that day. Until then I hadn’t understood what was happening around me – why the people called Arabs seemed to hate people like my family, *why they were richer than us*,²¹ why police beat men and women on the street” (8; my emphasis). What Jal comes to understand – through experience and not through oral or written accounts – concerns the racist treatment people like him and his family receive from the ruling Arabs. This understanding marks part of Jal’s loss of innocence, at least if we conceive of

²¹ Here Jal refers to the legacy of British colonialism in Sudan. For clearer understanding of this history, see A. G. Ahmed and E. S. El Hadi’s “When Political Parties Fail: Sudan’s Democratic Conundrum” in *African Political Parties: Evolution, Institutionalisation and Governance*, edited by M. A. M. Salih, Pluto Press, 2003, pp. 94-114; and A. G. Ahmed’s “Multiple Complexity and Prospects for Reconciliation and Unity: The Sudan Conundrum” in *Roots of African Conflicts: The Causes and Costs*, edited by Alfred Nhema and Paul Tiyaambe Zeleza, Ohio UP, 2008, pp. 71-87.

innocence as being the price experience pays to the world. David Mastey validates this view of innocence: “Innocence is traditionally regarded as the absence of certain adult knowledge and inability to comprehend their meaning” (“Relative Innocence” 357-8). The hate Jal mentions, and it is a term used frequently in the memoir, situates him in adult space because from the truck episode onward his consuming passion becomes to fight and kill Arabs. Speaking about his time at the SPLA training camp at Pinyudu, Ethiopia, Jal says: “Slowly I forgot everything except my hatred for the Arabs. Night after night I’d listen to tales of mothers being raped, sisters taken, and villages destroyed, feeling my anger harden even more inside me. I felt like a spear twisting in my chest whenever I thought of the *jallabas* [the Arab fighters]” (63). Throughout his stay at this camp, Jal is daily overcome with the desire to kill Arabs. Thus, when he first comes in contact with a boy of his own age who is an SPLA soldier “wearing a khaki uniform and boots with an AK-47 hanging over his low side,” the question Jal asks him is: ““Have you killed any Arabs?”” (64). Jal’s direct and indirect experiences of prewar atrocities nurture in him the propensity for violence and a willingness to associate with any group that will aid him in satisfying his overwhelming desire to kill.

When the call comes from the recruiting commander for volunteers to join the dreaded Red Army (a corps of child soldiers within the SPLA more popularly known as “*jenajesh*”²²), Jal does not hesitate to indicate his readiness. He recollects that moment thus:

My heart hammered as I listened [to the call], my throat felt dry, and my head hurt. I stared at the Red Army. They looked so proud and tall. They would fight like men [...] Time stood still for a second. I felt dizzy and breathless. Noise exploded all around me as I punched my hand into the

²² See P. W. Singer’s *Children at War*, pp. 24-5. More information on this intragroup formation is also on pages 62-5 of Jal’s memoir.

air. [...] Excitement flooded through me as my body shook. At last I was going to leave Pinyudu, at last I was going to fight to get back home, at last I would be able to do to the jallabas what had been done to me and my family. (76)

From this passage, it is evident that Jal sees the SPLA as the right means for him to slake his thirst for vengeance. The group offers him the possibility of realizing the Fanonian dream of the native employing the instrument of violence to check the violence of the colonizer.²³ It is this desire, more than the words of the recruiting commander, that informs Jal's choice to volunteer in the Red Army. Although it can be reasoned that his voluntary decision is nevertheless not absolutely free from the group's manipulation, it is not a contradiction to posit that the choice to become a child soldier is largely Jal's. To argue otherwise would seem to construe his prewar realities as inconsequential to his subsequent development. Jal is not oblivious of the reason for his decision. His story affirms the position that most children who volunteer with or are conscripted into armed groups are not the irrational, passive, innocent persons that Western human rights and humanitarian organizations assume all child soldiers to be.

Whereas most children who become child soldiers undergo indoctrination and are even drugged (as some fictional and nonfictional child soldier narratives reveal) in order to suppress their reluctance to kill, Jal is neither drugged nor does he witness any horrific killing inside the SPLA that might desensitize him to killing. The drug that works for Jal is *hate*. His indoctrination comes in the form of the trainer's reiteration of what the Arabs represent (74-5). Hate and the traumatizing scenes of death, pain, violence, and injustices Jal witnesses in Sudan already deaden his conscience and divest him of his childhood innocence. Once he is done with

²³ See the chapter titled "On Violence" in Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, translated by Richard Philcox, 2004, pp. 40-1.

the required training he says, “the child inside me hardened into a soldier” (87). Considering his state of mind prior to being trained as a *jesh a mer*, it is safe to conclude that the child in Jal has already begun its transformation into adulthood prior to the commencement of training. After training, the SPLA still does not deploy him to the front. Jal finds this delay unbearable. In response, he plots with another boy soldier to steal a food seller’s money and use it to pay for transportation to another camp at Itang in order to join a different wing of the SPLA, one much more directly involved in battling Arabs (107-8). As Jal puts it, “I wasn’t running away from war. I was running towards it” (108). Jal’s desire to engage in combat underscores the sense in Wessells’s position that “[c]hildren’s agency is a double-edged sword, though, as some children deliberately seek combat and find meaning through wielding the power of the gun” (*Child Soldiers* 74). After one of the commanders from the SPLA base near the refugee camp at Pinyudu moves Jal away from Itang, the boy still schemes his way through to “the front of the frontline” to be able to kill Arab fighters (155). Clearly, for a spirited young fighter like Jal who undoubtedly demonstrates his initiative in violent military confrontations, decking him in the ill-fitting apparel of an innocent victim would obscure key aspects of his identity and capacity to act.

However, it is in a claim of innocence and victimhood that Jal structures his soldiering experience around. Despite Jal’s clear demonstration that he knows and has a degree of control over what he is doing, he insists in his memoir that he must be seen primarily as a victim. The implication of this disposition is that he kiboshes the idea of what it means to be a fighter, in his case one convinced of the legitimacy of his cause. Sukanya Podder makes a valid point in her examination of children’s agency in relation to violence: “Characterizing atrocities committed by children as merely a product of coercion or manipulation weakens the argument in favour of

children's agency and ability to act in crises, both positively and negatively" (200). Narratives like Jal's, which prioritize victimhood in their representation of children's capacities at war, hardly prove enlightening and useful in understanding the roles and feelings of child soldiers. Such narratives tend to be written to meet an expected market and readerly expectations, especially given their joint production "with" Euro-American journalists and editors.²⁴ Jal's story, despite some of the challenges critics like Mackey claim it poses to rights discourse generally, still largely rejects any idea of the moral and psychological complexity of the child soldier, preferring instead the softer landing humanitarian discourse provides for former child soldiers claiming childhood innocence. This claim of innocence appeals to Jal: "I feel 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" (266). Jal's preference to be seen as a victim means that he holds Arabs and the Sudanese state responsible for the killings and atrocities he perpetrates during the war.

While I do not wish to overstress the relation between Jal's account and Abani's in *Song for Night*, I wish again to make the point that characters within child soldier autobiographical accounts are typically represented as innocent, which sits well with humanitarian ideology concerning children and conflict. But it is in fictional narratives such as Ahmadou Kourouma's and Abani's that the child soldier's hybridization as a victim and a deliberate producer of violence is acknowledged. And such fictions, Mastey insists, are more directly critical of young

²⁴ Among the seven memoirs already published by former African child soldiers, only two of them, Ishmael Beah's and China Keitetsi's are without co-authors. For more insights into the productions of child soldier stories published in what Allison Mackey describes as taking place "within the geographical and intellectual space of the global north," see Maureen Moynagh's "Human Rights, Child-Soldier Narratives, and the Problem of Form," 2011; and Kaelyn Kaoma's "Child Soldier Memoirs and the 'Classic' Slave narrative: Tracing the Origin," 2018.

soldiers than is standardly the case with non-fictional narratives. (“Child Soldier Narratives and the Humanitarian Industry,” 85).

In her examination of the roles of the first-person narrator in African literature, Mineke Schipper notes that “[f]irst person narrators take different positions with regards to the narrated event: first, they can tell a story in which they are or have been the hero/heroine; second, they can tell a story in which they mainly figure as observers; or third, they can tell a story which has been transmitted to them by someone else” (348). The first-person narrator of Abani’s *Song for Night* does more than what Mineke Schipper observes here. While My Luck narrates a story in which he is the principal character, his account of his military activity does not present him as a hero. To the degree that the story is about My Luck, he is its protagonist. For some of the actions he takes, he may even be deemed heroic. But when considering the entire gamut of his experiences as a child soldier, he cannot be considered a hero in any serious sense of the term.²⁵ As I have argued in this chapter, this child soldier makes sense only when he is understood in a hybridized way, as at once embodying great virtue and great viciousness. He is, after all, a victim and a perpetrator of atrocities. For this reason, Myriam Denov cautions against investing the child soldier with a heroic, celebrity status.²⁶ My Luck is not merely an observer; he is an agent, and he shapes the events around him much as the world shapes him. And the story he tells is not one transmitted or handed down to him. He speaks of himself and his role in the theatre of conflict, including how he exercises power over others and how some people exercise power over him. He speaks expressly of his trauma, the agony of war, and the pleasure he derives from asserting himself. His actions and words emphasize that childhood is not a state of disability and

²⁵ Certainly, the child soldier fate is a tragic one. Perhaps a different study may be required to examine My Luck, indeed child soldier characters, as a tragic hero.

²⁶ See Myriam Denov’s *Child Soldiers: Sierra Leone’s Revolutionary United Front*, 2010, pp. 9-10.

inertia. In the manner that he speaks of his war experience and his role in it, My Luck refuses to accept the prevailing understanding of children at war, or indeed of childhood, as characterized by innocence and vulnerability, and so non-culpability for their actions.

In *Song for Night* the idea of “loss,” which in the discourse on child soldier and other imaginative accounts is associated with children at war, is contested as applicable solely to young people caught in the vortex of military violence. My Luck and his fellow platoon mates may have lost their voices and their lives to the war they fight in, but they are not the only ones who suffer loss. The adult members with whom they prosecute the war are also depicted, especially in their management of the conflict, as lost. In this case Major Essien comes up as a fitting symbolic representation of those adults. In My Luck’s recollection of his group’s mission that leads to the accidental shooting of the minister of propaganda’s wife, he observes that everyone in the troop, despite having witnessed and caused many deaths, feel discomfort with this particular death. But not Major Essien: “We all cried when that woman died, except John Wayne, *who was well lost*,” adding that although their crying had nothing dramatic in it, it is “just silent tears and a shame that kept us from meeting each other’s eyes” (103, my emphasis). The description of the major as a thoroughly lost – inhuman and irrational – man suggests that the virulent effects of war are not things that only those categorized as children experience. Adults too are subject to the loss that war indiscriminately exacts. War is a dangerous disorder and those involved in it are scarcely spared of its contaminating effects (*Child Soldiers* Honwana 105). Similarly, the search motif which functions as a canvas on which My Luck narrates his soldiering experience is largely for a lost platoon and not the supposedly lost childhood that is foregrounded in other child soldier stories. Abani’s novella tends to underline the search for lost childhood as unrealistic.

Abani's *Song for Night* makes clear the point that the child soldier, considered as a hybrid, liminal figure, is anything but a simple character. As Honwana argues, liminal figures are not only ambiguous but dangerous and unstable. They elude easy categorization, are ungraspable, and hard to assign to one identity category (*Child Soldiers* 114). This is how Abani's novella represents child soldiers. The work invites readers to appreciate the complexity of the human person, an intricacy that becomes even more impregnable in the context of atrocities such as the one young combatants are involved in. The child soldier's complexity additionally derives from the fact that most such combatants start out as victims but somewhere in-between their enlistment and their exit from armed groups (either through demobilization or death), they assume other identities, and do some terrible things.

Chapter Three

Prewar Maladies and the Agency of the Child Soldier in *Allah Is Not Obligated*

In the preceding two chapters of this study I have examined how Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* and Chris Abani's *Song for Night* respectively depict child soldiers. While I argue that the dominant image of the child soldier in Iweala's novel is consistent with the one found in human rights and humanitarian discourses on children mobilized as soldiers, in my reading of Abani's novella I conclude that the work portrays the child soldier as a hybrid figure who cannot be understood mainly as a victim of violence, but as well as an effective agent. I build more on this image in this present chapter. In this chapter I analyze Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah Is Not Obligated*, which I interpret as a child soldier narrative that undoes the romanticized images of the child and child soldiers found in other accounts of child soldiering such as Iweala's. My main argument in this chapter is that Kourouma's novel provides a more nuanced image of the child soldier, one that offers insight into the consciousness of the child soldier set against the backdrop of the prevailing socioeconomic and political conditions that make child soldiering inevitable. I argue that the novel – through a searing satire directed at discourses and varied individuals and organizations concerned with children at war – dismantles both the notions of the child and childhood innocence that undergird representations of the child soldier in other such narratives. Kourouma represents child soldiers not merely as dependent, vulnerable beings, but as possessing some degrees of independence, maturity, and capacity for undertaking responsibilities that are usually associated with adults. My reading of the novel shows how the narrative discourages viewing child soldiers chiefly as innocent victims; depicts child soldiers as beings possessing meaningful forms of power and autonomy, and so agency; and portrays the futility of both the recovery of childhood innocence and attempts at rehabilitation in situations in

which the conditions requiring child soldiering remain unchanged. Where Isaac Ndlovu logically interprets the cyclical nature of the plot, which begins and ends with the same words, as “indicative of the disrupted physical growth and stunted psychological development of its narrator” (75), I go further to read the undifferentiation of the beginning and ending of the novel as the novelist’s satirical tactic, a mockery of the futile efforts towards the rehabilitation of demobilized child soldiers into unlivable societies whose worsening socioeconomic conditions and political instability made child soldiering possible in the first place.

Allah Is Not Obligated (*Allah* hereafter) is among the fictional child soldier stories in the African child soldier canon that have received a considerable critical response. So too are some of Kourouma’s imaginative works critically well-regarded, be they plays or novels. In their French and English versions,¹ this Ivorian novelist and playwright’s works have formed the subject of more than a handful of critical studies. Indeed, while Kourouma may have written a novel which fictionalizes the ethnopolitical conflicts in some African countries in which children have been instrumentalized as soldiers, as is the case with some authors of African provenance like Uzodinma Iweala and Chris Abani whose works are examined in this study, he does not belong among the category of *new African writers*. As Akin Adesokan argues, Kourouma, whose death occurred in 2003, was a leading figure of modern African literature whose early works – particularly his 1968 novel, *The Suns of Independence* – rank alongside the works of notable African writers like Chinua Achebe, Ousmane Sembene, Ayi Kwei Armah, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o “among the most critical accounts of the [mis]management of independence by African political elites” (11). This observation becomes important because, quite strangely, “popular

¹ Akin Adesokan is of the view that the translation of Kourouma’s works from French into English “has to be understood as part of the serviceability of certain kinds of postcolonial African narrative,” among which are those of the African child soldier genre for their foregrounding of the triad subjects of human rights, humanitarianism, and trauma (See “New African Writing and the Question of Audience,” 2012).

reception of [*Allah*] does not reflect much of that history” (Adesokan 11). In *Allah*, the issues of elite predatoriness and weak state structures which form part of Kourouma’s oeuvre are present, thus suggesting that for far too long most polities in Africa have remained the proverbial swivel chair which rotates while fixed on the same spot. And in those states, as the novel illustrates with the case of Liberia and Sierra Leone, the more things appear to change the more they fixedly remain the same.

As noted in the foregoing paragraph, Kourouma’s *Allah* has enjoyed remarkable critical success, especially since the publication of its English translation. The novel has been read from different analytical standpoints, most of which largely stress how unusual its impious child protagonist-narrator is, relatively to many of his fictive equals. Richard Priebe (2005) in his focus on the prevalence of violence in African novels seeks to establish a “rhetoric of motives” for the commonplace representations of violence in African literature (48). For *Allah*, he suggests that Kourouma uses a child narrator as a way of enabling his readers to make sense of the horror of violent conflict. Mainly, Priebe’s focus on the novel is how its child protagonist serves as a channel for the representation of violence. Whereas Eleni Coundouriotis (2010) celebrates *Allah* – in addition to Emmanuel Dongala’s *Johnny Mad Dog* – as a novel which eschews the human rights frame informing other child soldier narratives like Beah’s *A Long Way Gone* and Iweala’s *Beasts*, John Kearney’s (2010) critique of the novel underlines the historical and sociological contexts inspiring the portrayal of the child soldier as well as the phenomenon of child soldiering. In Kearney’s view, the narrative’s attentiveness to historical and sociological situations interferes with the child perspective which it privileges (76-7). On the surface, this position appears tenable, but a deeper appreciation of Kourouma’s satiric strategy yields a contrary view. Kearney’s silence on whether the generous inclusion of the factual events

concerning Liberia and Sierra Leone effects the artistic merit of the novel or renders its fictive universe less convincing encourages the kind of analysis that I undertake in this chapter.

Like Coundouriotis, Adesokan concludes that the novel is different from others in the genre in the way it depicts postcolonial unrest in Africa and represents child soldiers in a manner that both incorporates and revises the features of the *Bildungsroman*, which John Walsh argues in his own discussion of the novel is deformed.² Walsh analyzes *Allah* as an atypical coming-of-age narrative. He concludes that its prideful protagonist, Birahima, is “a study of arrested development” (191), but not of “arrested historicization” as Coundouriotis asserts in the case of other child soldier narratives which she claims disavow historical contexts as they “produce a metaphor of African childhood that is politically limiting as a characterization of the historical agency of the continent’s peoples” (192). In her reading of the novel, Maureen Moynagh (2011) highlights the status of the child protagonist as a perpetrator of violence who is morally incapacitated. In Vivan Steemers’s treatment of *Allah* (2012), attention is given to the implications of the linguistic features of the novel as a work of translation. Ndlovu’s (2014) engagement with the work, alongside Uwem Akpan’s collection of short stories, *Say You’re One of Them*, underscores the privileging of a child’s voice in the narration of traumatic violence and alarming victimization. Reading comparatively with other child soldier stories, David Mastey (2017) examines how *Allah* depicts the idea of childhood, arguing that while some child soldier stories privilege Western conventional ideas of childhood and sensationalize the figure of the child soldier in a way that reinforces extant, negative understandings about the supposedly “dark continent,” others like Kourouma’s vividly make the point that idealized notions of childhood are

² Isaac Ndlovu makes a similar argument. Ndlovu considers the portrayal of Birahima as a decisive satirical subversion of the idea of *Bildung*, the educative formation of personality. See “Satire, Children, and Traumatic Violence: The Case of Ahmadou Kourouma and Uwem Akpan,” in *Tradition and Change in Contemporary West and East African Fiction*, edited by Ogaga Okuyade, 2014, p. 75.

untenable in the situation of child soldiering (46). In addition to their intense respective focus on the child protagonist, these critiques have other things in common – other than Walsh's, they all feature *Allah* in conjunction with other child soldier stories for their comparative analyses. Thus, in varied insightful ways, these critics provide illuminating interpretations of Kourouma's *Allah*, affirming it to be a child soldier narrative with peculiar differences relative to others in the genre.

However, little or no attention in these studies is given to the prewar maladies that constitute the experiences of not only the novel's child participant-narrator but those of other fellow child soldiers he operates with from one war terrain to another. While I will draw from these works to complement my interpretive engagement with the novel, I differ from them in my focus on the novel's point about how prewar experiences of children who become soldiers are vital for making sense of their deprived childhood innocence and development of the agency they exercise outside and within soldiership contexts. This position also challenges the humanitarian groups' rhetoric which enjoins us to see war as the main robber of childhood innocence. In my view, the novel dramatizes the point that involvement in warfare is not the place where the loss of childhood typically occurs for most child soldiers. Instead, the novel propagates the idea that the military environment is more responsible for completing the transformation process following childhood loss that nasty prewar realities already activate in the-would-be child soldier. Or, as David Rosen makes clear in his focus on the child soldiers of Sierra Leone, "the biggest thefts [of childhood] took place during peacetime" (*Armies of the Young* 62). In mapping the factors that make children become soldiers, Kourouma's novel encourages us to understand that rehabilitation becomes impossible where prewar conditions remain untransformed.

It is in this regard that the significance of African child soldier narratives such as Kourouma's to the creation of rehabilitation programs for *children associated with armed forces*³ or armed groups and those affected by war becomes evident. My point here is that a multidimensional understanding of child soldiering is crucial for the initiation of viable and relevant rehabilitation programs and functional child protection ideas. This position is valid in view of Mark Drumbl's observation that child psychology and trauma studies, as well as reports of transnational NGOs and UN agencies, have been heavily instrumental in shaping the policies, laws, and programs that have been emplaced to curb child soldiering and rehabilitate demobilized child soldiers while other disciplines and their literatures have not resonated with what he calls the international legal imagination – the constellation of actors at the international level enacting laws, designing policies, and executing programs dealing with children and war. As he submits, “the international legal imagination holds contributions from these fields at arm's length. Thus, these contributions remain untapped” (11).⁴ Where prewar situations are unchanged, conflicts⁵ will thrive on a repeated cycle and children will not be immune to them. As Scott Gates and Simon Reich have suggested, conflicts are likely to break out from time to time in a “post-peaceaccord”⁶ society because failure “to attend to the problems that lead to the onset of civil war in the first place sows the seeds of future war” (“Introduction” 10). And those

³ Being the phrase favoured in the 2007 Paris Principles to describe those that the 1997 Cape Town Principles describe as child soldiers. See “The Paris Principles: Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups,” February 2007, <https://www.unicef.org/mali/media/1561/file/ParisPrinciples.pdf> (Accessed October 26, 2020).

⁴ Susan Shepler makes the same case, saying “[a]n ethnographic approach to understanding children's actual lived experience can contribute to more effective policy and programming that help to support the ‘best interest of the child.’” See *Childhood Deployed: Remaking Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone*, 2014, p. 164.

⁵ Although “post-conflict” societies may not have violence directly taking place in them, conflicts in such societies may continue in less obvious ways. Robert Mac Ginty's distinction between “direct” and “indirect” violence makes sense here. See Mac Ginty's *No War, No Peace: The Rejuvenation of Stalled Peace Processes and Peace Accords*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

⁶ The idea of “post-peaceaccord” instead of “post-conflict” to describe societies which have witnessed conflicts is John Darby's. See *The Effects of Violence on Peace Processes*, USIP, 2001.

problems that eventuate in ethnopolitical violence in which children feature in developing countries, as Jason Hart has relevantly argued, transcend local or national boundaries. For Hart, the roles of powerful governments in the developed world and the monetary policies and developmental programs International Financial Institutions (IFI) design for most poor countries, especially in Africa, cannot be overlooked when examining the material and political conditions that cause war (“Mobilization” 69). By ignoring “the ways in which western governments contribute to the material and political conditions in which children engage in armed conflict the efficacy of any intended remedies is likely to prove slight and short-term” (Hart 69).⁷ Liberia and Sierra Leone are some of those countries whose realities affirm Hart’s claim.

Originally published in French but translated into English by Fran Wynne in 2006, Kourouma’s *Allah* uses a child protagonist focalizer, which as Priebe argues is useful for depicting horrific violence of war in an African setting (48). The story is narrated by an impish, self-identified “little nigger” character by the name Birahima. This former “proper street kid that sleeps with the goats, and nicks stuff to eat from fields and concessions” (20) and who in an opportune moment becomes a “small-soldier” is of an indeterminate age: “I’m maybe ten, maybe twelve (two years ago, grandmother said I was eight, maman said I was ten)” (3). This inconsistency of birth record may also be read as projecting the unreliability of Birahima as a participant-narrator, for this foul-mouthed character is in certain respects a master of doublespeak and one who sometimes appears confused. Although his claim that he is fearless is true, the idea that he is a “blameless boy” is by all indications an attempt at self-ridicule as well as mockery of the conception of child soldiers who have committed serious offences as faultless,

⁷ For accounts of how foreign departments of Western nations and other interest groups supported warlords in Liberia and other African countries, see David Keen’s *The Economic Function of Violence in Civil Wars*, Oxford, 1998; and William Reno’s “The Business of War in Liberia” in *Current History*, 1996, pp. 211-15.

passive victims (30). *Allah* is basically the story of Birahima's two-year chequered experience and active participation as a soldier in the war-ravaged countries of Liberia and Sierra Leone. Birahima joins one of the armed groups operating in Liberia after the group at a roadblock halts and impounds the vehicle he is travelling in so as to get to the town where his aunt resides. He embarks on this journey to his aunt's after the painful demise of his mother from cancer, a disease she battles and which her mother encourages her to accept fatalistically as the will of Allah, who if he ordains "that you be miserable here on earth, it is because he has reserved some greater happiness for you in paradise" (10). It is here that the satiric and humorous elements that form the narrative strategies of the novel begin to emerge. Birahima's grandmother's fatalistic aphorisms are laughable and represent the weak attitude and escapist ratiocination of the populace in the world of this story with regard to the punishing reign of the parasitic political class whose idea of governance is self-enrichment in a manner that makes them unaccountable to their people.

In Mawuloe Koffi Kodah's reading, the title of the novel "is evocative of Kourouma's aversion for irrational religious practices and the ungodly exploitation of the vulnerability of the poor and needy in the human society" (200). In this novel, neither Christianity, Islam, nor African traditional religion is free of barbed censures as tools that are used to deceive people and put to the service of war. Cast as a rude and snooty child, Kourouma's child narrator speaks without any inhibitions against anything in "this bloody world," especially the conflict-suffused parts of it (118).⁸ The ruling elites in the story are like Allah, who Birahima sardonically describes as unquestionable – "Allah up in heaven can do whatever he likes; he doesn't have to

⁸ In an interview Kourouma reflects on the import of Birahima's oft-repeated phrasal declamation, "Allah is not obliged." See "Those who see it as a pessimistic conception of Africa are mistaken": Interview of Héric Libong with Ahmadou Kourouma" (<http://africultures.com/ceux-qui-vont-y-voir-une-conception-pessimiste-de-lafrique-se-trompent-1558/> Accessed October 20, 2020).

be fair about what he does here on earth” (21). Throughout the novel Birahima laughs at the ideas of religious fatalism; warlords and warlordism; humanitarianism and those who claim commitment to its execution; self-centred rulership masquerading as one committed to the greater good of the mass of the people, among many other national and transnational ills which (in)directly engendered child soldiering.

The novel is structured as the testimony of a witness of and participant in the traumatic affairs of mass violence. Birahima documents the atrocities of the wars he witnesses and participates in. As he tells readers at the beginning and at the end of the story, he decides to tell his story at the behest of his doctor cousin (214-5). This cousin is not a humanitarian, and his encouragement to his cousin to testify lacks a therapeutic function in the sense that demobilized child soldiers undergoing rehabilitation experience it. Birahima is neither effectively demobilized, nor is it clear from his account – assuming he is no longer a fighter – that he will not end up in another armed group. Birahima tells the reader that for some time he does not accord any seriousness to his cousin’s bidding to testify. However, his disinterest gives way to a passion for sharing his experience of war on a particular day when he is flipping through the four French dictionaries – “Namely, the *Larousse* and the *Petit Robert*, the *Glossary of French Lexical Particularities in Black Africa* and *Harrap’s*” – that are bequeathed to him (3 and 214). These materials boost Birahima’s language capacity and aid him in explaining “stuff because I want all sorts of different people to read my bullshit: colonial *toubabs*, Black Nigger African Natives and anyone that can understand French” (3). These resources are also important because they enable him to “write down” the nitty-gritty of his “adventures [from] A to Z” (214). In seeking to tell his story to an audience, who critics such as Moygnagh, Adesokan, and Coundouriotis have separately argued comprise (human rights) readers in the West, Birahima in

this respect is not different from his contemporaries in the genre. He also mounts the rostrum to bear witness to the atrocities of war. But he differs from those peers, especially Agu in *Beasts*, in the manner and tone in which he tells his story. Whereas his counterparts in other narratives render their accounts orally, Birahima captures his soldiering experience in writing.

Unlike Agu and My Luck, Birahima is not interested in being seen as a faultless victim of the adult world, his laughable description of himself as blameless notwithstanding. Birahima is one of two child soldiers in the African child soldier genre (the other being Dongala's titular character, Johnny Mad Dog) whose characterizations are so repulsive that they repel readerly sympathy. Yet, as some scholars have argued, these characters seem to stand out as paradigmatic examples of successful child soldier representations because of the absence of claims to lost childhood, or else efforts made in their fictions towards recovering lost childhoods (Coundouriotis 203; Kaoma 28). Conceiving of his soldiering exploits as adventures, Birahima resists any attention that may inscribe him as a victim. This "proper" street kid-turned child soldier audaciously claims responsibility for his terrible activities: "I killed lots of innocent victims over in Liberia and Sierra Leone where I was a child doing tribal warfare, and where I got fucked-up on lots of hard drugs. The *gnamas* of the innocent people I killed are stalking me, so my whole life and everything round me is fucked. *Gnamokode!*" (4). It should be noted that *gnamas* (evil spirits)⁹ are not invoked in a religious sense to explain away his agency. Rather, evil spirits, which I interpret metaphorically, are the traumatizing torments that result from the boy's perpetration of acts of brutality. The sense in this interpretation becomes clearer from Birahima's statement, in which he says "I'm cursed because I did bad things [...] I'm not some

⁹ Using one of his dictionaries, the *Glossary*, Birahima explains *gnama* as "the shadow of a person that remains after death. The shadow becomes an immanent malevolent force which stalks anyone who has killed an innocent victim" (4).

cute kid on account of how I'm hunted by the *gnamas* of lots of people (4). Birahima's use of language also attests to his corrupt state of mind, as well as his ability to initiate certain decisions. Three clusters of profanities predominate his act of witnessing throughout the narrative. Describing himself as "disrespectful" and "rude as a goat's beard," Birahima explains the three forms of swear words that he uses time and again in his story as follows: "I use Malinke swear words like *faforo!* (my father's cock – or your father's or somebody's father's), *gnamokode!* (bastard), *walahe!* (I swear by Allah). Malinke is the name of the tribe I belong to. They're Black Nigger African Savages [...]" (2-3). The boy's choice of words indicates something disturbing about his state of mind. While some scholars have interpreted Birahima as a victim of war, I argue he and his fellow child soldiers featured in this novel have got many things wrong in and with them prior to their enlistment in military activities. The experiences and actions Birahima regards as his "fucked life" imbricate his prewar and wartime realities and, more crucially, it includes the political and the social factors that make child soldiering possible in the civil wars of the "corrupt fucked-up banana republics" such as Liberia and Sierra Leone which constitute the larger settings of the novel (3).

"Corrupt Fucked-Up Banana Republics": Trajectories of Conflict in Liberia and Sierra Leone

Kourouma's *Allah* creates a believable universe of conflict that resonates strongly with the postcolonial realities of the two countries of Liberia and Sierra Leone that it fictionalises. In addition to the rich deposits of gold, diamond, iron ore, bauxite, rutile, chromites, platinum,

timber, rubber, and coffee for which they are known,¹⁰ these two West African countries are also infamous for their protracted ethnopolitical conflicts in which thousands of young people featured as soldiers.¹¹ In those wars, government and rebel forces freely outdid each other in the recruitment of children into their separate armies.¹² And for most of the children in these countries their prewar maladies were hardly distinguishable from those of wartime, while for some others the violent military ecosphere had more meaning than their prewar civilian space, prompting those children, Rosen argues, to find being under arms as “both safer and more economically secure than remaining in the unarmed, vulnerable, and economically ruined civilian sector” (*Armies of the Young* 85). To Walsh, “[t]he child-soldier is a product of the near absolute lawlessness of Liberia and Sierra Leone and a sign of the instability of the nation-state in West Africa” (192). Rosen comes to a similar conclusion when he contends that Sierra Leone became “the poster-child case of the modern child-soldier crisis” not only because of the country’s “particular history and culture but because the problem of child soldiers grew out of the breakdown and criminalization of the Sierra Leone state” (*Armies of the Young* 2). If, to follow both Walsh and Rosen’s line of thought, the child soldier is a consequence of political structures and governance practices of postcolonial nation-states, it makes sense to examine the politics and the socioeconomic structures in Liberia and Sierra Leone. In other words, it seems reasonable to ask: What intersections link the pre- and post-independence political structures and socioeconomic conditions in these two countries, as well as the conflicts which resulted later in

¹⁰ See Alfred Zack-Williams’s *Tributors, Supporters, and Merchant Capital: Mining and Underdevelopment in Sierra Leone*, Avebury, 1995; and Tunde Zack-Williams’s “Preface” in *When the State Fails: Studies on Intervention in the Sierra Leone Civil War*, edited by Tunde Zack-Williams, Pluto Press, 2012, pp. ix-xi.

¹¹ Vera Achvarina and Simon Reich provide in their research on child soldiers in twelve African conflicts rich statistics on the number of children involved. See “No Place to Hide: Refugees, Displaced Persons, and Child Soldier Recruits” (2010).

¹² See Tunde Zack-Williams’s “Multilateral Intervention in Sierra Leone’s Civil War: Some Structural Explanations” in *When the State Fails: Studies on Intervention in the Sierra Leone Civil War*, edited by Tunde Zack-Williams, 2012, pp. 13-30; Rachel Brett and Margaret McCallin, *Children: The Invisible Soldiers*, 1998, p. 222.

which children played prominent roles? As Gates and Reich argue, conflicts involving children tend to form “a template through which the conjunction of sociological, economic, and political influences can be studied” (“Introduction” 9). Thus, in this section of this chapter, I dig into the historical records of the two countries to establish a context for my analysis of Kourouma’s fictionalization of the two formerly war-torn states and the involvement of children in their wars, a conflict which in the case of Sierra Leone Yusuf Bangura makes a valid point when he argues that the war “does not have only one logic,” contrary to the monocausal thesis some scholars have advanced (133).¹³

Scholars such as Ibrahim Abdullah, Lansana Gberie, Rosen, Myriam Denov, Susan Shepler, Zack-Williams, Mas Utas, Krijn Peters and Paul Richards, Sukanya Podder, among other researchers from varied disciplines, have written about the mobilization of children and youths in the respective ethnopolitical conflicts of Liberia and Sierra Leone. The work of these scholars provides rich insights into the supposedly everyday lives of young people in those countries during supposed peacetime all through to the wartime and post-peaceaccord periods. There is a consensus in their shared conclusion that the Liberian war contributed a great deal to Sierra Leone’s conflict (Zack Williams, “Multilateral Intervention” 13; Gberie 2). Most of these scholars are also unanimous in underscoring the facts of alienation, abjection, deprivation, exploitation, dehumanization, and lack of opportunities as hallmarking the lives of the peoples – especially the young – of those two countries before their full descent into war.¹⁴ These social constraints, prior to and leading to the war periods, negatively rubbed-off on the young peoples

¹³ Among those scholars who have advanced a unitary-cause argument for the conflicts in countries like Sierra Leone is Paul Collier. See *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries Are Failing and What Can Be Done About It*, OUP, 2007.

¹⁴ Johan Galtung’s Structural Theory of Conflict comes to mind here (See *Theories of Conflict: Definitions, Dimensions, Negations, and Formations*, 1958).

of those West African countries and obstructed their efforts to attain and maintain positive conditions of life. As Peters and Richards argue in their work on Sierra Leone, peacetime in the country was so meaningless for most young people that when the war broke out, paradoxically, they found in it sources of meaning and purpose that were otherwise elusive to them in prewar times. Peters and Richards submit thus: “Set against a background of destroyed families and failed educational systems, militia activity offers young people a chance to make their way in the world” (184). This view is supported by Jimmy Kande, who argues that “[b]ad governance and mass deprivation were the underlying causes of armed conflict in Sierra Leone” (106). Comparably, in the case of Liberia Utas concludes that peacetime for most young Liberians “was more challenging and dangerous situation than the war itself, due to a tremendous increase in hardship; in other words, ‘war is peace’” (“Fluid Research Field” 212).

Founded in 1822 as a colony for returning manumitted slaves from the Americas, Liberia became an independent country in 1847 (the oldest republic in Africa) through the assistance of a US-based group known as the American Colonization Society.¹⁵ Once independence was attained, the new settlers, and later their descendants, held the levers of power and operated as though the land was without indigenous inhabitants who also mattered in the organization of the new polity. Liberian society was split between the politically and economically dominant Americo-Liberian elites and the mass of the country’s indigenous population made up of 16 different ethnic groups – the Bassa, Dei, Gbandi, Gio, Glebo, Gola, Kissi, Kpelle, Krahn, Kru, Kuwaa, Loma, Mano, Mandingo, Mende, and Via (Ademola Adeleke 572; Morten Boas 75). As different accounts show, no sooner had Liberia become independent than it began to be clear that

¹⁵ In *The Mask of Anarchy: The Destruction of Liberia and the Religious Dimension of an African Civil War* (1999), Stephen Ellis states that the United States of America has been largely involved in the politics and economy of Liberia since its establishment.

it was a polity forged in the smithy of inequality, division, discrimination, alienation, injustice, and ethnic discontent (Kenneth Cain 26; Podder, 186; Morton Boas 73-5). The ruling Americo-Liberian elites – constituting only two per cent of the entire population – created and sustained identitarian politics and classism which ensured that only they and their kind enjoyed the country’s resources. While the material and social conditions of the Americo-Liberian rulers were pleasant and positive, those of the indigenous ethnic formations in the country were consistently precarious and punishing. The existence of the dissimilar structures of opportunities, access to wealth, and inaccessibility to economic prosperity meant that the Liberian polity would be more unstable and conflict-prone. In other words, the seeds of conflict that would make Liberia ceaselessly volatile were sown right from the time of its creation as an independent state formed in the crucible of ethnic politics (Morton Boas 76). Inescapably, Ademola Adeleke argues, in Liberia “ethnicity became the *only* index of group identification and social mobility, and the dominant ethic in the nation’s collective consciousness, thereby setting the stage for political conflict” (italics as in the main text, 572).

In examining the Liberian political “disorder” and the mobilization of children as soldiers, Podder observes that the first Liberian major conflict (civil war) could be traced to “the rise of an Americo-Liberian elite that strengthened an oligarchy and related discrimination in public life” (185-6). In Boas’s view, Liberia from the time of its creation “was *de facto* an apartheid state, but since a black rather than a white elite ruled Liberia, this was not a major concern for the international community” (74). To maintain their vice grip on the country, the ruling elites “exploited the country’s ethnic configuration through a measured and uneven distribution of economic and social rewards, and through political coercion based on a strategy of recruiting troops from one ethnic group for deployment against others. These policies, which

were in place for over a century, not only kept the mass of the inhabitants in adverse poverty” but ensured that the fragmentation of the country along ethnic identities intensified and even got worse with successive regimes, from whites to blacks, all through to the civil war times (Adeleke 572).

Liberia’s fourteen-year ethnopolitical war occupies a prominent place in the “new war” literature. For proponents of that theory, the Liberian war was one of the definitive examples of hostilities which were plainly barbaric in targeting unarmed civilians. While it is true that the various rebel factions and breakaway groups¹⁶ that were active during the first and second Liberian civil wars “terrorised, looted and committed gruesome atrocities against the entire civilian populace (Utas “Fluid Research Filed” 212 and 215), Boas makes a convincing argument that we should take cognizance of the history of the country and not focus solely on material explanations such as greed in any attempt at understanding the conflict. Boas submits that “the spectre of war is nothing new in Liberia; [...] Liberia has been at ‘war’ with itself from the beginning of its existence as an independent state. This is first and foremost a ‘war’ over the questions of what it means to be a Liberian, and how the polity of the country should be constituted” (74). A look at the history of the country, especially the way in which it was organized at independence, is crucial if we are to avoid a narrow understanding of what informed its civil wars. The exclusionary governance rationality instituted by the country’s elites caused more tension and conflict than peace and justice. Minding this crucial historical reality of the Liberian state helps us to understand why its wars have so-far proven inexorable, why locating these wars within the “new war” discourse is indefensible, and why young people became

¹⁶ Podder reports that eight different factions of armed groups operated actively during the first civil war, 1989-1996, and all of them effectively used children as soldiers – see “Surviving Disorder: Children, Violence, and War Stories in Liberia” (2017).

consequential players in them. In his research on children's and youths' involvement in the Liberian conflict, Utas makes the following important point:

For many, the situation was so hopeless that when the civil war intensified in 1989 the war became an opportunity to obtain what many youth had failed to access through their initial migration from countryside to city or plantation. Economic prosperity and the sensation of power and respect were immediate and most welcome for a newly initiated member of a rebel army, with the AK 47 becoming the equivalent of a credit card – as it once again connected young men to the dreams of the modern world of goods and money. (“Sweet Battlefields” 117)

Together with the various warlords, most of the young people who joined the war were not keen on working for a new Liberian state. Rather they were content to establish themselves as new wielders of political power doing exactly what the self-serving Americo-Liberian political actors had done – divide and profit at the expense of any kind of broader society.

Moreover, throughout Liberia's civil wars, the fissiparous tendencies that defined the prewar state manifested among non-state actors whose enunciated rationale for armed warfare was rescue of the state from a divisive and parasitic Americo-Liberian political class. Liberia became more fragmented, and the specter of state failure gained more ground, after twenty-eight-year-old Sergeant-Major Samuel Doe took the reins of power in a violent coup that upstaged the elitist Americo-Liberian ruling class. Once in power, Doe and his People's Redemption Council (PRC), as the new regime christened itself, easily appropriated the exclusionary structures and governance logic of the ousted rulers (Boas 79). Commander Doe, as he styled himself, favoured his Krahn ethnic group, appointing members to choice positions such as within the security agencies, which soon bared their ruthless fangs against members of other ethnic formations, as

well as critics of the military government (Cain 268). “Master-Sergeant Samuel Doe,” as Adeleke explains, “made himself the ‘hero’ of *only* his own ethnic group by replacing the Americo-Liberians who had occupied the commanding heights of Liberia’s political economy with Krahn elites” (italics as used in the main text, 573). Doe’s cronies dominated the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL), “which became the instrument of the Head of State’s programme to consolidate his hold on power” (Adeleke 573). Through the AFL, Doe neutralized many coup attempts, one of which involved the killing of Captain Thomas Qwiwonkpa. The captain’s death sparked anger among the Gio and Mano in Nimba, from whence the dead man hailed.

An uprising against Doe ensued. That insurrection was championed by Charles McArthur Taylor and Prince Yormie Johnson, both men of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL). The NPFL had massive support and a following comprised of members of other aggrieved ethnic groups, and most especially from the broad mass of young, socially alienated, unemployed Liberians. In other words, although the ethnic groups that united against Doe’s dictatorship were not without animosity towards one another, “the Krahn had been transformed by Doe into an instrument - and, indeed, the symbol - of oppression, which meant that those who endured brutal assaults sympathized with the key objective of the anti-Doe movement even if there was as yet no practical means to accomplish it” (Adeleke 574). However, the NPFL splintered, causing Taylor and Johnson to separate and head different rebel groups fronting as political parties. Johnson’s bloc became known as Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (INPFL) while Taylor retained the headship of the NPFL. Although both groups crossed swords on many occasions, they jointly defeated the Doe-led PRC, taking control of the capital city of Monrovia (Utas, “Fluid Research Fields” 212). With Doe’s displacement and death, there appeared to be some momentary quiet on the Liberian theatre of carnage. The Nigerian-led Economic

Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), a West African multilateral armed force established by the Economic Community of West African States, was in place working with an assortment of anti-Doe band of rebels to stabilize the country even though it was without clear humanitarian goals.¹⁷

The peace deals struck by the heads of the West African states who contributed to the formation of ECOMOG, notwithstanding, the violence that upstaged Doe provoked more violence and the flourishing of what William Reno has described as “the deregulation of factional politics” (107). In the process, Johnson’s INPFL was disbanded and in its place many more factional rebel groups emerged. Within five years (1990-1995) fourteen transient peace accords were signed and neither of these pacts, nor any of the five peace agreements realized before the 1997 presidential election, proved effective (Podder 186). The main actors signed the deals but did not see them as consequential. Because nothing significant was done to redress the structures of inequality and estranging ethnic-based politics that formed the governance logic of the country’s founders, the Liberia that Taylor assumed its leadership after he won the 1997 presidential election proved even more ethnically divided and dangerous to live in. During the war Taylor’s NPFL was notorious for using young boys – those abducted and those who joined out of their own volition – called “the Small Boys Unit” (James Pugel 164; Vera Achvarina and Simon Reich 66). With the Small Boys Unit, Taylor unleashed terrible violence against Liberians and the neighbouring country of Sierra Leone. His rule further worsened the human condition in Liberia, exacerbated the ethnic contradictions, and encouraged the emergence of more rebel

¹⁷ See Human Rights Watch’s “Liberia” in *Human Rights Watch World Report 1995*.

movements such as the brutal but ironically named Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD).¹⁸

That Liberia under Taylor (as with many other postcolonial African countries) convulsed in a cauldron of ethnic violence is not hard to understand if we acknowledge that the idea of nation-building along the same colonial thinking of exclusion does more to stir hostility than support any harmonious coexistence. Mahmood Mamdani, in his book *Neither Settler Nor Native*, wherein he examines political modernity – colonial and postcolonial – and the roots of extreme violence that is the lot of most postcolonial states in Africa and elsewhere, makes a notable argument about why violence remains a defining feature of postcolonial states in which political identities determine who benefits from the state and who is sidelined by it. As Mamdani argues, “nation-building violence tends to be cyclical. Those excluded by new boundaries of nationhood [and those marginalized in the allocation of state resources] turn to a new round of violence in order to establish a national political community in which they are included, necessarily excluding others. And then the cycle restarts” (15). In such polities, those who assume power by displacing others who they suspect to be oriented towards their ethnic brethren do not themselves walk a different path when it comes to the country. Their allegiance is always towards those they identify as belonging to their political community. The Liberian case, as well as the Sierra Leonean condition I examine below, illustrates this point clearly. Ethnic politics as an element of nation-building means that the disaffected will not be at peace and when, by whatever pathway, they gain the controls of political power they will in turn reinvent the wheels of marginalization, privileging their own ethnic nations.

¹⁸ See William Reno’s *Warlord politics and African States*, 1999, pp. 91-107.

In appropriating the violence of the colonial founders¹⁹ of the country, successive Liberian rulers further privileged practices that were inimical to peace and good condition of life for the general populace. Thus, when the necropolitics – politics of life and death or “the power and capacity to dictate who is able to live and who must die” (Achille Mbembe 66) – as practised in the country inevitably spiralled into war, the army of impoverished youths and neglected children heeded the call to arms. To then conclude, as is strongly asserted in humanitarian discourse on children and conflicts, that the youth and children who embraced warfare in Liberia and other African countries with similar history of precarious conditions were simply passive victims of their commanders suggests either a narrow understanding of the history of those countries, or a complete disregard of the political and socioeconomic realities of the children. In the case of Liberia, Utas maintains that the perilous situations that had disincentivized living for families made soldiering appealing to the young. Utas contends that “[e]ven if forced conscription took place in Liberia most young combatants joined out of ‘free’ will [...] Parents sent their children off to fight in a righteous war. But young people also saw it as a youth revolution, a chance to get rid of an elitist urban leadership of autocrats that showed little concern for the young of Liberia” (“Fluid Research Fields” 214). In such a country, as *Allah* indicates, mainly ending war and designing demobilization and rehabilitation plans for the young fighters without the construction of a “polity based on the principle of inclusion instead of exclusion” only makes for the repeat of war (Boas 74). The repeated return of Liberia to war for fourteen years despite the many attempts at peacebuilding and enforcement bears out this stance.

¹⁹ Boas makes an important point about the American freed slaves who established the Republic of Liberia. Although Boas refers to them as strangers since they were new to the place, his analysis of the nature of polity the ex-slaves created in Liberia implies that they were colonialists. See “The Liberian Civil War: New War/Old War?” 2005, p. 76.

Sierra Leone State, War and Child Soldiers

The case of the Sierra Leonean state was not so different from Liberia's. Like Liberia, Sierra Leone too was formed as a fragile country whose larger populace bore the brunt of elite misrule, narrow vision, and the ethnicization of politics. Before it finally yielded to the disruptive cyclone of ethnopolitical conflict between 1991 and 2001, successive ruling elites initiated and executed policies which debased the humanity of their beleaguered people within the thirty years of the country's existence after independence in 1961.²⁰ In those years of acute misgovernance and sustenance of primitive pillages of state resources, peace and security for most Sierra Leoneans had the feel of terror and war. To quote Rosen, in Sierra Leone, "the violence of peace spawns the violence of war [...] Warfare was a cruel extension of prewar conflicts in which children and youth were already integrated into an exploitative and violent political system largely ignored by the world" (*Armies of the Young* 58 and 90). Formerly described as the "Athens of West Africa,"²¹ Sierra Leone was organized as a state by and for a coterie of elites in cruel marginalization of most of the populace (Zack-Williams 16).

The violence of peacetime did much to rob most Sierra Leonean children of their childhood. The case of Sierra Leone contests humanitarian groups' generalized, if not simplistic, claim that loss of childhood occurs in the context of armed conflict. Most of the hundreds of thousands of children who made it into armed groups in the country were already in different ways bearing the pains and scars of deprived childhood. The politics of death to which they had been accultured was itself a kind of war whose consequences were tellingly intolerable. It is in

²⁰ See Aning Kwesi and Angela McIntyre's "From Youth Rebellion to Child Abduction: The Anatomy of Recruitment in Sierra Leone" in *Invisible Stakeholders: Children and War in Africa*, edited by Angela McIntyre, Institute for Security Studies, 2005, pp. 67-86.

²¹ For clarification of this phrase as it applies to Sierra Leone, see Rosen's *Armies of the Young*, p. 65.

this regard that one makes sense of Susan Shepler's argument in her book, *Childhood Deployed: Remaking Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone*, that there is "no such thing as *the* war" when speaking about the Sierra Leonean condition (italics as used in the main text, xii). Shepler's rationale for reaching such conclusion inheres in the fact that war is not a one-sided occurrence that plays out solely in an unusual situation of physical violence. Rather, war as a "total phenomenon" can manifest in other forms including in language and symbol, socioeconomic situation, and in day-to-day experience. For most Sierra Leonean children and youths therefore, war was already a part of their everyday experience before the country's civil war erupted. This reality also explains why, for many Sierra Leoneans, the idea of child soldiers diverged sharply from the notion of lost and violated childhood innocence emphasized in humanitarian discourse. The nature of postcolonial politics prior to the outbreak of war meant that children and youths in Sierra Leone were never the politically unaware minds that they are categorized as in Western understandings of childhood. In their work, Krijn Peters and Paul Richards, posit that the children involved in soldiering during the Sierra Leonean civil war should be understood as "rational human actors" with "surprisingly mature understanding of their predicament" (183, 186). However inconspicuous it may be, Sierra Leonean children and youths featured as actors in the political development of the country. Speaking of the logic and nature of politics in Sierra Leone before its brewing war became full blown, Rosen makes the following crucial point:

The seeds of civil war were sown in the prewar peacetime politics that mobilized large numbers of children and youth in the years following Sierra Leone's independence in 1961 and turned them into political thugs. Youth violence was encoded into the normative structure of everyday political competition in Sierra Leone. Its Legitimization opened the door to unrestrained bloodshed. (59)

The prevailing political practices, skewed mostly towards the wellbeing of the political class, encouraged the instrumentalization of children and youth as agents of political violence and military offensives against those the state labelled opposition forces.

As Boas submits regarding the Liberian polity, an understanding of why the Sierra Leonean state was largely unstable, precarious, and fragile must be traced to the premodern, as well as the colonial,²² history of the country, a history that Rosen, referencing Rosaline Shaw, claims was “dominated by the terrors of the Atlantic slave trade” (63). The terrible foundation of violence, mistreatment, and subordination the Atlantic slave trade established also shaped the predatory and neopatrimonial political processes that defined postcolonial Sierra Leone.²³ The repugnant trade in human bodies was not an activity that only outsiders undertook in the West African space involving Sierra Leone. The business also involved indigenes, who waylaid their fellow men and abducted them to be processed for the infamous journey of no return. This trade caused disruption, terror, and dislocation across Sierra Leone, creating a society in which “terror had become a taken for granted aspect of the environment in which people’s lives unfolded” (Rosen 63; Rosaline Shaw 41). By the time Britain officially banned the slave trade in Sierra Leone in 1929, the negatives of that commerce – violence, exploitation, kidnapping, and killing – had “[become] inscribed into the cultural patterns and practices of life” in the country (Rosen 63). Rather than deploy state resources to improve the material and living conditions of their people, the ruling class embraced a system that enabled them to exploit their people, favoured

²² The political science scholar, Jimmy Kandeh, holds that the anti-democratic stance of postcolonial Sierra Leonean state institutions, especially its army, “derives from [their] colonial inheritance and [their] intense politicization since independence” (“Intervention and Peacebuilding in Sierra Leone: A Critical Perspective,” 101). See also Roger Tangri’s “Conflict and Violence in Contemporary Sierra Leone Chiefdoms,” *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 1976, pp. 311-21); Rosen’s *Armies of the Young*, p. 67; and Mamdani’s *Neither Settler Nor Native*, 10-11.

²³ Kwesi and McIntyre, “From Youth Rebellion to Child Abduction: The Anatomy of Recruitment in Sierra Leone” p. 68.

wanton corruption and patronage politics, and used violence as an organizing principle of their unproductive statecraft.²⁴

The abundant resource of diamonds became one of the notable sources of conflict as state and non-state actors fought bitterly to control them as a means of personal wealth generation and for lubricating the wheels of their politics of patronage. As Peter Singer observes, in that country, “the key matter in their ten-year war was not over who was in place in the capitol, but who had control over the country’s diamond fields” (“The Enablers of War”103). After the six year-reign of the Sierra Leone People’s Party, which took over the governance of the country from the British colonialists, the All People’s Congress (APC) came into power. Its leader, Siaka Stevens, ruled the country for 17 years while the party was in power for a total of 24 years.²⁵ Under Steven’s watch, Sierra Leone became a one-party state and was caught in the sandstorm of corruption and insecurity and violence. Strongmen rule, or what Utas calls “bigmanity,”²⁶ found a fertile soil in the APC-led regime and the already weakened state institutions were subordinated to the whims and fancies of Stevens and his cronies. Aning and McIntyre sum up the state of Sierra Leone under Steven’s watch:

The deliberate concentration of power in the hands of a few people in the capital had many implications. Access to resources became virtually impossible for non-APC members, and membership of the APC became a necessary condition for access to jobs and state resources. Local government institutions were weakened, thereby hindering the development of participation at the grass-roots level. The needs of the provincial and rural areas were either marginally attended to or neglected

²⁴ Ibid., 68.

²⁵ Ibid., 68-9; Rosen, *Armies of the Young*, 76-7; Reno, *Warlords Politics*, 114-6.

²⁶ See *African Conflicts and Informal Power: Big Men and Networks*, Zed Books, 2012, pp. 1-34; and Rosen’s *Armies of the Young*, 77.

outright. This created a feeling of deprivation and alienation among rural residents. (68)

That state of affairs routed Sierra Leone through the failed-state lane where anyone (warlord) who could command any following constituted their own ragtag army and sought control of diamond fields. Consequently, when the crisis of state gave way to war, there was no shortage of children and youths to prosecute it with all the political thuggery skills they had acquired during the turbulent years of peacetime. After all, “early on in his presidency, Stevens and the APC leadership realized that children and youth could play a major role in maintaining political control and violence” (Rosen, *Armies of the Young* 77). Local and national elites and international financial institutions competed to create the conditions that made the years before the civil war traumatic for Sierra Leoneans. Kandeh’s conclusion in this regard further validates this assertion: “The domestic political class and the IMF were the two primary producers of human misery in Sierra Leone prior to the war” (112).²⁷

Based on the foregoing backdrop, it is safe to say that the miserable socioeconomic and political conditions of the Sierra Leonean people provided the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) a justifiable cause. When this group, which started out as a pro-people movement but later transformed into their worst nightmare, called for an uprising against the undemocratic government of the APC, many Sierra Leoneans heeded its call (Shepler 11; Denov 60; Rosen 83). Most of those were children (street kids) and youths in higher institutions. Dyan Mazurana et al report that about 80 per cent (30 per cent of which were girls) of RUF fighters comprised children between the ages of 7 and 14 (107). Under its leader, Foday Sankoh, a former Sierra

²⁷ In *Child Soldiers: Sierra Leone’s Revolutionary United Front* (2010), Denov comes to a similar conclusion, saying “children’s complex journeys in and out of violence do not exist in a vacuum, but are intimately connected to broader worldwide structures and actions” (204).

Leonean army corporal with links to Taylor's NPFL in Liberia, the RUF freely operated as a terror group, senselessly killing, looting, raping, and hijacking diamond mines. The RUF was responsible for the notorious amputations of arms and wrists, otherwise known as "long sleeves and short sleeves respectively, to deter the populace from participating in what it saw as a sham civic exercise."²⁸ It must be noted that the violence RUF unleashed was not so unlike what existed prior to the wartime, or even further back in time to the times of slavery and the colonial period. In other words, "[v]irtually all the atrocities visited on the people of Sierra Leone during the civil war (save the amputation of limbs) was part of the peacetime repertoire of political violence [...]. Marauding bands of youth first learned in peacetime that they could kill and maim civilians with impunity and that the 'rule of law' was a club for bludgeoning political enemies" (Rosen, *Army of the Young* 79). Although not all the young people who joined RUF did so voluntarily (Peters 30), those who made themselves available for the service of RUF cannot be simply described as victimized or abused. Most Sierra Leonean young people were not only living in dire socioeconomic situations before the war, but they were also acculturated into state-sponsored violence which, as I contend, already stripped them of their childhood.

In Sierra Leone, as well as Liberia, humanitarian and human rights perspective that children are directly targeted as the strategy of war does not apply.²⁹ Focusing on the age and characteristics of children, these organizations see child soldiers essentially as victims of

²⁸ Mariatu Kamara (with Susan McClelland) in her memoir, *The Bite of the Mango* (2008), shares her experience of the violence of RUF-engineered amputations in Sierra Leone. While Mariatu's memoir is vital in documenting a personal experience of violence, its claims about children's involvement in armed violence as the site where loss of childhood innocence took place ignores the country's history of political violence and economic impoverishment which devalued lives and impeded access to the attainment of the basic necessities of life.

²⁹ In addition to the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers and other humanitarian organizations focused on children at war and those affected by warfare, Graca Machel's *The Impact of War on Children* (2001) and Romeo Dallaire's *They Fight Like Soldiers, They Die Like Children: The Global Quest to Eradicate the Use of Child Soldiers* (2010) emphasize this view.

despotic systems and ruthless guerrilla commanders. But such positions undercut the agency of those combatants. Neither the helpless-victim label, nor the passive-nonagent descriptor fits the young Sierra Leoneans who had endured the harshness of social exclusion.³⁰ Here, Mark Drumbl's question is apt: "If some children join armed forces or group for social, economic, or political reasons, does treating them as passive or incompetent address their grievances?" (3). The response to this question in imaginative works on child soldiers such as Kourouma's *Allah* indicates that the privileging of rights and the platitude of innocent victims distract attention from the agency of child soldiers in the same way that it misrepresents what makes children's military mobilization thinkable and possible. Ignoring the history of political violence in both Sierra Leone and Liberia as is the position of humanitarian and human rights groups³¹ makes claims about victimization of children at war seem justifiable. Additionally, while there is no doubt that children generally are physically vulnerable, this overused explanation for making sense of their involvement in warfare in Africa misses the point.³² For various reasons, ranging from economics, vengeance, (ironically) search for freedom, and to quest for criminal enterprise, children and youths featured largely in the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Indeed, no one "single common social denominator or personal motive links all the children who were in combat" (Rosen, *Armies of the Young*, 61). Regardless of how those youths and children who joined child soldiering in Sierra are viewed, what cannot be denied is that in both their attitude to state dysfunction and identification with armed groups as soldiers, they exercised agency. As

³⁰ For the various categories of children and youths who joined the Revolutionary United Front's movement, see Ibrahim Abdullah et al.'s "Lumpen Youth Culture and Political Violence: Sierra Leoneans Debate the RUF and the Civil War" in *Africa Development*, Vol. 22, No. 3/4, 1997, pp. 171-215.

³¹ Mamdani, *Neither Settler Nor Native*, 21.

³² Here I refer to the congruent position of Human Rights Watch (<https://www.hrw.org/legacy/campaigns/crp/index.htm> 2019) and Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers (<https://www.child-soldiers.org> 2019), in which children's vulnerability and pliability is referenced as the reason for their use in war.

Krijn Peters argues, youths and children's expressions of agential capacities "clearly played a critical role in the Sierra Leone conflict" (30-31).

Among the stories in the African child soldier literary canon, Kourouma's *Allah* stands out as sensitive to the historical realities underlining the involvement of children in conflicts as soldiers in those two countries. The novel also portrays child soldiers as political agents who not only have some grasp of the postcolonial condition, but they are also aware of what makes military activities inexorable. In addition to its lengthy but humorous recreation of the Liberian wars, in fifteen unbroken pages (157-72), the protagonist-narrator of the novel, Birahima, recounts the stormy history of Sierra Leone. Moreover, from chapters two to four of the novel – more than 100 pages – Kourouma generously recreates the history of Liberia, capturing the major epochal moments from the supposed peacetime to the periods of the civil war. He represents the roles that child soldiers play in the conflicts involving different rebel factions. What is remarkable about Kourouma's use of historical materials is the satiric and humorous manner his child protagonist presents them. Needless to add, that Birahima references the histories of Sierra Leone and Liberia must not be mistaken for his vast knowledge of history as a child. To read it as if the author is trying to make the point that children are as politically informed and knowledgeable as some adults is to ignore the fact that the novel is intended for adult audience and the historical materials therein are contexts to aid an appreciable understanding of the story. Contrary to Kearney's conclusion that these historical contexts interfere with the story, I argue that the novel maintains fidelity to historical contexts without sacrificing artistic quality. In this regard, it confirms Coundouriotis's view that issues about "history and agency do not have to preclude" artistic depictions of war (195). Moreover, in *Allah*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's assertion that literary works are not derived from nothingness, but

that they are given impetus and shaped by the realities in society (xv), is evident. In the harrowing socioeconomic realities and political violence of Liberia and Sierra Leone, Kourouma finds useful inspiration that enables him to create a compellingly imaginative child soldier universe.

Undone by Prewar Peacetime: The Child Soldiers in Kourouma's *Allah*

As I have argued in my analysis of Iweala's *Beasts*, one of the features of the typical formulaic structure of most of the stories in the African child soldier genre involves the depiction of the protagonist's life prior to participation in warfare. The narrative significance of that depiction is to show an idyllic childhood which war would later steal and ruin. Such portrayal, I argue, is consistent with the position advanced in humanitarian discourse, which carpets war as the main destroyer of childhood goodness. However, in Kourouma's *Allah*, there is a subversion of that representation and structure, and by extension a critique of the humanitarian discourse that undergirds it. The first indication that Birahima's prewar life is dismal, or "fucked-up" as he himself describes it repeatedly (5), is present in the first chapter of the novel. He summarizes his life before becoming a child soldier and provides information on both his family situation, especially the cancerous illness that makes his mother miserable and a victim of religious fatalism and charlatanism in a society where access to good healthcare is nonexistent, and how he becomes a child soldier within an armed group that caters to his needs. Birahima sums up his life prior to his military endeavours thus:

Before I go to Liberia, I was a fearless, blameless kid. I slept anywhere
I wanted and stole all kinds of stuff to eat. My grandmother used to
spend days and days looking for me: that's because I was what they call

a street kid. Before I was a street kid, I went at school. Before that I was a *bilakoro* back in the village of Togobala (according to the *Glossary*, a *bilakoro* is an uncircumcised boy) [...] I was a proper Black Nigger African Savage. (5)

Birahima's opening short in this passage immediately comes across as false when considered in the light of the sentence which follows. The meaning implied in the use of the word "blameless" is naivety, the idea of ignorance which allows for absolution from any wrongdoing. But Birahima's action of repeated theft and his demonstrated capacity to choose wherever he sleeps at night do not indicate the actions of a person who cannot distinguish their right from their left hand, so to speak. These actions are not even carried out within the confines of a home; they are done on the street, which the chapter reveals to be a space whose organizing principles are lawlessness, terror, and violence. It is a space that can transform its inhabitants negatively and preclude them from making any claims to innocence. The street is a world where innocence gives way to experience as children strive to fend for themselves, learn life lessons the hard way, and devise strategies to survive the extreme hardship of street life. Street kids may start out as inexperienced and gullible, but in time, through the force of adversity and the compelling necessity to survive, they become tough and function more and more as adults even though biologically they are still children (Aptekar 199). Street life imbues them with agential capacity. As a matter of fact, the decision to take to the street is itself an exercise of agency. In Birahima's case, he finally makes the choice to become "a proper street kid that sleeps with the goats, and nicks stuff to eat from fields and concession" once he learns that his mother's cancer is self-inflicted (20). The superstitious story has it that his mother is the leader of "soul-eaters," and she makes her cancer incurable by devouring it at night (20). However, Birahima later blames himself for believing this story about his mother's illness. Street kids cope with a high

degree of scorn and hostility on account of their “being dirty, uncontrolled by authority, and involved in mischief” (Aptekar 196). Street kids belong in the category of the socially rejected, others placed in the fringes of society because of their status as societal rejects. Among the different factors that predispose children to streetism are “the psychological status of the child and the child’s family, the perception of life on the streets, and the degree to which a street children culture exists” (Aptekar 206). In the world of Kourouma’s novel, family breakdown, lack of parental care, extreme poverty, and bad governance account for why children like Birahima become street kids.

Birahima’s experience of street life exposes him to the adult world where he undertakes roles that are mostly associated with adults. This exposure renders his claim to innocence questionable. As Mastey notes in his examination of the concept of childhood innocence, “innocence is a precarious condition of childhood that is analogous to purity; even brief exposure to [...] adult experiences could result in the premature loss of innocence” (“The Relative Innocence” 354). Clear in the quoted passage from the novel is the picture of a boy whose childhood innocence is eroded by streetism, destitution and hunger. The idea of his truncated education also illustrates the rupturing of childhood, for at his age, Birahima should be in school and not on the street. The arrested development of Birahima – a kind of subversion of the *Bildungsroman* tradition which Walsh and Ndlovu observe in *Allah* – is not represented as something which occurs because of soldiering activities. The inversion of this boy’s flowering happens before he becomes a peripatetic child soldier. In his explanation for why he drops out from school, Birahima says, “I gave up in my third year in primary school. I chucked it because everyone says education’s not worth an old grandmother’s fart any more” (1-2). He adds that “even if you get a degree you’ve got no hope of becoming a nurse or a teacher in some fucked-

up French-speaking banana republic” (2). In this fictional country, one which mirrors the realities of Sierra Leone and Liberia decades before their civil wars, education is worthless and there is no hope for the young. What is certain is a slippery slope into the abyss of adverse, precarious existence occasioned largely by unproductive governance. And in claiming that he is a proper savage before taking up military duties, Birahima further stresses his estrangement from innocence. After all, fierceness, violence, and uncontrollability are characteristics associated with being a savage.³³ Therefore, in the passage above and in the six-point introduction of himself in the chapter, the picture of Birahima as a de-socialized, innocence-lacking boy stands out. This image, he confesses, is “not an edifying spectacle” (5). Like the Liberian and Sierra Leonean kids he typifies, much of Birahima’s prewar existence is not positively memorable.

Birahima’s familial condition also reveals that he is a child without childhood. The first time Birahima mentions his mother, he lets his audience know that he is separated from her because of his actions towards her. He says: “Don’t go thinking that I’m some cute kid, ‘cos I’m not. I’m cursed because I did bad things to my maman” (4). But nothing in his story shows that his mother really pays attention to the bad things this son does to her. What is far more significant is that Birahima’s mother is burdened with an ailment which prevents her from giving Birahima the parental attention he deserves. So much is the woman’s life undone by infirmity and misery that she does not even remember her son’s age. As Birahima informs the reader, “Maman hadn’t been counting my age, she hadn’t got time on account of how she spent all the time suffering and crying” (6). As a cripple who “walked round on her arse” because her left leg is irreversibly damaged (“as withered as a shepherd’s crook”) and the other amputated after

³³ Here Kourouma draws from the register of colonial vocabulary. For the colonialists, the natives (colonized Africans and non-Africans like the indigenous peoples in North America) are savages who lack recognizable humanity and are given to violence and inexplicable barbarities. The infamous “civilizing mission” was conceived as the cure to the disease of savagery. See Mamdani, *Neither Settler Nor Native*, p. 2, 11.

being disabled by cancer, maman does not even have the cheapest of crutches to aid her mobility (6). This terrible condition makes it impossible for her to prevent her son from crawling near a fire on one of the rare occasions when she engages him in play. Moving faster than his mother could, the boy falls into the glowing embers in the fireplace in their house and has his arm grilled by the heat. Birahima says he still bears the traumatic scars of that incident: “It’s still there in my heart, in my whole being, like the smell of my mother. My body is saturated with maman’s nauseating smell” (7). It can be argued that what Birahima means when he references the indelibility of that childhood accident and the disgusting odour from his mother’s unkempt body and cancerous legs is that his is a troubled and painful childhood. As he says, “I’d only ever seen her at her worst, [especially] in the last stages of her multifarious, multicoloured decay” (11).

This awful childhood is compounded by the glaring absence of a father figure in his life. His father, Mory, dies when Birahima is still a toddler (21). The only father figure in the boy’s life is Balla, the traditional medicine man who manages maman’s cancer and later becomes her second husband after the death of Birahima’s father. While Balla is not known to maltreat his stepson, he is neither a good role model to him nor does he add much value to his upbringing. In addition to the behaviour and manners he learns from his life on the street, Birahima learns more antisocial behaviour from his stepfather. Of his stepfather’s negative influence on him, Birahima says: “All the stuff I bullshit about (‘bullshit’ means ‘to say stupid things’) I learned from Balla” (9). And when Birahima completes that statement with these words of gratitude, “A man should always thank the shea tree for the fruits gathered beneath its branches. I will always be grateful to Balla. *Faforo!Gnamokode!*” (9), it becomes clear that he himself is aware that there is nothing to be appreciative of in the training the man has given to him. The “stupid things” Balla teaches him do not enrich his childhood and neither do they enable him to avoid the lure of street life.

Both in and out of his home, Birahima is exposed to practices that adulterate his childhood rather than positively affect its development.

From being a street kid, Birahima finds his way into an armed group. Once people like his grandmother can no longer abide his unsociable behaviour, vagabond life, and the un-Islamic education Balla is providing him with, she decides to send Birahima to leave with his aunt in Liberia, where he “would have rice and meat with *sauce graine* to eat,” foods that are not available to him in Togobala village (28). It is on this boy’s way to his aunt’s that his life as a child soldier begins. It is important to note that apart from acts of killing, there is nothing especially new that Birahima learns from the armed group he joins. His childhood is already contaminated before his military experience begins. After different failed searches, Birahima finds someone to take him to Liberia. The fellow, Yacouba-alias-Tiéoura, a crook and fugitive from the law, tells Birahima about the war in Liberia and how “four big important warlords: Doe, Taylor, Johnson and the Hajj Koroma” are running it (43).³⁴ This chaperon tells the boy about how children his age are involved in the war, listing many things that Birahima lacks and cannot even have on account of his age. Those “small-soldiers,” he explains, “had every-fucking-thing” (37). Birahima learns that in Liberia “the child-soldiers [...] don’t get paid. They just kill people and steal everything worth stealing” (44). Birahima finds the information appealing, after all he already possesses one of the skills that those small soldiers use – stealing. Birahima notes that the aptitude he has developed for stealing as a street kid proves handy in his new role as a soldier. He says: “Me and my friends [that is fellow child soldiers] were pretty resourceful. We stole food, we pilfered food. Pilfering food isn’t stealing because Allah, Allah in

³⁴ In chapter five of the novel the history of Sierra Leone from the precolonial to the postcolonial period is represented, with the names of all the major political actors and rebel factions explicitly mentioned. It appears Kourouma is not willing to leave anyone in doubt of the historical context he is recreating.

his inordinate goodness, never intended to leave empty for two whole days a mouth he created. Walahi!” (129). Birahima wastes no time in expressing his readiness to become a child soldier as soon as the opportunity presents itself (50-1). Here again Kourouma’s protagonist asserts himself as a conscious social agent, although sometimes he displays signs of immaturity. But those occasional moments of naivety do not detract from the strong assessment he makes about his family, the politics of his and other countries, the conditions that make child soldiering possible, and the roles that children play within armed groups.

Birahima’s journey into armed combat takes place as he, Yacouba-alias-Tiéoura, and an itinerant marabout, Sekou, arrive in Liberia. The convoy in which they travel into the country is stopped at one of the checkpoints mounted by child soldiers under the command of Colonel Papa le Bon, “the representative spokesman of the NPFL [...] the movement of the warlord Taylor, who wreaks havoc all over the region” (48). The soldiers order the passengers out and frisk all of them, confiscating their belongings and valuables. When it is Birahima’s turn to be searched, he begins to scream, expressing his desire to join the fold of child soldiers and at same time saying things that mark him out as somewhat childish. Birahima describes his drama this way: “I was blubbing like a spoiled brat, ‘Child-soldier, small-soldier, soldier-child, I want to be a child-soldier, I want to go to my aunt’s house in Niangbo’” (50). Although it may be argued that the boy is frightened because of the militarized environment he finds himself in at this point, his stated desire to enlist in the group is not a careless utterance triggered by fright. A few times at that checkpoint he entreats the child soldiers undressing him to admit him into the group. In time, Papa le Bon appears at the scene. He speaks endearingly to Birahima, patting his head “like a proper father,” an action which makes the boy “happy and proud as a Senegalese wrestling champion” (52). The word “proper” comes easy to Birahima. He uses it as an intensifier to give

emphasis to what he is saying, showing on some occasions his deprecating sense of humour and at other times suggesting his seriousness. Thus, when he refers to Papa le Bon's assuring stroking of his (Birahima's) head, he hints at the parental affection he lacks. In this instance too, the warlord, like some of his ilk in the African child soldier genre, further makes the armed group welcoming to the children by providing for them such things as the familial love and care they desire but is denied them. Despite his ludicrous religious posturing and the many horrific atrocities he commits, Papa le Bon embodies "the good father" (62) in his relationship with the child soldiers under his command.

Indeed, the story of Papa le Bon supports the view that a society which destroys the childhood of its young members will still possibly have to endure more terrible consequences when those children mature into adults. As a child, Papa le Bon did not know his father and his mother is never available for him. A sailor who wants to marry his mother but does not want to see the boy sends him away to be with his aunt. It is from there that a child-centred NGO comes to his aid and sends him to the US. He trains there as a priest and later returns to Liberia to be ordained. However, on his return to the country he finds that the crisis he knew as a young boy has developed into war, further ruining the lives of children. In response, he decides to help the children displaced by war. He does well with the children; they are happy with him and they change his name from Robert to Papa le Bon, the good father. As the story goes, the news of his humanitarian actions travels far and wide. The country's ruler at the time, Samuel Doe, is not pleased with the accolades the priest receives because of his work. The dictator then sends assassins to kill Papa le Bon, but "he escaped by the skin of his teeth and managed to get to Taylor, who was Doe's sworn enemy. Taylor made Papa le Bon a colonel and gave him lots of power" (62-5). Papa le Bon sees the military offensive against Doe's government as part of a just

cause. For him, the children who join the group are fighting to get rid of an evil system that denies them a good childhood. He does not see the children under his command as being abused. But Papa le Bon, in his new role as a warlord, sometimes operates like a deranged mind, recalling the suffering of his childhood and how the ruler of his country who comes to power with a promise to be different from his predecessors seeks to kill him because of his work to save the childhood of homeless and malnourished children.³⁵ This priest-turned-warlord rarely turns away children who want to enlist in the army in his area of command, but he is also unrelenting when it comes to enforcing discipline. In consideration of Birahima's pleas to be admitted into the group, Papa le Bon asks his guards to allow Birahima to follow the group and a few days later after the funeral of a felled child soldier, he is officially drafted into the army. From then on, Birahima digs deeper and deeper into soldiering, travelling with the group and joining others to perpetrate heinous brutalities from Liberia to Sierra Leone.

Despite the temporary shock he feels when he encounters the heavily armed child soldiers at the roadblock, Birahima's recruitment into the armed group is voluntary. While it may seem the case that Birahima "accidentally morphs into a child-soldier," as Adesokan casually observes (13), a careful attention to the fact that he is the only one among his equally young co-travellers who pleads with the Papa le Bon army to recruit him shows that he is intentional about his enlistment as a child soldier. Birahima's recruitment is voluntary, one of the three ways by which children make it into state army and rebel groups.³⁶ Yet, voluntary enlistment is not without some element of compulsion, especially when considered in the light of the argument in this chapter that the human-made existential predicaments of the prewar lives of children who

³⁵ The full description of Papa le Bon's character is available between chapters two and four of the novel.

³⁶ See Drumbl's *Reimagining Child Soldiers*, 2012, p. 13.

take to arms are factors that encourage their seeking out military mobilization. As Drumbl submits, “[e]nvironmental factors and situational constraints – which include poverty, insecurity, lack of education, socialization into violence, and broken families – certainly inform [young people’s] decisions to enlist” (15). Although it is triggered by something, voluntary recruitment is not another term for abduction or forced recruitment. To treat the two as the same is to ignore the agency of the children who make the choice to join armed groups. Both voluntary and involuntary recruitments are real and different contexts inform how they occur. The idea that all enlistments of children in armed groups are involuntary is, as already established in this dissertation, a position firmly maintained in humanitarian discourse. The authors of that discourse, as Hart argues, “have little time for the idea that children may be capable of exercising any real measure of choice about recruitment. [...] The very notion of voluntary recruitment is largely an illusion” to those people (“Saving Children” 5, 7). Arguing against the humanitarian position on recruitment, Drumbl posits that voluntary enrollment, rather than forced recruitment, is the pathway most children take into armed groups (13).³⁷ “The international legal imagination,” he contends, “cannot just wish away the fact that significant numbers of children join armed forces or armed groups in the absence of evident coercion and, in fact, exercise some – and at times considerable – initiative in this regard. Even within the most maleficent of conflicts, children come forward and present themselves for service” (13). While other writers elect to depict forcible recruitment as the path to child soldiering, Kourouma chooses to represent voluntary enlistment as the way into the military for most children. This choice reflects

³⁷ For more on children’s voluntary involvement in armed groups see Michael Wessells’s “Psychosocial Issues in Reintegrating Child Soldiers,” *Cornell International Law Journal*, Vol. 37, No. 3, 2004, pp. 12-22; Peter Singer’s *Children at War*, 2006, p. 61; and Rosen’s “Child Soldiers, International Humanitarian Law, and the Globalization of Childhood,” *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 109, No.2, 2007, pp. 296-306.

fidelity to the historical contexts his work is set in. It also allows him to depict child soldiers as “rational human actors” who are relatively aware of their calamities.

Kourouma’s narrative of Birahima’s involvement as a child soldier serves a strategic purpose. This move enables his protagonist-narrator to take the reader into the world of child soldiers and gain insights into their initiatives, actions, and most importantly what their lives were before enlistment and what motivated them to become child soldiers. In Papa le Bon’s army, there is a tradition that funeral orations are to be presented at the burial of children who die in the action. As Birahima explains it, the “funeral oration” is important because “[c]hild-soldiers are the most famous celebrities of the late twentieth century” (83). This description of child soldiers as “famous celebrities” speaks to two things. One, it reflects the preponderance of children’s involvement in armed groups both on the African continent and elsewhere between the late twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries.³⁸ Second, the statement is a veiled swipe at Western media, entertainment industry, and transnational humanitarian organizations for their roles in the transformation of demobilized child soldiers whose rehabilitation takes place in North America and Western Europe into superstars. The most visible former child soldiers such as Beah, Keitetsi, Jal, and Mehari all live abroad and have published memoirs of their soldiering lives. At different times these individuals have featured in concerts, international conferences, and advocacy programs aimed at campaigning against child soldiering and creating awareness of the plights of children at war. These new advocates for children, some have noted, live the good life abroad while the victims of their atrocious actions remain miserable. More, as the case of Beah shows, the activities that these erstwhile fighters undertake for humanitarian organizations and businesses portray them as global heroes, popular rock stars, and international celebrities. At

³⁸ See Michael Wessells’s *Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection*, 2006, p. 19.

some point Beah was a fashion model. Speaking to the celebrity status of the child soldier, Denov notes that “the portrayal of child soldiers as heroes has entered into western media discourses, often assigning celebrity status and even stardom to former child soldiers, particularly those living in the west” (*Child Soldiers: Sierra Leone’s Revolutionary United Front*, 9).³⁹ In the various funeral orations that Birahima provides for his fellow soldiers who fall in battle, we learn “how in this great big fucked-up world they came to be a child-soldier” (83). In this regard, the funeral oration constitutes a tribute which chronicles the circumstances that make enrollment in armed groups inevitable for those children. All the orations given show that the children’s everyday lives prior to becoming soldiers are grim. The common threads in the prewar realities of the children include disintegrated families, dismal socioeconomic conditions, lack of opportunity for development, political violence, and poor governance system.

The first funeral oration Birahima performs is for a girl soldier named Sarah (Papa le Bon’s group comprises boys and girls, although the former are more in number). As Birahima’s speech reveals, Sarah does not enjoy parental attention before she becomes a child soldier. Her father is never present at home: “He travelled and travelled, he did nothing but travel so much that you wonder how he found the time to make Sarah in her mother’s belly” (83). At age five, Sarah’s mother’s is killed by a drunk driver. Having never been available in the life of his daughter, Sarah’s father sends her to his cousin, a wicked woman who makes the girl work like a slave. After the domestic chores her guardian Madam Kokui assigns to her, Sarah hawks bananas for her custodian. On two different occasions some street kids hijack the bananas, leaving the girl with no money to take home. Out of fear of what Madam Kokui will do to her, Sarah decides to

³⁹ See also Belinda Luscombe’s “Pop Culture Finds Lost Boys,” *Time Magazine*, 2007, <http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,1584807,00.html> (Accessed on July 20, 2020).

take to begging to pay for the stolen bananas. When the theft happens again, she goes begging and from then on decides not to return to Madam Kokui again. It is during Sarah's street life that she runs into a man who pretends to care for her but who ends up raping her, so "vicious that he left her for dead" (86). She lands at the hospital, but her father is not there to take her. After her recovery the hospital people sends her to an orphanage in Monrovia. War breaks out and all the nuns in the home are killed. Sarah and other girls take to prostitution and from there "they joined the child-soldiers, so as not to starve to death" (86). From lack of parental care to the need to survive hunger, the reasons Sarah became a child soldier are abundantly clear.

Next in the oration ritual is another child soldier called Kik, who dies after accidentally stepping on a mine (87).⁴⁰ Kik and his family live together but have to endure the political instability of their "fucked-up country." When the festering crisis erupts into war, it consumes all the members of Kik's family. He runs away from school to avoid being killed, but on getting home he is greeted with the gory sights of lifeless bodies with slit throats. Birahima sums up Kik's next move thusly: "And when you've got no one left on earth, no father, no mother, no brother, no sister, and you're really young, just a little kid, living in some fucked-up barbaric country where everyone is cutting everyone's throat, what do you do? You become a child-soldier of course, a small-soldier, a child-soldier so you can have lots to eat and cut some throats yourself; that's all your only option" (90). The desire for security, food, and vengeance facilitates Kik's military experience. Until his unfortunate death, Kik finds safety and family within the armed group. But like others who Birahima pays tribute to, Kik's case proves the point that war sometimes does not just complete the destruction of whatever is left of the childhood of child

⁴⁰ This experience is reminiscent of the fate of Chris Abani's child soldier protagonist and his fellow mine diffusers in *Song for Night* examined in the preceding chapter. Mine traps constitute another way by which child soldiers and their superiors are expended on battlefields.

soldiers before their enlistment; it can also bring an end to their lives. And when Birahima says becoming a child soldier is the only option left to kids like Kik, he calls attention to the fact that the state has become so plagued by dysfunction that the wellbeing of anyone is not guaranteed.

Another child soldier Birahima chronicles his prewar life after his death on the battlefield is Sekou the Terrible. As in other places in the novel, here too Birahima demonstrates both his irreverence and sense of empathy when he refuses to tell the reader how this dead child soldier acquires his nom de guerre. He says: “I don’t feel like telling it and I’m not obliged to, and anyway it makes me sad, really sad” (113). Here is Birahima’s summary of the circumstance in which Sekou becomes a child soldier: “It was school fees that had thrown him into the jaws of the alligator, into the ranks of child-soldiers” (110). The absence of a functional administration of criminal justice system in Sekou’s country (Côte d’Ivoire) deprives him of his father, leading to the stoppage of his education and eventually to streetism and soldiering. Sekou’s father works as a security guard in one of the luxury villas owned by the upper-class members of society. One day armed robbers attack the villa and cart away valuables. Without any evidence, the owner of the house concludes that Sekou’s father is the facilitator of the robbery. The rich man sends his former guard to jail. Three months into his father’s imprisonment, the headmaster of Sekou’s school suspends him because of outstanding school fees. His mother’s food business is not yielding the expected returns as her debtors are unable to pay her. Not wanting to loaf around, Sekou sets out to the train station to “jump train” to travel to another town to see his uncle who is a transporter with his own car and house. On arrival to the new town, he is arrested by police and is thrown behind bars. A few days later, Sekou manages to escape from police custody. He roams around the town in vain looking for his uncle’s house. In the process the boy runs into a trucker and pleads with him to sign him on as his apprentice. The man agrees but it turns out that

he is a gunrunner who uses his truck to “secretly transport arms to the Taylor faction in Liberia” (112). In the course of this work, Sekou and his boss are kidnapped. Their kidnappers want the government to pay ransom for their release, but none comes. Soon, as he does at the police station, Sekou makes his escape from the forest where his kidnappers are keeping him and his manager.

Sekou ends up in a village. In this village there are many child soldiers. Tired of his troubles, Sekou, much like Birahima, approaches the head of the group and expresses his interest in becoming a child soldier (112-3). It is not war that Sekou runs away from before he becomes a child soldier. It is the injustice of the purported peacetime of his country. The inability of his mother to keep her son in school after the unjust incarceration of his father – even though she has a small-scale food business – points to the horrible economic condition of the country and the lack of credible options for children and their families. What is remarkable however about Sekou’s journey into child soldiering is that right from the time his education ceases, he makes valiant efforts to get himself productively engaged in work. Right from before he enlists in the armed group, he initiates actions that are not traditionally associated with individuals his age. Whatever happens to him do not occur by chance; they happen because he takes actions. His voluntary association with the armed group is made possible because he inhabits a country which is less concerned about young people like him. This fact is what Michael Wessells speaks to when he concludes that “[t]oo often, failed systems set the context for unforced recruitment by offering few positive alternatives for young people, who spend most of their time in idleness, and creating a multiplicity of risks” (43). Thus, for Sekou and others like him, the best option available to them becomes joining armed groups.

Sosso the Panther too experiences the nastiness of peacetime and takes to soldiering after the familial mess he has endured for too long. Sosso's father is a drunkard who returns home every night to beat his wife and son. One fateful day he beats his wife to death. In response, Sosso stabs him to death with a kitchen knife (113-5). Forthwith he becomes a parricide with no other option but to, as Birahima reports, "join the child-soldiers." In sharing Sosso's story, Birahima is again compelled to repeat, with a little adjustment, the statement he makes in the funeral oration he does for Kik. In making that speech about the lack of what Wessells calls the paucity of "positive alternatives for young people," Birahima lamentably concludes that "[b]eing a child-soldier is for kids who've got fuck all left on earth or Allah's heaven" (114). Pondering over how the stories of the children he meets in the various rebel factions he fights in from Liberia to Sierra Leone, Birahima finds the stories of their prewar experiences too traumatizing for him. From time to time in his funeral orations Birahima gives up saying more about his fallen fellow soldiers (114 and 144).

In Sierra Leone Birahima meets other child soldiers, among whom are three others who are killed on the battlefield. These children, Birahima says of their lives before joining armed groups, "were bastards, druggies, criminals, liars. They were cursed" (144). It is interesting to note that in addition to the narrative importance of the funeral orations, which take the reader into a deeper awareness of the factors that propel children into war, the orations also serve the purpose of making the reader appreciate the fact that behind the veneer of a ruffian and rascal, Birahima has a tender heart. At different times in his funeral speeches he breaks down in tears, saying he can no longer continue to tell the stories of fellow unfortunate soldiers who have escaped the terrible hardships of peacetime only to end up killed in battle.

The arrested development and destruction of the childhoods of all the child soldiers in Kourouma's *Allah*, from Birahima, Sarah, Kik, Sekou, Soso, Johnny Thunderbolt (178-9), to Siponni (198), all take place during peace time. Not one of these children dreams of becoming a merciless killer. When society fails them and war comes, they still make efforts to find an existence unconnected to violent crime. They take different actions that show that they are not merely passive agents. As Denov submits, children's expressions of agential capabilities may seem as "small victories" considering the challenges they face, "the creative ways" they cope with these realities "reveal their capacity as successful negotiators and agents in the history of armed conflict and its aftermath" (198). And while they avoid war, it does not avoid them. It claims and completes the destruction of what is left of their aborted childhood. Those like Birahima who are not killed in battle seem condemned to live out their lives in polities that only change for the worse. Unable to find his aunt, whose dead body he sees in a refugee camp in Sierra Leone (202-13), Birahima's chance of ever exiting his armed group becomes even smaller. It is therefore not surprising that at the end of the novel the reader is back at the start again – with Birahima the same "little nigger [telling his] bullshit story" (215).

Chapter Four

The Child Soldier and the Stereotypical Image of Africa in *Johnny Mad Dog*

In this chapter my focus is on the locale of the African child soldier, their local “soil” or what we can instead maybe term their *terroir*. I advance the argument that when representing child soldiers, most African writers succumb to the pitfall of imagining (and then rendering) warfare in Africa in a stereotypically Western way. In other words, such writers convey a view of Africa as a continent comprised of what former American President Donald Trump has notoriously referred to as “shithole countries,” ones so named because they are indistinguishable from hell and afflicted by wars that are totally “irrational, meaningless, and criminal” (Rosen, *Western Imagination*, 48; Reid 2). It is this image of warfare in Africa, and by extension Africa generally, that may be detected in Emmanuel Dongala’s *Johnny Mad Dog*. By representing child soldiers as irredeemable sociopaths, Dongala presents wars in Africa as mere games between warlords blinded by greed and maddened by ambition. No one in the novel fights for a noble objective or a higher or respectable cause. Combatants in Dongala’s fiction do not fight to displace self-serving, tyrannical rulers, even though there are objective grounds for them to do so. Conflicts in Africa, Dongala suggests, are not informed by lofty ideals, any more than they serve to sustain ideas of the common good. The enlistment of children in these wars, whether forced or voluntary, only shows how ruthless warlords can be. In addition to reflecting Africa in a stereotypical sense, I argue that Dongala’s account distorts the image of child soldiers by showing them to be morally numb and mentally damaged. In his narrative, child soldiers are also hopelessly unsalvageable and children caught in conflicts are redeemable only thanks to non-African (i.e. “white”) benevolence and rescue. For such children, as I show through my close reading of the novel, redemption is only possible when initiated from outside the African

continent. Besides focusing on the specifics of the novel's setting, I demonstrate how Dongala's heavily one-sided image of the child soldier reflects the regnant racist view of Africa as forever *bound to violence*.

Like Ahmadou Kouroumah, Dongala is among the notable writers of Francophone Sub-Saharan African extraction. He belongs in the circle of Francophone African writers whose works wrestle with postindependence agonies and troubles. He is also one of those Francophone African writers who had their education abroad and who for various reasons later fled from their home countries to become exiles.¹ In Dongala's case, after some years of his return to the Republic of the Congo (also known as Congo-Brazzaville) from France where he received additional educational training as a chemist, he had to flee permanently with his family to the US. His exit from Congo-Brazzaville in 1997 happened "for reasons of real physical fear of being killed" because the country was embroiled in an ethnopolitical conflict.² This issue of emigration on account of a destabilizing and disruptive civil unrest features strongly as a major theme in Dongala's child soldier novel, suggesting the deep impressions that the incident made on his mind about the challenges of inhabiting African countries like Congo-Brazzaville. Even though Dongala has published poetry and created theatrical productions, he is more famously known as a novelist. He has thus far published five prose fictions, namely *A Gun in the Hand*, *a Poem in the Pocket* (a novel, 1973), *Jazz and Palm Wine* (a collection of short stories, 1982), *The*

¹ What is different in the destination choice for educational training in the case of Dongala is that he went to the United States and not France or any French-speaking states as was the case with fellow Francophone writers like Léopold Sédar Senghor, Aimé Césaire, Camara Laye, Bernard Dadié, Ahmadou Kourouma, David Diop, to mention a few. See Dominic Thomas's *Nation-Building, Propaganda, and Literature in Francophone Africa* (2002) for more on Dongala's and other Francophone African writers' educational pursuits.

² See Eloïse Brezault's "Listening to Emmanuel Dongala: An Interview." <https://motspluriels.arts.uwa.edu.au/MP2403ed3.html> (2001). Accessed March 14, 2021.

Fire of the Origins (a novel, 1987), *Little Boys Are Also Born from Stars* (a novel, 1988), and *Johnny Mad Dog* (a novel, 2002/2005). The thematic concerns of these works include disillusionment arising from the failure of postindependence governance, political instability and the crisis of state, one-party system and authoritarianism, memory and history, the fraught relationship between France and its former African colonies, and the lamentable fate of children both trapped in the throes of senseless wars and those mobilized as soldiers.

Dongala's works have also received critical attention, especially in Francophone circles. Among the critical responses to Dongala's works, especially the novel I analyze in this chapter, are Dominic Thoams's *Nation-Building, Propaganda, and Literature in Francophone Africa* (2002); Odile Cazenave's "Writing the Child, Youth and Violence into Francophone Novel from Sub-Saharan Africa: The Impact of Age and Gender" (2005); John Kearney's "The Representation of Child Soldiers in Contemporary African Fiction" (2010); Catarina Martins's "The Dangers of the Single Story: Child Soldiers in Literary Fiction and Film" (2011); Stephen Gray's "Two African Child Soldiers: The Kourouma and Dongala Contretemps" (2013); George MacLeod's "The Spoils of War: Money and Humanism in Emmanuel Dongala's *Johnny Chien Méchant*" (2015); David Rosen's *Child Soldiers in Western Imagination: From Patriots to Victims* (2015); and Joya Uraizee's *Writing That Breaks Stones: African Child Soldiers* (2020). These criticisms provide interesting perspectives on *Johnny Mad Dog*. However, except for Rosen's which succinctly takes up the issue, these critical reflections neither address novel's stereotypical recasting of Africa, nor do they engage its Afropessimistic contents. As such, my reading of the novel fills this gap.

Witnessing and Perpetrating Violence

The choice of a child protagonist-narrator is not unique to *Johnny Mad Dog* among Dongala's prose fictions. The story of his novel, *Little Boys Are Also Born from Stars*, is focalized through a child narrator. In "Listening to Emmanuel Dongala: An Interview" (2001), Dongala explains why he prioritizes using children as narrators in some of his novels which treat the issues of corruption, authoritarianism, conflict, among other themes, in Africa. In his view, since these themes are not new in contemporary African literature, he uses children as narrators in order to bring fresh perspectives to the fictional re-enactment of those subjects. But in privileging child narrators in *Johnny Mad Dog*, as I argue in this chapter, Dongala does much more than "bringing a certain freshness" to telling the familiar story of African conflicts and the presence of children in them as soldiers. He appropriates the supposedly carefree attitude of children to Afropessimistically portray the undistinguishable Africa of the work.

What is also different in the use of the child focalizer in *Johnny Mad Dog* is that, unlike the other novel and those – to delimit it – in the African child soldier genre, there are two child narrators who tell the darkly humorous story of a pointless war, excruciating sufferings, avoidable tragic deaths, chequered humanitarian interventions, and paradoxical hopefulness in an alternating mode.³ Laokole, a sixteen-year-old girl, and the eponymous character, Johnny Mad Dog, who is about a year younger than his female counterpart, are the narrators of the story. The use of two narrators in this novel has its narrative value. The alternation enables different

³ Dongala is not the only Francophone writer to use this style. In the novel *Transit* by Abdourahman Waberi (a Djibouti-born novelist and essayist resident in France), each of the major characters take turns to speak. Each does so in a separate chapter one after another. Similarly, among the memoirs jointly authored by some war-displaced Sudanese young people famously known as the "the Lost Boys of Sudan" now resident in the United States, two of them also use alternating narrators to tell their stories. These memoirs are *They Poured Fire on Us from the Sky: The Story of Three Lost Boys from Sudan* (2005), by Alephonsion Deng, Benson Deng, and Benjamin Ajak; and *Lost Boy, Lost Girl: Escaping Civil War in Sudan* (2010), by John Bul Dau and Martha Akech.

perspectives on the same incidents. It exposes the limitations of each narrator as well as provides a mirror to each narrator's blind spot. The untruths that Johnny Mad Dog cavalierly and unabashedly spews out are doggedly counteracted and exposed by Laokole's account. Johnny Mad Dog's narration is generally darkly humorous and sometimes characterized by coarse language and injudicious expressions while the young girl's is critical, candid, and endearing. Where Laokole accounts for the suffering of the civilian population, making the reader see the unsightly consequences of war, Johnny provides the windows through which the reader appreciates the internal workings of his and other rebel groups and the state army.

For example, at the opening of the novel, Laokole informs the reader of the 48-hour looting period that General Giap, the leader of Johnny's group, has declared. The reader understands what that absurdity means for the civilian population. But it is Johnny that reveals the details of the absurd declaration. In his account, the reader gets to read the full text of General Giap's broadcast (6), learns that the newly installed president (who comes into office through a coup, somewhat reflective of the Congo's Denis Sassou-Nguesso's 1997 ascension to power through putsch) approves the looting spree, and the reader understands that the declared brazen daylight pillaging is another way to fulfill the monetary promise made to the "brave freedom fighters that fought like lions, like buffalo!" (6). The comparison of those fighters with animals like lion and buffalo underscores the ferocity and sheer unbridled capacity for violence that they demonstrate. This animal imagery, an overriding feature of the novel, also speaks to the inhumanity of those waging war in the world of this story. The animal imagery also suffuses child soldier narratives such as Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation*. To cite one of several examples, after his exit from the armed group, Agu the protagonist-narrator of the story describes his experience of war in animal imagery, observing that the road he walks is "rising up and down

like one animal [...]” (129). In Joya Uraizee’s view, Agu’s description of the road in animal imagery after his demobilization suggests that the path to rehabilitation is far from smooth and assured (85).

The two narrators in Dongala’s novel echo each other and this reiteration as a narrative strategy also shows their state of mind. For instance, after General Giap shoots Gator, a child soldier in his group who insinuates that the “general” is withholding the money the president promises them, he orders the remains of “this subversive element” to be taken away for burial. Silently in response, Johnny quips, “Really, people are awful. They have no heart” (44). Likewise, in painfully wondering about the tragedies that her country’s rulers make happen to the people, Laokole says: “What kind of country kills its children in cold blood? [...] Really, people are awful. They have no heart” (55). This “textual echoing,” as George MacLeod describes it (530), underlines the difference between the two narrators. Whereas Laokole’s submission about the heartlessness of people like those who govern her country is genuine given that it is regular persons like her who suffer the consequences of the ruling elites’ cruelty, Johnny’s utterance is superficial and duplicitous since he himself is cruel, kills and makes life hellish for others. Laokole is humane, empathetic, and respectful of others. In contrast, Johnny is a sociopath, an unfeeling, and depraved person. Thus, they may echo each other, but their convictions, motivations, values, and upbringings are manifestly different. Although they inhabit the same situation, there is an oceanic difference in the roles they play in that condition and their individual response to it.

It is in view of the foregoing conclusion that I disagree with MacLeod’s position that these two characters are more similar than they are different. MacLeod further argues that the textual echoing between the two narrators is a narrative strategy that enables Dongala to avoid “a

simplistic representation of the child soldier as an inhuman killing machine,” adding that the author’s use of double narrators allows for the humanization of the child soldier (530).

MacLeod’s conclusion may be tenable where Johnny’s character is simplistically read as a victim. In any case, the portrayal of Johnny Mad Dog does not allow for such a reading of his person as merely a victim. Neither is loss of innocence a concern of his creator in the formation of his character. If loss of innocence arising from exposure to conflict is to be teased out as an issue in the novel, it is certainly much more applicable to Laokole than it is true of her fellow male narrator. It is not even clear in the novel what a life of innocence or childhood for Johnny looks like. A look at the prewar lives of the two narrators will reveal that their childhoods are not similarly affected by the conditions of the times. While Laokole grows well and is socially well-adjusted in the periods before the outbreak of war, Johnny Mad Dog grows up as a social deviant. In the former’s case, the erosion of her childhood begins only when war breaks out. War claims her childhood and paradoxically brings out the good and the bad in her. Laokole suffers rape, destitution, and hunger, and, out of necessity kills in self-defence. In contrast, Johnny Mad Dog makes his way into soldiering as a street kid already weaned off his childhood innocence. From the beginning to the end, Johnny is cast as a graceless, inhuman, irredeemable person. Going by the names he chooses for himself as a child soldier (which I address later in this chapter), his worldview, actions, and the fact of his death at the end of the novel, Johnny comes clearly across as an irreparably damaged mind. He is represented as a dangerous figure, one whose representation fits the media portrait of African child soldiers as people “fluent in the language of violence, but ignorant to the rudiments of living in a civil society.”⁴

⁴ See “Special Report: Boy Soldiers” in *Newsweek*, August 7, 1995. See also Michael Wessells’s *Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection* (2006, 45 and 47).

It is this image of child soldiers as “permanently damaged” beings that Myriam Denov outlines as one of the misrepresentations – the other two being “hapless victims and redeemed heroes” – which have shaped the child soldier issue in policy discourse and media reports that is present in Dongala’s novel (*Child Soldiers* 5-10). So irredeemable is Johnny Mad Dog that he is killed at the end. Presenting Johnny Mad Dog’s character in this manner allows the author to “present African warfare as inexplicable, brutal and disconnected from the ‘civilised’ world order” (Aning and McIntyre 77). Just as his country’s war is purportedly disconnected from other wars outside the continent, so too is Johnny Mad Dog’s person as a child. His is an inverted childhood, one which also functions as a metaphor indicating that his country/continent is a child – not just any but a “wayward child in need of [adult] guidance” (Lee-Koo 735).⁵ This child soldier is a ruthless killing machine who is animated by violence in a country where peace and stability are consistently elusive. Nothing in the manner Dongala shapes this boy soldier’s character suggests any attempt at humanizing him as McLeod claims. In terms of morals and values, as John Kearney contends, Dongala shapes Laokole to be Johnny’s opposite (79). Even Laokole considers Johnny, whose outfits she describes as “bizarre” the first time she encounters him from her hiding place (50; 74-5), as her *bête noire*. By and large, the humane and humanized person between the two characters is Laokole and not Johnny as McLeod would have it.

Moreover, a couple of things are similar and dissimilar about Laokole and Johnny Mad Dog, but the similarities do not conduce to sameness of views and personhoods as McLeod suggests. In addition to their age, they both have experience of interrupted education, albeit for different reasons.⁶ While Johnny Mad Dog drops out of school after completing second grade

⁵ See Kate Manzo’s “Imagining Humanitarianism: NGO Identity and the Iconography of Childhood,” 2008, for how, paradoxically, the images of children in conflict and precarious situations can function as colonial metaphor.

⁶ As in other works of the African child soldier genre, interruption is also a thematic feature of Dongala’s novel.

(10), Laokole's education and "dream of graduating from high school and becoming an engineer" are interrupted because of the war that people like Johnny are waging (16). Besides not providing details of why he discontinues his education, Johnny is also unreliable. Twice in his numerous self-serving and unfounded claims of being an intellectual, Johnny provides conflicting information about the grade level at which he withdraws from school. First, he claims he gives up school after completing grade two, and second, a couple of pages after, he claims, "I had completed fourth grade" (88). Both narrators have ambitions – Laokole wants to be a mason or an engineer (31) while Johnny, at least given his obsessive, if often ludicrous, references to intellectualism or his self-projection as "an intellectual who values clarity" (39; 316 and 319), can be assumed to be inclined towards an academic profession. And while Laokole survives the war – the only one in her family and among many others – and travels abroad because she knows "some people who had influence abroad" (302), Johnny is not so lucky as he is consumed by the war. Surprisingly, this unconscionable "beast," as his killer calls him (309), meets his end in the hands of Laokole (318-20), who first "hit him square in the face" with a large Bible he earlier throws at her when he holds her hostage. The enormous Bible destabilizes Johnny and Laokole pounces on him, "stomping, crushing, kicking with all my might, aiming my blows at those genitals that had humiliated so many women" (320). Johnny is killed like the totally hardened criminal that he is. By aiming at his genitals and eventually permanently disabling him, Laokole achieves a symbolic justice for all the victims of Johnny's sexual violence.

Furthermore, throughout the novel both narrators by their actions collapse the boundaries between childhood and adulthood. Right from the beginning to the end of the novel, Johnny and Laokole assume roles mostly associated with adults while still occasionally exhibiting childhood tendencies. Prior to the start of war, Johnny works as a cleaner for Malian and Lebanese

shopkeepers in a market to support himself (21 and 90). It is worthy of mention that nothing about Johnny's parents and family is mentioned in his account. It is only clear that he drops out of school, is a street kid, and later he joins a political group which morphs into an armed group where he becomes the leader of a unit. This textual silence suggests that Johnny lacks parental guidance, care, and affection. More, the textual opacity also reveals the gap in the story. It is strange that a story which explores the lives of a child soldier and a child civilian refugee provides information on the childhood background of one but is silent on the other. Ultimately, the impression the novel creates regarding the lack of information about Johnny's family is that the absence of his parents in his life constitutes a contributing factor to the crude, unfeeling, and morally diseased person he turns out to be. On her part, Laokole combines household chores with schooling and supporting her mason father at work (15-6). When war comes, the transformation it brings further catapults these two teenagers to a higher level of varying responsibilities that obscures the child-adult borders of undertakings. Laokole becomes the sole caretaker of her family, taking care of her twelve-year-old brother (who she also views as "no longer a small child, old enough to help the family," 4) and tending to her amputated mother after the gruesome murder of her father by a militia group at the start of the war. She energetically bears the responsibilities of her household and sees herself as a capable operator in adult space. As she puts it, "[a]t sixteen, a girl is already a woman. I was now the mother of my mother, and the mother of my brother. I had to go on" (47). For Laokole, "the moment in every daughter's life when she becomes a mother to her mother" comes early and she rises enthusiastically to embrace it (102).

Similarly, war makes it possible for Johnny to undertake more adult roles. He becomes a fighter in the Mata Mata, meaning "Death Dealers – for we were completely fearless when

killing others or meeting death ourselves” (7). In this group, from where he perpetrates heinous atrocities of killing, raping, looting, and harming, Johnny rises to the level of a unit commander responsible for fifteen “child” soldiers of about and slightly above his age. Like Laokole, Johnny too understands that his activities have necessitated reversals of adult roles, wherein the limitations between adulthood and childhood are fast petering out. In what appears a conscious appreciation of his new identity and roles, Johnny magisterially proclaims that he is no longer a child. He captures his status thus: “Now I was no longer a kid; at almost sixteen, I was a man. I knew what you could do with a chick, what you *ought* to do with a beautiful chick, even a chick two or three times older than you” (23). The actions and roles of the two teenage narrators affirm De Boeck and Honwana’s assertion that [y]oung people constantly cross the frontier between childhood and adulthood. As they actively create and recreate their roles in the face of changing conditions, they blur that social divide” (4). What cannot be ignored in this crisscrossing of boundaries of adulthood and childhood by these young people is their demonstration of agency. In pursuit of noble and nefarious ends, these assumedly immature beings decide the course of actions that leave telling impacts on their environments and fellow humans.

All through this novel both Laokole and Johnny initiate actions and through them challenge assumptions about children’s and adults’ roles and responsibilities. Through what they say and do, these young characters contest the humanitarian view that children do not have the maturity to hold and express political beliefs. They prove that “both voice and responsibility as a subject and social actor (for better and worse) are not and cannot be exclusive to adults” (Martins 444). In the conducts of Johnny and Laokole, there is an indication that “children are often more aware and active politically, and more developed morally and socially than adults generally assume” (Boyden, “Anthropology Under Fire” 250). However, while it is worth noting that most

of the children in Dongala's novel exercise agency and as such tend to resist their pigeonholing as children in what seems a repudiation of Western notions of childhood (that is immature, dependent, and in need of protection), I argue that Dongala's portrayal of the reversal of roles between adults and children serves the narratological purpose of underscoring the inversions that have become the norm in the nameless African country he depicts. Put differently, Dongala's empowerment of children through the undertaking of adult roles works to strengthen his Afropessimistic portrayal of postcolonial African states as an emporium of reversals and incongruities, "a place of untold horrors, exquisite mystery, existing outside of the vestiges of historical time" (Krishnan, "Affect, Empathy, and Entanglement," 212).

As I demonstrate in my analysis later in this chapter, although Dongala's *Johnny Mad Dog* takes readers into the world of the child soldier and the effects of war on society as he also makes clear in an interview,⁷ these imaginative insights are achieved against the backdrop of Africa as one homogenous "dark continent" incapable of an existence devoid of unconstrained suffering, acute violence, and unfathomable political instability. In unveiling the inner world of the child soldier, the novel mostly concentrates on the geographical, outer world of this fighter through what is arguably an Afropessimistic lens. Both the novel's paratext – "the means by which a text makes a book of itself and proposes itself as such to its readers, and more generally to the public" (Genette 262) – and the intolerable world of excessive violence and the pains it represents promote an undifferentiated Africa often encountered in Western journalistic reportage about the continent. Susanne Gehrman refers to such Western media coverage of African conflicts as "superficial representation," which means that "Africa, as in colonial

⁷ See Niren Tolsi's "Writers' Voices" in *Mail and Guardian*, 2008: <https://mg.co.za/article/2008-04-04-writers-voices/> (Accessed April 30, 2020).

discourse, gets constructed as a place of evil and primitivity” (32). It is this idea of Africa as synonymous with barbarism and violence as shaped in different historical and geographical contexts from the Greeks to the contemporary times that Valentin-Yves Mudimbe rigorously interrogates in his philosophical books on the idea and invention of Africa.⁸ While there is no doubt about the artistic merit of Dongala’s work,⁹ its universe and staging of African conflict still teems with such troubling Afropessimistic features and “the stereotypical depictions of Africa often promoted in the Western media, and supposedly perpetuated in literary works from the continent as well” (Tunca 147).

Violence of varied proportions suffuses Dongala’s *Johnny Mad Dog*. The novel is set in a nameless African country in which, as Laokole lamentably observes, “there was no longer any logic: soldiers destroy for the sake of destroying, killed for the sake of killing, stole for the sake stealing – even the most improbable objects” (15). In this imaginative, homogenously symbolic African country, but recognizably in different respects as the Republic of the Congo and some countries in Central Africa,¹⁰ the organizing principle for getting anything done is violence. The country has no history of a point in time when it was at peace, when things worked, when human lives mattered, or when politics and governance was people-centred and served as a means of ensuring sustainable economic progress. Living in a Hobbesian state of nature, the inhabitants in the world of this novel only know the avoidable human-made unpleasantness of life, unceasing sadism, and increasingly tragic end to human lives. So commonplace are violence and anarchy that a moment of respite from them creates a sense of abnormality and surprise. Laokole’s

⁸ These books are *The Invention of Africa* (1988) and *The Idea of Africa* (1994).

⁹ John Kearney too hints at this merit, describing it as “a triumph of imaginative engagement” in “The Representation of Child Soldiers in Contemporary African Fiction” (2010, 91).

¹⁰ Stephen Gray quotes Dongala as saying in an interview he granted in Paris in 2002 that the inspirations for the setting of this novel were some war-torn countries in Central Africa. See Gray’s “Two African Child Soldiers: The Kourouma and Dongala Contretemps” (2013).

experiences of occasional goodness from people, especially from outside of Africa, make her ponder on the subject of goodness and evil and the paradoxical existence of the former despite the overwhelming presence of the latter (136 and 156-7). If being an adult in this space is fraught with all forms of danger, existing there as a child is even more tragic. It is a world of confounding inversions and utter moral depravities wherein the illogic of wanton violence supervenes. Those who run the affairs of the country may talk about deriving their legitimacy from the people, they may talk about the fine principles of democracy, rule of law, transparency, and accountability, what they actually mean are the opposites. The two political parties in this story – the “Movement for the Democratic Liberation of the People (MDLP) and the “Movement for the Total Liberation of the People” (MTLP, 82) – are both sides of the same rotten coin of oppression, terror, and self-promotion. They conduct their affairs in flagrant repudiation of what their respective name claims. They are neither democratic, nor are they people-centred. They deplore plurality of views and criminalize dissents. Their path to power is through violence (83-4 and 88). Given the supremacy of violence and the rudderlessness that defines all aspects of the society in this work, it is hard not to think that there is something about the makeup of its inhabitants that makes them luxuriate in the boiling cauldron of unimpeded violence.

The Symbol and Substance of the African Child Soldier

The idea of Africa as “a paradigm of difference” (Mudimbe xii), or what Katrina Lee-Koo calls “a morally defunct zone of tragedy” (731), is a major thematic feature of the African child soldier genre. This stereotypical perception of Africa may have thrived in the cultural productions of the Euro-Western worlds, “which for many years assumed the right to create images of Africa, in fiction, travel writing, anthropological research, maps, missionary accounts,

colonial records and reports produced by aid agencies” (Gallagher 2), what is not in doubt is that there is a continuing perpetuation of it in the memoirs, novels, and films – produced by Africans largely – on African ethnopolitical conflicts and the participation of children as soldiers. As David Mastey observes, “the sensational figure of the child soldier feeds into existing, pessimistic notions about the [African] continent. Child soldier narratives provide a view of African histories, politics, cultures, and day-to-day realities that seem familiar to readers, insofar as they compliment existing thinking about Africa in North America” (52). This negative, stereotypical image of Africa found in child soldier works constitute some of those that humanitarian organizations like the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers use in their campaigns (Lee-Koo 734-5). The Euro-Western human rights readers these works are addressed to and in some cases the namelessness or symbolic signification of their setting make such colonial, distorted, and essentialized depictions of Africa even more inevitable.

While in many cases the African child soldier memoirs are specific about countries within Africa that the authors had their experiences of soldiering, some of the fictions adopt nameless African settings which tend to Africanize child soldiering and, in that sense, decontextualize and de-historicize conflicts in African countries. These narratives, as Rosen argues, “attempt to lend the situation of child soldiers a universal ‘everyman’ quality [...] by drawing upon an earlier discourse about Africa that has long served to dehumanize Africans” (*Child Soldiers in Western Imagination* 57). Dongala’s *Johnny Mad Dog* belongs in this category. Like other child soldier fictions, Dongala’s novel inscribes the image of Africa as a continent of countries which are incapable of governing themselves. This position tallies with Lee-Koo’s conclusion that the “African child soldier is one in a catwalk of children that reminds the global North of the infantilism of the global South” (735). The child narrators stress the un-

livableness of the African world, that is, they serve as witnesses to the real, exaggerated, and imagined precarities of the continent. They bear witness to the human conditions there and their testimonies promote the view of their sociopolitical milieus as places where humans' "vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality" (Achebe 3). It is for this reason that Rosen early on describes the African child soldier genre as "frequently written as dystopian parables," which is another way of underscoring their Afropessimistic contents ("Child Soldiers" 103).

Everything about Dongala's child soldier narrator, Johnny Mad Dog, symbolizes what the reader is to understand as the pathology afflicting the African continent. In this manner, the novel exhibits the point novelist Dinaw Mengestu makes in her reflections on works detailing experiences of African children in and at war. Mengestu observes that "the brutal existence of a child soldier dovetails neatly with the depictions of Africa both as a place born of hell and misery and as a continent that, like a child, can be saved."¹¹ At every turn of the page, Dongala's child (soldier) narrators provide unsettling philippics against the symbolic country they inhabit, one where repeated conflicts have shockingly wiped out "the national army that could have protected" the people (85), where "[t]here's no longer any government; there are only warlords" (153), a country "where the people were so stupid they found nothing better than to kill one another for the sake of power and prevent their own children from going to school" (156), or as Laokole further puts it, a country where "it was impossible to have any hope [...] where the road to power was littered with corpses, where you were hunted down merely because you were a Mayi-Dogo [one of the ethnic groups], where children were murdered in cold blood" (146). This

¹¹ This quotation is from Alexandra Schultheis's "African Child Soldiers and Humanitarian Consumption" in *Peace Review*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2008, pp. 31-40.

senseless violence is something Johnny and his group freely unleashes on the general populace. Johnny makes clear that the war whose cause is facilely attributed to ethnicity is nothing more than a sport for him and his group.

In different ways, Johnny lives up to the billing of his name as a sociopath inhabiting an equally seamy and sick postcolonial country. One of his acts of mindless violence takes place at a radio and tv station. Once he and his team arrive there, they indiscriminately fire rockets and turn on flamethrowers against those they label enemies, transforming them into “human torches shrieking with pain and writhing on the ground.” Johnny says his men find this scene “pretty funny,” more so that the burning humans “squealed like stuck pigs” (20). Other journalists who behold this gory sight fall on their knees and appeal to Johnny to spare their lives. But he “didn’t bother to listen” and he and two others “emptied [their] clips into them at the same time.” As in other cases of unjustifiable killings, Johnny rationalizes the murder of these journalists on the pretext that they “spread propaganda for the previous government and its leader, enemies of the people and of democracy, a genocidal regime with contempt for human rights” (20).

Recognizing that these charges are spurious and indict both the government and the killer squad he leads a unit of, he quickly adds that “I think that’s what we’d been told to say. They shouldn’t have treated us like rebels and bandits” (20). Johnny’s clarification of the attributed reasons for the violent killings his group carries out performs the narrative task of shifting attention away from the child soldier to the nature of the state this fighter exists in. Once Johnny makes his way into the broadcasting station, he goes another step higher in his perpetration of violence in the name of the state. He finds in one of the studios a woman by the name Tanya Toyo, a popular news presenter who the reader later learns Laokole and her friend admire (32). It turns out that this young killer has encountered the broadcaster at a market where he once worked as a sweeper

(22-3). With the instrument of violence, he achieves a quick reversal of role. Where once he answers “[y]es ma’am” to Tanya Toyo’s call of “[y]ou boy” (22) at the marketplace as someone on the lowest rung on the social ladder, Johnny is now able to do as he pleases with the woman. Within the same space, Johnny kills one of the two technicians in the studio with the female broadcaster and thereafter proceeds to rape her, an “ethically unsettling” sight (Moynagh, “Human Rights” 52).¹² Johnny comments on how with the aid of the gun he easily violates the tv presenter: “That’s what is so terrific about a gun. Who can resist you? We’d been told that power lies at the muzzle of a gun, and it was true” (24). Here again attention is deflected from Johnny’s action with the attribution of the knowledge of the capacity of the gun as an instrument of terror to the state. This form of reference is meant to make the reader ponder what manner of state acculturates its young ones into violence.

Other violent acts of Johnny abound. When Laokole and her brother and disabled mother hide to avoid the gunfire of Johnny’s group, she observes that he kills a ten-year-old boy who is hawking fruits. One of the group members finds an Uzi lying on the ground. The group concludes that the Israeli-made submachine gun belongs to the state enemies they call Chechens. At this point the boy hawker is discovered and is branded “one of those subversive elements!” (51). The boy is interrogated but none of his explanations makes sense to the group. Soon, as Laokole reports it, Johnny fires a shot at the boy who “collapsed but did not fall full-length on the ground.” With the boy in that state, Johnny commands one of his subordinates to “[f]inish him off, Little Pepper – a present for you” (53).¹³ Laokole is shocked at this reckless violence and her statement, that “I didn’t know there were people who could murder a child,” affirms the

¹² Moynagh argues that the “the ethically unselling” is a trope in the African child soldier narratives. “Directly or indirectly,” as she submits, the child protagonists of these works confront and regale readers with details of their “crimes” (52-3).

¹³ See page 43 of the novel for the full detail of this account.

unchecked reign of violence her country is entrapped in. It should be noted that Johnny's group, like the political elites in the country they serve, thrives also on inversions of social values such as sharing and giving of gifts. In the passage above, Johnny speaks of his instruction to Little Pepper to engage in the violence of killing the boy as a present. In another account, he recalls that he and Gator, who General Giap kills for doubting his sincerity, share the first woman they catch in a joint act of sexual violence. He explains that this reprehensible behavior enriches his relationship with Gator and that is why he feels pained by his hasty murder.

What is also more important about the scene Laokole witnesses is the observation she makes about Johnny's group. At first she does not know if Johnny's Mata Mata group is a militia group or an adjunct "to the so-called regular army." But she is convinced that these fighters are not "foreign mercenaries, since they were speaking one of the languages of our country." Her conclusion is that it does not matter whether this group is an irregular or regular army because there is no difference in the way each treats the suffering civilian population. Both are cruel. If there is any difference between them, it "lays in the way they dressed" (50). Johnny also buttresses this point in the following chapter after Laokole's, saying "[a]ctually, apart from their uniforms (the supposed state army), I didn't see what made them any more 'regular' than we were [...] We were fighting the same enemies they were; we believed in the same fetishes; we did the same thing to the men and women we captured. Plus we looted the same territory – though I must admit they were better at it than we were" (57-8). The lack of any consequential difference between the state and the non-state army serves here to illustrate the degree to which the state in this story has lost its reason for existence. The country is a jungle where both state and non-state actors are united in acts of criminality against citizens. In this frame of incongruity, the focus is the milieu of the child soldier rather than their undertaking and character.

Additionally, the African world of Johnny's soldiering activities as a place of horror and antithesis of reason comes up in another scene of his operation. Johnny's Commando Unit moves from their Huambo district and takes hold of another district called Kandahar. The names given to the various places in the country of this novel helps to buttress the hellish nature of the place. Both Huambo and Kandahar are prominent cities in Angola and Afghanistan, respectively. Both places are notable for the conflicts that destabilized them. While there has been some respite for Angola, Afghanistan is still in the woods of Islamist terrorist unrest championed by the Talibans (I will have more to say on naming when I consider the war names of Johnny and his fellow child soldiers below in this chapter). It is at Kandahar that Johnny sees some magnificent villas. Among those marvellous villas, one stands out. This unit commander begins to wonder about how the owner makes their money. In that reflection, he suggests that most people in the country are so impoverished that they cannot have the "millions of euros and dollars" required to build such elegant residential edifices (228). He then concludes that whoever owns the house must be one of two things – another window into what governance is about in the country. As Johnny explains it, the owner of the grand building is either "a bureaucrat on the government's payroll" who has "siphoned off large sums from the state treasury, or he was mixed up in politics and was an active member of the party in power (anyway, in our country the two always went hand in hand)" (228-9). Here again the reader is presented with another inversion that defines the war-scarred state in which the morally spent and irredeemable child soldiers reign unchecked. Those who run what is mischaracterized as a government do not see a difference between their private pockets and the public till. Being in office, whether as civil servants or *elected* public officials, provides an unfettered access to the public vault. Moreover, bureaucrats and politicians are as a norm involved in an incestuous relationship of raiding the public treasury for their own personal

comforts. The basic understanding of governance as service to the public for their overall wellbeing is strange to the criminal elements who run Johnny's country. This predatory governance sense contributes to make the country one hellhole repeatedly convulsed by preventable violence. Consequently, if war has no meaning in this country and it is not informed by any coherent ideological positions, politics too has no enduring positive values here.

Eventually Johnny and his fellow fighters make their way into the unique villa in Kandahar district. The owner of the house turns out to be one Mr. Ibara, "the customs inspector! The man who got a ten percent commission on all imported goods, the man who bought a new Mercedes every year, [...] People said he skimmed off more money from the nation's customs revenues than our president did from its oil revenues" (229). Ibara's profile of seedy and larcenous conduct is not so much the point here as is the kind of state that allows an administrator of this man's level to get away with his crimes against the state. The customs boss does not come to any judicial grief on account of his embezzlement and graft because the state itself is perpetrating wrongdoing against *citizens*. This structural malfeasance explains why Dongala's novel occupies a special place among other Afropessimistic representations of the African condition. In this novel, morbidly corrupt state officials like Ibara do not experience any organized protest from any civil society groups or the victims of their hefty thefts, after all, as Johnny says, "[t]here wasn't a soul in the country who hadn't heard of him" (229). So numbed and inured to suffering are the people that there is no record that they unite to protest the legendary misgovernance that devalues their lives, even if they will be violently dispersed or arrested and arraigned for all kinds of framed charges as is the wont of such governments in real cases in some African countries and elsewhere. In considering this point about the novel, Rosen concludes that Dongala's narrative "uses patently absurd and inauthentic social and political

categories to convey the meaningless cruelty of war” (52). That the war is without meaning and the country made up of zombies comes clear in Johnny’s response to Ibara.

Johnny and his group are not outraged that people like this customs boss mortgage their future by stealing the money meant for the public. Rather, once he gains access into the man’s house, Johnny jubilates that he is the “one who would have the privilege of looting his [Ibara’s] house!” (229). That is exactly what he does – drinking the choice wine and champagne in the man’s house (231), smoking his imported cigars (235), carting away his wife’s jewelry box and library with the phony claim of being an intellectual (232 and 233-4), and raping Ibara’s wife, demonstrating how sociopathic he has become. He reports his sexual violation of Mrs. Ibara in this distasteful manner: “I rode her good – I pumped and I pumped. I was fucking the wife of a bigshot! It made *me* feel like a bigshot. And for the first time in my life, I was fucking an intellectual. I felt more intelligent” (237). Other child soldiers also take turns raping the woman. They humiliate the couple and later leave the house. What Johnny says as they depart from Mr. Ibara’s house shows that the country will continue to be governed by lawlessness and will continue to function at the whims and caprices of anyone or groups with the superiority of terror. Those who steal state resources will be subjected to jungle justice. In what seems like a direct message to state officials like Mr. Ibara who may read the novel, Dongala through his child soldier character has this message for them: “Mr. Bigshots of this world, don’t forget that little guys exist, too! And know that they’ll get you whenever they can. Remember this for your own good” (238). In other words, the rule of law and fair judicial trial are never the answer to crimes in the state; the answer is terror and violence from outlaws who are also more than eager to have their share of looted state money and resources. Immediately Johnny and his gang exit the customs man’s house with their loots, they further descend on Kandahar in what is a hideous fest

of plundering, killing, and stealing, noting that from across the length and breath of the district “you could hear cries of ‘*Somba liwa!*’¹⁴ Along with gunfire, thundering grenades, screams, sobs, and the howling of dogs” (240). By the time they are done, Kandahar “was devastated, bled dry, barren as a wheat field after a plague of locusts, bare as an elephant carcass after an attack of army ants” (241). This picture is clear in what it portrays about the world in which the child soldier operates – a complete space of lawlessness where what passes for government troops are taking turns with rebel troops to loot, maim, and kill already stressed people (14). The child soldiers by their actions mirror and symbolize the violence that the state oppresses the people with.

The easy recourse to violence and casual disregard for the sacredness of human lives make Euro-Western foreigners who are exploiting the resources of this representative country think their own humanity is far superior to those of the local people. And when it comes to saving people in the throes of conflict, the understanding is that white foreigners deserve the first consideration, for their own humanity matters more than, if at all, those of the locals. The exchange between Tanisha, the director of the High Commission for Refugees (HCR) where Laokole and other fellow civilians run to to seek protective sanctuary from Johnny’s militia group, and an oil company executive dramatizes this issue. In that interchange which Laokole witnesses, some white foreigners mount pressure on Tanisha to prioritize their evacuations from the country. The woman clarifies that “we at the HCR do not make distinctions among refugees. All are treated the same. Everyone is in an emergency situation” (151). But to the oil magnate, who is one of those demanding privileged evacuation, the locals have always been in emergency

¹⁴ On page 226 of *Johnny Mad Dog*, Johnny quotes one of his subordinates, Little Pepper, as using the phrase twice. Johnny translates this Congolese language as meaning “Buy your death,” used when a person is threatened at gunpoint to either part with money or other items or risk being killed.

situations and seeking to treat them as equals with white outsiders constitutes an abnormality.

His words to Tanisha, who he later learns is an American, are worth quoting in length:

Don't be irresponsible! You intend to treat us like those people?
We're foreign nationals, madam – high-ranking international officers,
with our families [...] We're European citizens – some of us are even
Americans. So show us some consideration! We're not begging for
food like those people over there – because this food, this aid, comes
from our own countries! It's been paid for by taxes on our citizens!
[...] Well, you can understand better than an African that our
evacuation should be given top priority. We want nothing to do with
the mess in this godforsaken country. If those tribes want to slaughter
each other, we don't give a damn. We're not humanitarians.” (151-2)

Although the oil company mogul's words clearly indicate his white supremacism, what is foregrounded here is the condition of the country he and his fellows operate in. The foreign companies which do business in this country are not unaware of its preventable troubles; they do business there because those who lead the country are more concerned about their own pockets than their citizens. The foreign business and oil executives do not have to bother about accountability or any other structures of legality, ethics, and transparency, after all what matters to them, as Tanisha remarks, are “[m]oney, money, money! Oil, oil, oil! Diamonds, diamonds, diamonds!” (152). And when violence erupts as it does often in this place, the oil executive wants it understood that there should be no debate about prioritizing the lives of those who come from countries where human lives are valued. The countries of the foreign nationals the man advocates for may be complicit in the terrible mess this symbolic African country is enmeshed in – a point Tanisha makes in the reprimand of her interlocutor (153) –, the fact remains that human lives do not amount to much in the African country of this work. For that reason, citizens of

foreign countries who are trapped in the violence that incessantly occurs there can make a case for the superiority of their own humanity.

It is not only Euro-Westerners that Tanisha lectures about the importance of valuing all lives. She also talks tough to Johnny when he demands, based on the instructions his superiors hand down to him, that the HCR eject the refugees within their premises. Johnny does not care that the crowd of worried, wounded, and weary civilians his team chases with guns have found a safe haven at the HCR compound. For him, since “the people who were seeking refuge” have been branded as “our enemies,” they must be hunted down and killed (125). It does not matter if they are sheltered in a space protected by international laws as off-limits to violent groups. Johnny fires into the crowd within the precincts of the HCR and the rest of the unit follow his lead (126). It is at this point that some UN Blue Berets come forward to restrain the group from firing at unarmed people.¹⁵ The HCR shares premises with the UN. The loud exchange between the commander of the UN special force and Johnny attracts Tanisha’s attention. Once at the scene, the HCR director crossly denounces the murderous inclination of Johnny. She says to him, “You realize what you have done? Have you seen all those wounded? All the people you’ve killed for no reason? You’re murderers! Criminals. How could you shoot at defenseless men and women? And children! Children – do you realize that? You’re a disgrace to us! A disgrace to

¹⁵ The Blue Berets, also known as Blue Helmets, are the United Nations peacekeepers saddled with the responsibility of observing peace processes in post-peace-agreement societies and working with parties in conflicts to execute peace agreements. Not only since the early 90s have the UN peacekeeping forces been known to monitor elections and compliance to international human rights laws, administer an entire country as was the case in Cambodia, they have also imposed peace by force, using military capabilities against belligerent parties. For more on the UN peacekeeping, peacebuilding, peacemaking, and peace enforcement missions (all of which do overlap in different contexts), see Roger MacGinty’s *No War, No Peace: The Rejuvenation of Stalled Peace Processes and Peace Accords* (2008); Richard Falk, et al.’s *Human Rights at the UN: The Political History of Universal Justice* (2008); Chester Crocker, et al.’s *Unleashing the Dogs of War: Conflict Management in a Divided World* (2007); Martin Rochester’s *Between Peril and Promise: The Politics of International Law* (2006); and Beatrice Pouligny’s “UN Peace Operations, INGOs, NGOs, and Promoting the Rule of Law: Exploring the Intersections of International and Local Norms in Different Postwar Contexts” in *Journal of Human Rights*, vol. 2, no. 3, 2003, pp. 359-77.

Africa and to all Africans! You have no right to be here – this is UN property! Get out!” (128-9). Tanisha’s use of “we” to express her identification with Africa as an African American does not invalidate the fact that she is a foreigner who is performing the messianic duty of saving Africans from being murdered by fellow Africans. Her appearance at the scene from the safety of her office – and her trip to this war-battered country from the US – is akin to a descent into hell to save imperilled souls. When it becomes clear that all the foreigners in the UN compound – personnel from the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, some charitable organizations, and various development projects (129-30) – must be evacuated and the local refugees left to the devices of those ruling their country, Tanisha makes one more effort to save Laokole.

The HCR director informs Laokole, who at that point is only left with her mother having lost her brother in the chaos the militia stokes, that the HCR authorities have acquiesced to her (Tanisha’s) request to take Laokole out of this “godforsaken country” (159). But the young refugee girl refuses the offer on the reason that she does not want to leave her brother and mother behind (160). Evident in Tanisha’s and other foreigners’ paternalistic attempts to save Laokole is what Mark Drumbl refers to as the pathologizing of entire social structures “by presenting the children as needing to be saved from their communities, from their cultures, and from their families” (10). Kate Manzo in “Imaging Humanitarianism: NGO Identity and the Iconography of Childhood” (2008) also argues that NGOs and transnational humanitarian organizations do exploit the images of children from the global South to legitimize their missions and campaigns of saving children from their undeveloped societies. Such efforts at saving the children tend to reinforce racial stereotypes and the images of the children in need of salvation reproduce “colonial visions of a superior global north and an inferior global south” (643). That supposedly inferior African world is what I argue is depicted in Dongala’s novel. Towards the end of the

novel, another white saviour, this time the Belgian journalist Katelijne, offers Laokole a new chance to escape from the unlivable country that has violently taken her family from her and messed up her life. This time the battered but doughty girl has no more reason to refuse the offer of Western salvation. She accepts it but laments that not many people are lucky like her, saying “I’d been rescued and was able to escape because I knew some people who had influence abroad” (302). Laokole further runs a commentary on what leaving her country means:

But not everyone was so fortunate, and in any case a country couldn’t base its future on a mass exodus of its people. True, I was happy to be leaving – but I wasn’t proud of it. For if everyone did the same, who would see to the future of the millions of children condemned to live out their lives here? Those children had as much right to a future as children in Europe and America, and the first thing one had to do to improve their lot was inform the world of their suffering. (302)

Laokole’s point here harks back to the fact that the salvation of the country can only come externally. The only people in this African world thinking of the future of “the millions of children condemned to live out their lives” there are either foreigners or people like her who are “fortunate” to be immigrated abroad. Were it practically possible to relocate the doomed children in that country to America and Europe whose children have hope of a good future, people like Laokole would have considered it as the best action. But since that move is not possible, the other plausible cause of action is to serve as the mouthpiece for these children abroad, appealing to NGOs and international organizations to save those African children. Laokole’s statement above betrays her creator’s view. In several places in the novel, this female narrator’s reflections echo Dongala’s positions on the political situations of his country. In the interview he grants to Eloïse Brezault in 2001, Dongala makes a similar comment to the one his female character

makes in response to the interviewer's question on African intellectuals as "*Western by-products*" and the African condition. Dongala's response is:

I studied in the United States and I worked in France where I could have stayed too, but I preferred to go back to Congo. I have spent my entire career there and I did not leave until 1997 for reasons of real physical fear of being killed! So I tried. I'm not 100% happy to be here because I chose the easy solution, I was lucky to be able to leave, but what about the tens of thousands of children who are there, without being able to get out. Something must be done on the spot.

Like his character, Dongala's worry too is that there is something about his country that makes it dangerous to children and other inhabitants. The thoughts of consistent decimation of lives and bleak futures for the young ones combine to dilute the happiness of those who like Dongala are already far away from the violence and misery of their African countries. What Dongala calls "the easy solution" is far from being the case. The other available option is to remain there and become added to the figures of the murdered, after all, as he says, he decides to leave for "reasons of real physical fear of being killed." In the country he fictionalizes, being an intellectual adds no value to the progress and material well being of the people. The intellectuals who have any chance of contributing to the progress of society are the ones who are based in Euro-Western lands and so are far away from the madding, vicious crowd he graphically depicts in his child soldier novel.

Furthermore, the bleakness of the country in Dongala's story is evident in the roles its intellectuals play there. Unlike in other countries where intellectuals generate ideas that advance their people and the rest of the world, in the nameless country of Dongala's story, academics and thinkers are of no positive value except to the project of bitter divisiveness along ethnic and

religious lines. In this country, “the nonentities become leaders, and the most intelligent ones are always ignored” (82). Where the intellectuals are ever accorded attention, their knowledge is put to the services of the rulers who oversee the country for their own self-serving objectives. An instance of this kind of intellectual is the unnamed – symbolic in this respect – intellectual who talks Johnny into the world of political violence from where he transmogrifies into a fiendish child soldier. Johnny recounts his encounter with the man who introduces himself to him and others as being a native of their region (86). Once the unidentified man says “he was a doctor of something or other, a professor at some university” (87), Johnny, who hitherto says the man does not impress him (86), swiftly gives him attention, saying “[h]e was an intellectual! In our country, the people who were widely admired, especially by kids, were politicians, soldiers, musicians, soccer players. No one looked up to the intellectuals, and certainly not to professors” (87). He thereafter runs a lengthy commentary on who intellectuals are and how he belongs in their circle, a point he claims throughout the novel in peculiarly laughable and derisive sense.

The talking point of the intellectual rests on ethnic othering. There are two dominant ethnic groups in the country of this story. They are the Mayi-Dogos and the Dogo-Mayi. The near sameness of these names (a kind of chiasmus really) suggests the speciousness of the division between the groups. Like Johnny, his fellow soldiers, and the ruling elites, the intellectual also belongs to the Dogo-Mayi ethnic formation. Johnny reports that until this “doctor of something” shows up to talk to them about the need to wipe out the Mayi-Dogos, the two groups have never “had any problem” with each other. He adds that “among the young people our age, no one even knew who was a Mayi-Dogo and who wasn’t” (85-6). One cannot fail to observe that the fire of division the intellectual stokes between the two groups is reminiscent of the actions of colonizers in different parts of Africa to divide and rule and create

new (racialized) identities as was the case, to mention a specific example, in Rwanda. As Mahmood Mamdani argues in his book, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda* (2001), the poisoned colonial legacies of divide-and-rule and political identities subsist as institutional policies in many postcolonial African states. The representative intellectual in Dongala's novel reproduces the constructed colonial political identities and thus proves that the colonial governing logic of artificial divisions is still very much a reality of postcolonial African states.

The man from "some university" explains to Johnny and others that the Mayi-Dogos are the enemies of the Dogo-Mayis, that both ethnic groups are "different peoples," that young Dogo-Mayis like Johnny are unaware of the "fact" because in "reality there were secular hatreds" between the groups "just waiting for an opportunity to flare up" (86). He then concludes that because the party leader that forms the government at the national level is a Dogo-Mayi, Johnny and the others from this ethnic group "automatically owe him our support; his party became our party, and refusing to join it was tantamount to betraying our native region" (86). The intellectual promotes identitarian politics and speaks of adherence to it as a proof of patriotism. Strangely, Johnny, who has thus far dismissed the intellectual's divisive rhetoric as unimpressive, does a volte-face and accepts the man's position. His reason for accepting to be recruited into the Dogo-Mayi-controlled party is that he is an intellectual like the recruiter. Claiming to understand who intellectuals are, Johnny sees no reason why he should doubt one: "So believe me, if I were asked to take the word of a soldier, a businessman, a musician, or an intellectual, I wouldn't hesitate to put my faith in the intellectual. With so much knowledge in their heads, people like that couldn't possibly lie" (87). While Johnny here may be considered naïve, the significance of his manner of recruitment is that it highlights the meaninglessness of

the cause he identifies with. The risible reason he gives for becoming a killer bespeaks the ideological vacuity, nay worthlessness, of the Mata Mata group. Although Johnny and the group see the Mayi-Dogos as enemies, he still chooses a Mayi-Dogo girl as his girlfriend. In his characteristic double-speak and untrustworthiness, he rationalizes the choice by saying Lovelita, the girl, “didn’t choose to be born a Mayi-Dogo. Do you know anyone who chose the hour, the tribe, and the village in which he was born?” (73). But in his merciless hounding and massacring of other members of this group, this sound logic does not apply. This scenario further proves the complete irrationality of the war and onslaught against the Mayi-Dogos. The same invidious senselessness is at play in the attack of Johnny’s group against merchants licensed to run businesses in the country. The Ministry of Commerce requires all merchants to “display a picture of the head of state” in their facilities. But Johnny’s Mata Mata group moves against the merchants who comply with the directive, claiming falsely that those businesses are supporters of the Mayi-Dogo-led government the Dogo-Mayi group wants to oust from office (94). To prove the utter ridiculous nature of their cause and the lawlessness in the land, Johnny observes that anyone who has “valuables worth looting” is considered to be associated with the condemned Mayi-Dogo-peopled government. Johnny’s group is not even faithful to its own rules and it incessantly shifts the goal post of its ill-conceived codes of operation.

Moreover, Johnny’s recruitment is voluntary. His enlistment has more to do with his readiness for a life of violence than any persuasive rhetorical power of the intellectual. The depiction of Johnny’s recruitment and participation in an armed group is not one of victimization and loss of innocence within armed group. Here, Johnny’s case is not so different from Ahmadou Kourouma’s boy soldier character, Birahima, in *Allah Is Not Obligated*. As street kids, both Birahima’s and Johnny’s respective experience of streetism makes them ready for the violence of

soldiering. They both inhabit polities which value their kind only for the violence they can wrought. Even General Giap, a friend who later becomes Johnny's commander, has reason to reconsider his initial principled stand against joining the intellectual's violent, ethnically homogenous political group. Giap rebuffs Johnny's later attempt to recruit him into the group. But once he learns, with evidence from others, that being in the group affords anyone who joins the chance to meet their needs and loot without consequences, Giap repudiates his fine principle and sound argument against identitarian politics and becomes not merely a nominal member, but a commander of "the Mata Mata commandos, fearsome enemy of the Mayi-Dogo militiamen known as the Chechens" (88-95). Giap, whose former nickname is Pili Pili until Johnny coins "Giap" for him (10), joins the group because "a multisystem VCR" he has been longing for but could not have can be easily obtained through association with the armed group (90 and 95). Giap's reason for enlisting in an armed group illustrates how privation makes armed groups beholden to young people. It further shows that he inhabits a country where another name for governance is destitution, duplicity, and violence (on pages 42, 83-4, and 89 Johnny provides details of the politicians in his country). For Giap, as is the case with other child soldiers in the African child soldier genre, armed groups are either a refuge zone or a place where the desires for the basic and good things of life are satisfied.

"A name is never innocent": Signification of War Names in *Johnny Mad Dog*

If the Mata Mata armed group which Johnny belongs to is ideologically arid and the war it wages pointless, the war names and identities the fighters construct for themselves emphasize the irrationality of their cause too. In the varied works of the African child soldier narratives there are many war names. Mastey has written about the war names in the African child soldier

narratives, noting that “more than fifty war names appear in these works” (“War Names” 167). These nom de guerres, he argues, perform varied narratological purposes, including acting as “unique identifiers, signal their [child soldiers’] statuses as combatants” (“War Names” 166 and 168). Mastey notes that the characters who come up with war names do often comment on the significances of those designations, which they take as “inspirational, aspirational, representative of how they want to be perceived by others and even a source of ‘hidden power’ that improves their effectiveness as soldiers” (166). And as Rosen has shown, war names are not unique to African child soldier narratives. They exist in different transcultural productions. Rosen explains that in different Western antiwar narratives, war names are rife. He identifies the name “Johnny” as quite popular in such works (*Child Soldiers in Western Imagination* 52). However, the difference, he argues, between the African Johnny in Dongala’s novel and the ones in Western narratives is that the Western Johnnys are not depicted as dehumanized fighters in wars without political contexts or criminals waging wars that are mainly oriented towards mere violent lootings and killings of defenceless civilians (52).¹⁶ As he argues elsewhere, “the international community of humanitarian and human rights groups and of governments” have a role to play in the new meaning that the name Johnny has acquired in contemporary African child soldiers narratives (*Armies of the Young* 14). These groups, Rosen maintains, “once avid supporters of the armies of national liberation, have now redefined all rebels and their leaders as apolitical criminals and child abusers” (14). In other words, the Johnnys of African contemporary wars are either apolitical innocent victims or damaged criminals involved in wars that signal the colonial notions of the barbarity and irrationality of non-European peoples (Macmillan 37).

¹⁶ Elsewhere, Rosen also examines the historical change in the undertakings of the bearer of the name Johnny. See “The Child Soldier in Literature or How Johnny Tremain Became Johnny Mad Dog.” *Restaging War in the Western World: Noncombatant Experiences, 1890-Today*, edited by Maartje Abbenhuis and Sara Buttsworth. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, pp. 109-127.

I find both Mastey's and Rosen's separate thoughts on war names in African and Western traditions useful contributions to the criticisms of transcultural child soldier narratives. My addition to their thoughts is that the war names in Dongala's *Johnny Mad Dog* augment the Afropessimistic contents of the novel. The Johnny in this novel, together with the war sobriquets he bears, has changed unrecognizably from the Johnnys of previous wars who fought for liberation, independence, democracy, and freedom to one who resents those lofty ideals. The new Johnny operates and uses war nicknames that are consistent with the features of the "new war" Mary Kaldor popularizes. The appellations of all the child soldier characters in Dongala's novel are carefully chosen to reflect the insignificance of their cause and the actively degenerating milieu in which they carry out their dehumanizing actions. The act of choosing war names is also a marker of the agentic capacities of the young fighters. These war names, as Johnny's efforts indicate, are not casually created, or selected. Their adoption follows "a complex process regulated by informal rules that yield diverse examples" (Mastey 166). Johnny comments on this process, stressing that a "name isn't just a name. A name contains hidden power. It's no accident that I've taken the name Lufua Liwa, which means 'Kill Death,' or rather 'Cheat Death.' A name is never innocent" (9-10). In other words, the potency of names requires that he thinks carefully about his choice.

Johnny does not frivolously concoct his war names. When the reader first encounters him in chapter two where he makes his first appearance after Laokole, his war name is "Lufua Liwa" – "Johnny, known as Lufua Liwa" (6). It is the only chapter in which Johnny uses this war name. This pseudonym, he claims, is bland and counterproductive. Death is an inevitable fact of life, and even if one cheats it, it is but for a temporary time. In other words, for Johnny, the name does not represent him as a member of a death-dealing group, a person of terror. He says,

“‘Lufua Liwa’ doesn’t inspire fear. Someone who cheats death is certainly crafty, sly, cunning, and shrewd, but he has never struck terror into the enemy’s ranks” (10). For this reason, he thinks of a new war name that is representational and capable of eliciting the kind of response he wants from people. After some period of reflection, Johnny comes up with such a name: “From now on, I’d call myself Matiti Mabe – ‘Poison Weed.’ Poison like *diamba*, the powerful hemp that grows around here and that makes your head spin, drives you crazy. Poison like the deadly mushroom” (10). Most of the things Johnny does from this point onward reflect the significance of his new name. He talks and acts like a deranged person. He eulogizes himself thus: “Matiti Mabe, the evil weed that can mess up your head with a single puff of smoke, transforming the stars in the sky into millions of glowing, menacing owl-eyes in the darkness” (80). At another time, when Giap addresses him by the derivative moniker “Turf, harmless grass,” Johnny again waxes lyrical about “Matiti Mabe,” saying “evil, poisonous, deadly weed; the mushroom that kills, that sends you *ad patres* [literally], to the land of your ancestors; the cannabis whose smoke makes your head explode into a thousand psychedelic pieces; the beautiful, mysterious, yet carnivorous flower that feeds on live animals” (97). Johnny not only strikes fear into the enemy – who are mostly innocent civilians –, but he also toxifies their lives. The phrase, “beautiful, mysterious, yet carnivorous flower that feeds on live animals,” also signifies the sense in which the “child soldier” phrase is understood in the humanitarian discourse – a child as an innocent being who is acculturated into violence. The oddity is striking; a flower devouring flesh, more or less a child (innocence) as a soldier (violence). Johnny’s explication of his war nickname does show that, although biologically he is somewhat a child, he is at once a dangerous person inhabiting a jungle-like space where strange and barbaric things happen. The fact that Johnny is still a child, physically, is evident in his response to the weapon General Giap orders him to

carry. That weapon, a rocket launcher, proves too big for the boy – it “was almost twice my size and weighed a ton,” Johnny reveals (17).

Another war name that reveals the make-up of Johnny as a child soldier, the barbaric war he is participatorily waging, and the condition of his country is “Johnny Mad Dog.” Between chapters four and ten, Johnny retires the war name “Matiti Mabe.” For him, the name does not yield the outcome he wants in his relationships with people, and it does not befit his status as a “military leader” (98). From chapter eleven he takes on Johnny Mad Dog, from whence the title of the novel emerges. He answers to this eponymous name through to the time of his death. Johnny justifies the jettisoning of “Matiti Mabe” on the ground that “a plant, even a poisonous one, won’t scare the shit out of an enemy. With a pair of good boots, you can safely walk on it, trample it. No, it was a stupid name – I had to change it” (98). While there is no doubt that the reason this child soldier adduces for the renunciation of the name shows his fickleness, the change also reflects the kind of seriousness attached to the creation of war names. Johnny’s desire for a new name at this point comes shortly after he is made the commander of one of the fifteen-member Commando Units. He wants a name that can express this status as well as convey the evilness, animalism, and terror he personifies. Thus, this name performs an expressive function, signifying his transformation into a savage beast. The conversion proves irreversible as this mad dog is killed. Of this name, Johnny says, “And *wham!* A name exploded in my brain [...] A strong, powerful name, a name that inspires the same gut-wrenching terror that a condemned man feels before the firing squad, a name that makes people tremble when they see it on a sign” (98). The name is both expressive and motivational. It communicates what Johnny has become, the nature of his undertaking within the Mata Mata rebel militia, and motivates him to conduct himself antisocially. It is not surprising that after the announcement of

the name – “From now I’m MAD DOG!” –, his first move is to “give the command for them [his crew] to fall upon the city like roaring, bounding tigers” (98). Johnny becomes what Drumbl tags a “demon child soldier,” which, as he posits, “tends to hail from the global South (notably Africa) [and] it reinforces racial stereotypes” (10).

Drumbl is right. The image of the child soldier as a vicious demon is the stuff of most African child soldier narratives. That demon is present in Uzodinma Iweala’s *Beasts of No Nation*, Kourouma’s *Allah Is Not Obligated*, Chris Abani’s *Song for Night*, Delia Jarrett-Macaulay’s *Moses, Citizen and Me*, and Dongala’s *Johnny Mad Dog*. Of all protagonists of these works, Johnny Mad Dog appears as the most demonic child soldier. In other child soldier stories, particularly stories of young people who joined Jewish partisans fighting the Nazis during the Second World War, the child soldier is generally a pleasant, endearing figure who exhibits the virtues of patriotism and discipline, and heroic qualities. A typical example here is Yuri Suhl’s novel, *Uncle Misha’s Partisans* (1988). Suhl’s story is about a 12-year-old Jewish boy by the name Motele, who loses his entire family to the mindless killings of the Nazi death squad. The story is told in the third-person. On a fateful day Motele returns from his violin training to see his entire village burnt and his family members all dead. Through the help of a neighbor, he escapes the searchlights of the Nazi killers. The kind fellow advises Motele to clandestinely run away to a village where he is not known and must not reveal his identity as a Jew. For some time after his escape from his village, Motele works variously in the new place he runs to as a shepherd and a violinist entertaining people at social gatherings. He also changes his name from Motele (a Jewish name) to Mitek (a Ukrainian name) to disguise his identity, a move that later proves useful for the partisans’ campaign. He works with a peasant, a farmer’s daughter who is married to a policeman who one day hosts a feast for his colleagues. It is on this occasion that Motele

hears the officers talk about a group of partisans made up of Jews who have escaped from Hitler's extermination camps into the deep forests and are fighting against the Germans. He learns that the group is headed by one "Uncle Misha." Soon, Motele runs away from the village and goes in search of "Uncle Misha's Partisans." After long hours of a journey that includes multiple evasions of German soldiers and their loyalists, he runs into some men who belong to the armed group. Once he learns that they are partisans, he makes a case for his membership and requests that they take him to Uncle Misha.

In articulating his eligibility for membership of the partisans, Mitek underscores his shared experience with members of the group and stresses the fact that they are all together confronted with the same existential danger that needs to be thwarted. However, thinking that the boy is delirious and does not understand what he is saying, some members of the partisans suggest that he should be dispatched to "the family camp" where "he'll have boys his age to play with" (9).¹⁷ But Mitek disagrees, resolutely saying, "I'm not looking for boys to play with [...], I want to be a partisan" (9). As Mitek reasons, he just cannot be disallowed from joining the partisans, "[t]here must be something a boy of his age could do to make himself useful to real partisans" (13). The boy's refusal to accept being dispatched to the playground suggests his clear awareness of the terrifying danger he and his fellow Jews are confronted with. As Rosen observes, for many Jewish children, "the context of genocide meant that there was virtually no space not to be a soldier" (*Armies* 47). Mitek reasons that the existential threat faced by Jews is unusual and so does require that the prewar traditional roles and boundaries between adults and

¹⁷ In chapter two of his book, *Armies of the Young: Child Soldiers in War and Terrorism*, Rosen talks about the creation of "family camps" within the partisan groups. Rosen explains that while some members of the partisans gave themselves to the fight against the Germans and their allies, others thought of their duties as providing shelter for those who had made it into the forests. See pages 53-55 of the book for more on the family camps within the Jewish partisan groups.

young people give way to the forging of alliance for the purpose of fighting the war. Rosen's clarification on the presence of children in the partisan army appositely lends credence to my interpretation. He says: "That children were among the Jewish youth fighters and partisan groups should not be surprising. Children were part of virtually every partisan and resistance movement in World War II [...] The reason was simple: all Jews were targeted for death. Genocide, in singling out an entire people for death, makes no distinction between soldier and civilian, combatant and noncombatant, male and female, infant and elder" (*Armies* 22).

When Mitek finally meets Uncle Misha at his hideout, he repeats his desire to join the partisans and become not just a sit-at-the-base partisan but "a partisan who goes on missions" (108). Uncle Misha finds the boy's unyielding determination to be a boy soldier irresistible. But the group still does not allow him to go to the frontline. Mitek continues to demand that he should be deployed to see real action so that he can help bring down the Nazi evil system. Reluctantly, Mitek accepts the explanation that what he does "behind-the-lines" as a partisan counts in the cause (108). The young man commits himself devotedly to the activities of the group. And through this commitment, adherence to the partisans' rules, and demonstration of agency, Mitek helps the group to achieve a notable victory against a detachment of the Nazis. Suhl's depiction of the partisans' acceptance and engagement of Mitek as a spy and intelligence gatherer despite their initial hesitancy recreates one of the realities of the actual Jewish partisans. Rosen reports that "the partisan units that accepted children and youth had to be willing to find a role for them under the harsh conditions of warfare" (*Armies* 55).

Mitek's case prove the point that "[i]n some circumstances, becoming a child soldier may be a necessary and positive choice for children. Indeed, where there is a total breakdown of society, armed groups may provide the only source of refuge and safety for children" (Rosen,

“Child Soldiers, International” 298). With his family killed and his life endangered, the armed group proves to be the only place where Mitek is safe. He himself understands it and this recognition explains why he does all he can to find the partisans. He knows too well that if he remains with the peasant, his identity as a Jew may soon be exposed, for living with a police officer sympathetic to the Nazi nihilistic ideology puts him closer to the evil that claims his nuclear family and makes his village unlivable for him. In electing to seek and join the partisans, Mitek demonstrates such agency that signposts him as a “conscious agent of political conflict” (Boyden, “Anthropology Under Fire” 248). This political consciousness contrasts with humanitarian discourse which denies children’s capacity to understand the sociopolitical realities of their environments. Suhl’s story challenges that discourse of children’s political ignorance, indicating that children are not the political novices they are commonly regarded to be. In stressing the political ideology and the capability of young Jews to make rational choices, Rosen observes that Jewish child soldiers “made dignified and honorable choices, and their lives serve as a reminder of the remarkable capability of children and youth to shape their own destinies” (*Armies* 56). The Mitek encountered in this story makes a conscious decision to join armed resistance group based on his deep appreciation of the invidious predicament of Jews in a world where the extermination of Jews is a mission statement for some people.

The portrait of the partisans’ resistance against the Nazis in Suhl’s narrative is one of a noble cause. Every member of the group understands the insurrection as a moral affair which disallows any form of criminality. The partisans are depicted as a group of disciplined, focused army with clearly defined ideology and goals. It is not a ragtag army which forces people into its fold, tortures, and steals from the public. As the narrator reveals, the partisans are forbidden from stealing from peasants, adding that “they were allowed to take only food. Not clothing. This was

a very strict rule. A partisan who broke it was severely punished” (103). When the partisans use violence, it is decisively against enemy combatants. Everyone who joins the armed group does so with a mind to contribute to the actualization of the objectives of the fight. Uncle Misha’s Partisans prohibit the young partisans in the group from doing anything they want; it is made clear that “a partisan acts on his commander’s orders” (104). It is strongly impressed upon the young fighters that obedience to the instructions of commanders is a must, more so that those superiors themselves lead by example. In essence, *Uncle Misha’s Partisans* participates in a past military tradition in which children’s participations in wars as soldiers are represented as heroic acts, a matter of ineluctable necessity, duty, and patriotism; and the armed groups they enlist in as fighting forces given to morally justifiable and egalitarian ideals.

In contrast, Dongala’s *Johnny Mad Dog* presents an image of the child soldier in transition – from the heroic child combatant observable in novels such as Suhl’s to the fighter who is at once a demonic killer and a heartless perpetrator of crimes in a war without ideology and purpose. Both on the street and in an armed group as an unconscionable murderer, Johnny inhabits a disorganized, chaotic space. Even in the violent-ridden environment that Mitek in Suhl’s child soldier story inhabits, he still finds meaningful engagement by working for a peasant. No such affordance is possible in Johnny’s case. Not even the understanding that those who fight for the ruthless and corrupt ruling elites are expendable and are of no value compels a different stance on the part of the likes of Johnny and his peers. Where Uncle Misha’s partisans have a laudable objective, fight as a disciplined army, and purposefully deploy its old and young warriors, General Giap’s army is rudderless, undisciplined, ideologically barren, and destructive. While Suhl’s story is grounded in the history of the Holocaust, during which millions of Jews were heinously murdered, most African child soldier stories – e.g., Dongala’s – are denuded of

their historical underpinnings. Yet, as Zeleza remind us, “many postcolonial conflicts [in Africa] are rooted in colonial conflicts. There is hardly any zone of conflict in contemporary Africa that cannot trace its sordid violence to colonial history and even the late nineteenth century” (1).

Whereas *Uncle Misha’s Partisans* paints a positive image of the involvement of children in armed group in a non-African setting, *Johnny Mad Dog* depicts child soldiering in Africa through a familiar Afropessimistic lens that considers warfare in Africa a criminal escapade. The Africa of this novel is a corridor of darkness, one running parallel to the Africa in Western discourse about Africa and its wars. Like most of the African child soldier narratives and films, Dongala’s novel encourages Western audiences to see the conflict it presented “to stand for African warfare, African politics, or even Africa entirely,” thus reproducing “the generalizing, Afropessimistic image of the whole continent as a sinister and violent place” (Sandig 203). The Africa of Dongala’s *Johnny Mad Dog* is pretty much what Akin Adesokan calls “a site of humanitarian emergency” (13).¹⁸ The humongous pathetic human pitiable condition there attracts the intervention and presence of transnational humanitarian organizations, NGOs, and the International Community eager to demonstrate that they are for the good of humankind generally regardless of race and ethnicity. The international media also hovers like vultures over this African world to scoop stories of suffering and pain to Western listeners and viewers. After all, as the reporter from Belgium, Katelijne, informs Laokole, “viewers liked reports from Africa that featured scenes of blood and gore, starving children stretching out their hands imploringly, dramatic images like the ones she wanted to make of Mama” (303). When Katelijne and her crew are invited to a refugee camp in the country, Laokole subverts the journalist’s plan for such

¹⁸ See also Aviva Sinervo and Kristen Cheney’s “NGO Economics of Affect: Humanitarianism and Childhood in Contemporary and Historical Perspective” (2019, 14).

dramatic stories of suffering. Rather than be presented with such sights, Laokole ensures that Katelijne listens only to stories of the women who have suffered and witnessed suffering, especially sexual violence. In that encounter, it is the women who tell their stories in the way they want anyone interested to hear it and not how the journalist shapes and presents it, for by remaining silent and allowing others to determine how to tell “our stories,” one woman reasons, “we’ve become invisible” (303). But while the presences of these international groups mean something modestly beneficial for some of the locals, generally these organizations are depicted in a satiric, negative sense as hypocritical, self-facing, opportunistic, dissimulating, racist, and insensitive. As Katelijne says to Laokole and her friend Melanie in the HCR compound when she persuades them to share their stories, these international bodies do not mean well for Africans.

Kateljne says:

The world is completely ignorant of the tragedy unfolding here. An appalling civil war that has caused nearly ten thousand deaths, half a million displaced persons and refugees, a humanitarian catastrophe – and not a single word in the American or European media. Obviously, this isn’t Kosovo or Bosnia. Africa is far away, right? Who cares about Africa? Tantalum – okay. Oil, diamonds, hardwoods, gorillas – yes. But the people don’t count. They’re not whites, like us. We mustn’t let this scandal continue, or let the arms dealers get richer and richer on the blood of Africans! It’s a disgrace to all of humanity! We’ve got to bear witness!” (145)

Kateljne’s criticism serves to reveal the international, external dimension to the problems of this fictionally symbolic country.¹⁹ Her censure also echoes the point that Tanisha has established in her critical response to the racist stance of the white executive of an international oil company.

¹⁹ In a public interview involving “a European scholar from an International Centre of African Studies at some French university” and “an African political analyst,” the external factor to African conflict is further discussed. The exchange also contains stereotypes about African warfare. See pages 211-15.

The fulcrum of that encounter is the fact that to international organizations Africa does not matter beyond its vast resources. And in speaking of bearing witness, Katelijne underlines again the function of most African child soldier narratives. As I have noted early on, the narrators of these stories bear witness to the horrors they themselves perpetrate and/or the ones they suffer from. They bear witness to the pains that come with being children in a land that, as Laokole remarks, does not care for them.

Dongala's novel dwells on barbarism and negativities. The novel's African space is still, to use Achebe's words in his critique of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, "a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity" (5). In his efforts to recreate the socioeconomic and political conundrums of some African states in which children feature as soldiers, Dongala reifies a stereotypical understanding of the African continent as a dangerous place. The presence of some blameable foreigners in this work, as I have reasoned, does not affirm the humanity of the inhabitants of the created African world, for as Achebe makes clear to Caryl Phillips in their 2003 conversation, "You cannot diminish a people's humanity and defend them at one and the same time."²⁰

²⁰ See Caryl Phillips's "Out of Africa" in *The Guardian*, 2003: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/feb/22/classics.chinuaachebe> (Accessed April 23, 2021).

Chapter Five

The “Paratextual Condition” of African Child Soldier Narratives

In the preceding four chapters of this study, I have analyzed the textual representations of child soldiers, as well as the political and socioeconomic realities of their African world. But there is also a visual dimension to these representations. Put differently, the texts of African child soldier narratives do not constitute the sole site of such representations. Paratexts – “the means by which a text makes a book of itself and proposes itself as such to its readers, and more generally to the public” (Genette 262) – also contribute to representations of child soldiers and much more. If child soldier narratives are, as Joya Uraizee rightly asserts, fraught with uncertainty (xi) and their protagonists “difficult to grasp and pin down analytically” (Honwana and De Boeck 3), their paratexts are even more ambivalent, contentious, and uneasy in their portrayals of the child at war. In this chapter I examine the paratextual elements of Ahmadou Kourouma’s *Allah Is Not Obligated*, Uzodinma Iweala’s *Beasts of No Nation*, Emmanuel Dongala’s *Johnny Mad Dog*, and other autobiographical narratives in the African child soldier genre available in Western book markets. I offer some reflection on the work that paratexts of child soldier narratives does with and to their main stories. The covers of these books do important paratextual work, I contend, notwithstanding their ostensible purpose as marketing devices. They also serve as a means of reinforcing the idea of the faultlessness and victim status of “passive” and bestialized child victims, and contribute to stereotyping Africa as backward and child soldiering as endemic to the continent. Notable too is the fact that Western publishers of these stories are deeply aware of the immeasurably significant emotional impression that book covers, especially of those depicting the vulnerability of children, have on the reading public. I submit that cover designs of African child soldier narratives, considered as paratexts, are sites

filled with tensions and contestations since what is represented in cover designs can sometimes depart dramatically from what the book is actually about. In the divergence between paratexts and their source texts we find confirmation of Genette's claim that paratexts act more beyond formal objects, "playing [their] own game to the detriment of [their] text[s'] game" (Genette 260). This form of subversive contestation emerges from and speaks to what David Rosen (2015), Lorraine Macmillan (2009), and Catarina Martins (2011) have each respectively described as the North-South divide in depictions and understandings of African child soldiers and their societies. Thus, the paratextual condition of African child soldier narratives is marked by tension, ambivalence, misinformation, discrepancy, and stereotypes.

On the Concept of Paratext

Without doubt, paratexts are essential elements of books. As the foremost theorist of paratextuality, Gerard Genette, explains them, paratextual components "surround [the text] and prolong it, precisely in order to *present* it, ... to make it *present*; to assure its presence in the world, its 'reception' and its consumption, in the form, nowadays at least, of a book" (emphasis from the main text, 261). Because paratexts exist in the outer layers of a book, they are what hold a book together. They are the forerunner of a book, or what Philippe Lejeune calls "the fringe of the printed text which, in reality controls the whole reading" (45). Paratexts provide pathways that lead the reader into the text. Consequently, they offer readers "the possibility either of entering or turning back" (Genette 261). Through an examination of the paratextual makeup of a given book, it is possible for readers to make a decision regarding a book – whether they would get or even read the book or not. By paying attention to a book's paratexts, it is possible to locate "the text within a process context and evaluate its position within a culture that cherished the

book and the written word” (Shlomo Berger 57). And paratext, as Genette posits, comprises two separate but related parts, these being “peritext + epitext” (262). The peritext is made up of titles, subtitles, prefaces, acknowledgements, dedications, slogans, cover appendages, among other things. Conversely, the epitext is defined by varied pieces of information that lie outside of a book. Among these material texts are reviews, interviews, letters, errata slips, and advertisement leaves. Taken together, the paratextual elements of peritext and epitext provide specific information about a book. Paratext, therefore, is the means by which “the unknown becomes known and the unknowable becomes known” (Watts 76).

While Genette’s conception of the paratext is important, my use of the concept maintains more fidelity to Beth McCoy’s understanding, which construes paratexts as elements of books “constituted by title pages, introductions, dedications, prefaces, epigraphs, footnotes and endnotes, forewords and afterwords, appendices, and blurbs” (199). It is through McCoy’s work that I have gained the awareness of the significance of paratexts. McCoy’s reading of the paratexts of slave narratives illuminates my understanding of the place and importance of paratexts in interactions with books. Thus, from my engagements with child soldier narratives it becomes clearer that paratexts are far from being the subordinate entities, merely “assistant,” “accessory,” and “auxiliary” to books as Genette conceives them to be.¹ And they are neither an “undisputed territory” incontestably enabling the reading of the text in line with authorial intention (McCoy 407). Paratexts have become “undutiful servants,” doing and saying more than is expected of them. As McCoy argues in her illuminating essay, “Race and the (Para)Textual Condition” (2015), attention to paratexts can open pathways to other ways of reading and

¹ Andrew van der Vlies takes similar position when he advocates “a more material engagement with the text” instead of attending mainly to the “abstract notion of text.” See his edited *Printed Text and Book Culture in South Africa*, Wits UP, 2012, p. 13.

understanding – not only slave narratives but also African cultural productions. Among these cultural productions are African child soldier narratives which have lately become the new kids on the production bloc of Western book markets because of their traumatic contents and implications for human rights promotion (200). In Kay Schaffer and Sidone Smith’s view, “life narratives [like African child soldier stories] are one of the most potent vehicles for advancing human rights claims” (1).² The production processes and the places of production of these works make their paratexts “ripe for critical investigation” (McCoy 207).

Paratexts contribute to shaping how books are read and what meanings are assigned to areas that readers might be unfamiliar with. An uncritical attitude to the paratexts and contents of stories from postcolonial societies and those of distant cultures (most notably those from the Global South) published by Western publishers and circulated in the West for Western readers may perpetuate what Diana Brydon has dubbed “sanctioned ignorance,” which as she explains allows for the promotion of the rhetoric of multiculturalism while acting as if structural racism is nonexistent (“Cross-Talk” 81). It is for the reason of avoiding such certified, willful ignorance that Diana in another essay, “Difficult Forms of Knowing: Enquiry, Injury and Translocated Relations of Postcolonial Responsibility,” makes the following crucial points:

Fictional imaginings, stories, and poems remain some of the most powerful modes we have for entering and engaging with difficult ways of knowing and thus stretching our imagination in the ways that will be necessary for addressing the challenges now facing our interconnected world with globalization. But they cannot stand alone. They need to be placed in dialogue with other modes of enquiry such as those developed in the civil, social, market, and physical spheres once confined for analysis to

² See *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition*, 2004, Palgrave Macmillan.

the social and natural sciences. Texts once studied within the confines of a national literature need to be read as involved in an emerging global dialogue, but in a manner that bewares of assumptions of easy translatability across different cultural situations. Never must we be more cautious than when the language or genre of expression suggests an “apparent mutual transparency.” (16)

An analysis of the texts of African child soldier narratives as well as their paratexts is important for making sense of their subjects. Placing the paratexts of these works in dialogue with their stories help us to understand the roles of such agents as editors, graphic designers, art directors, and marketers in their production, a process through which they potentially shape readers’ interest or, as David Mastey puts it, determine “how a child soldier story appears on the bookshelf or among the pages of online retailers” (“Covering Child Soldiers”). If, as Mastey argues, the covers of these narratives invite readers not just to buy “but also to interpret [their] contents in particular ways,” then it goes without saying that there are certain assumptions that the covers of these books disseminate about child soldiering and the African settings they recreate. In this regard the paratexts of the African child soldier genre reminds us of “the institutional production of ‘African literature’ as a category in the west, interventions that encouraged the treatment of African literature as ‘cultural information’, as a more or less transparent window onto a richly detailed and culturally specific, but still somehow homogenous [...] African World” (Sandwith 475). The presence of stereotypes and unfounded assumptions that some of the covers of the African child soldier stories project suggests the reliance of the publishers on “existing tropes” (Mastey “Covering Child Soldiers”).

It is not only in African child soldier narratives that paratextual materials may be found fraught. In his book, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (2001), Graham Huggan

speaks about the paratexts of the once-popular African Writers Series (AWS), noting that “the blatantly exoticist packaging of AWS titles, particularly their covers, arguably betray a preoccupation with the iconic representation of an ‘authentic’ Africa for a largely foreign readership” (53). Profit and reification of the old ways of imagining Africa appear to be the inspiration behind how Western publishers create the paratextual materials of African stories. Mastey reminds us that the publishers of these stories “participate in the marketing, sale and consumption of an ‘Africa’ that in truth does not exist” (157). In her essay, “African Books for Western Eyes,” the novelist Tricia Nwaubani reflects on Western publishers’ and judges’ choices of the African stories to publish and single out for high honours. She claims: “Why else have brutality and depravity been the core of many celebrated African stories? It appears that publishers have allotted Africa the slot for supplying the West with savage entertainment (stories about ethnic cleansing, child soldiers, human trafficking, dictatorships, rights abuses and so on). The same stereotypes Africans often claim to abhor tend to form the foundations for our literary successes.”³

As I have already noted in the introduction to this study, all the best-known stories of the African child soldier genre – fictions and nonfictions – are published and circulated in the West. For example, the seven prominent memoirs by former child soldiers (Beah, Akallo, Mehari, Keitetsi, Jal, Missamou, and Kamara) are published in the UK, the US, Canada, Germany, and Denmark. The same is true of all the four novels I examine in this dissertation and others such as Delia Jarret-McCauley’s *Moses, Citizens, and Me* (2005). All these authors are based in the West and published their stories there. This reality has prompted Allison Mackey to conclude that their

³ See Nwaubani’s essay here: <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/30/opinion/sunday/african-books-for-western-eyes.html> (Accessed March 12, 2021).

stories “are written from within the geographical and intellectual space of the global north” (101).⁴ To be sure, African child soldier narratives do not by reason of their publication abroad occupy any unique position. Indeed, these works share this fact in common with most works that make up African literature, a point that Eleni Coundouriotis underscores thus: “The recent proliferation of African child soldier narratives largely reflects this new shape of African literature, written and marketed outside Africa” (192). Lizzy Attree makes a similar point, noting that “[m]uch contemporary African writing emanates from writers living in the diaspora, living and working outside the countries in which they were born” (36). In Joya Uraizee’s words, these writers are “migrants and then immigrant writers, their speaking voices occupy a liminal space” (26).⁵ While these narratives – owing to their “displacement and production and study” outside of Africa (Coundouriotis 191-2) – revitalize the long-existing debate on what qualifies as African literature,⁶ their paratexts demonstrate their publishers’ influence in eliciting readerly interest and shaping readerly understanding of the stories. This possibility even more makes African child soldier narratives and their paratexts contested. The idea of African war and the understanding of child soldiers present in these works and their paratexts are as absurd as they as they are ambiguous, ambivalent, and misleading. Indeed, if reading the “insides” of African child soldier narratives is important for what they can reveal, reading the “outsides” of these books can yield deeper insights into their “production and reception, the different roles [they have] been

⁴ See also Joya Uraizee’s *Writing That Breaks Stones: African Child Soldier Narratives*, 2020, p. 26.

⁵ Delia Jarrett-Macauley in a 2006 interview with Ambrose Musiyiwa also reflects on the pains and challenges that come with an African writer living in the West. See “[‘Something Beautiful and Strong’: Interview with Delia Jarrett-Macauley, Winner of Orwell Prize for Political Writing](#), *BlogCritics*, accessed March 14, 2021.

⁶ Biodun Jeyifo has observed that the sites of activities for African literary study are Europe and North America and no longer Africa (see “The Nature of Things: Arrested Decolonization and Critical Theory,” *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 21, no.1, 1990, p. 40). It is for this reason, as Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani observes, that African readers think of African literature as existing for mainly Western audience (See “African Books for Western Eyes” in *New York Times*, November 28, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/30/opinion/sunday/african-books-for-western-eyes.html>). See also Griswold’s *Bearing Witness: Readers, Writers, and the Novel in Nigeria* (2000) and Larson’s *The Ordeal of the African Writer* (2001).

assigned, the various ways [they have] been made to signify, and the particular ideological and material interests [they have] been made to serve” (Sandwith 489). Without “more dawdling on the threshold of the threshold,” to use Genette’s imperative, I turn now to examine the paratexts of some child soldier narratives, beginning with Kourouma’s child soldier novel.

Analyzing the Paratextual Condition

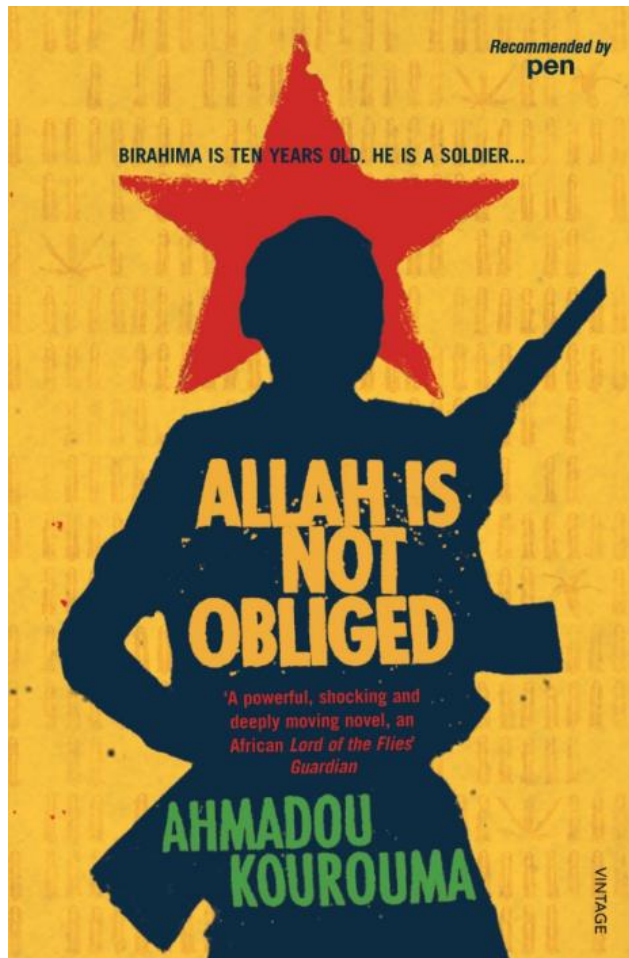
When introducing himself, the protagonist-narrator of Kourouma’s *Allah Is Not Obligated*, Birahima, informs readers that he does not know his exact age: “I’m maybe ten, maybe twelve (two years ago, grandmother said I was eight, maman said I was ten)” (3). It is crucial to note that despite an indication of the undetermined age of this irreverent protagonist-narrator, the cover page of the novel declaims ex cathedra that “Birahima is ten years old. He is a soldier...” I argue that this apparent misinformation suggests the liberty taken by the publishers, a decision that is far from insignificant. The specificity in Birahima’s age on the novel’s cover page is meant to highlight his childhood, nay vulnerability, in contrast with the idea of soldiering which indicates aggression and violence. Even though Birahima’s experiences and actions in the world of the novel make his description as a child questionable and in this regard challenge Western notions of childhood, the publishers want upfront to shape readerly engagement with the novel through its paratextual element, thus promoting the idea of child soldiers as blameless victims. This faultless-passive-victim image of child soldiers, Mark Drumbl reminds us, is neither free of racial undertones, nor is it applicable to all children deemed child soldiers. As Drumbl explains it, “transnational conceptions of faultlessness do not fully reach children from the periphery who commit atrocious acts against Westerners. Whereas the child perpetrator targeting Africans tends to be held as a mindless captive of purposeless violence, the child perpetrator targeting

Westerners tends to be held as an intentional author of purposeful violence” (10). Because Birahima’s targets as the novel shows are Africans like him, the emphasis on his age as evident in the cover of that novel serves to reinforce his victimhood and, by extension, a denial of his agency.

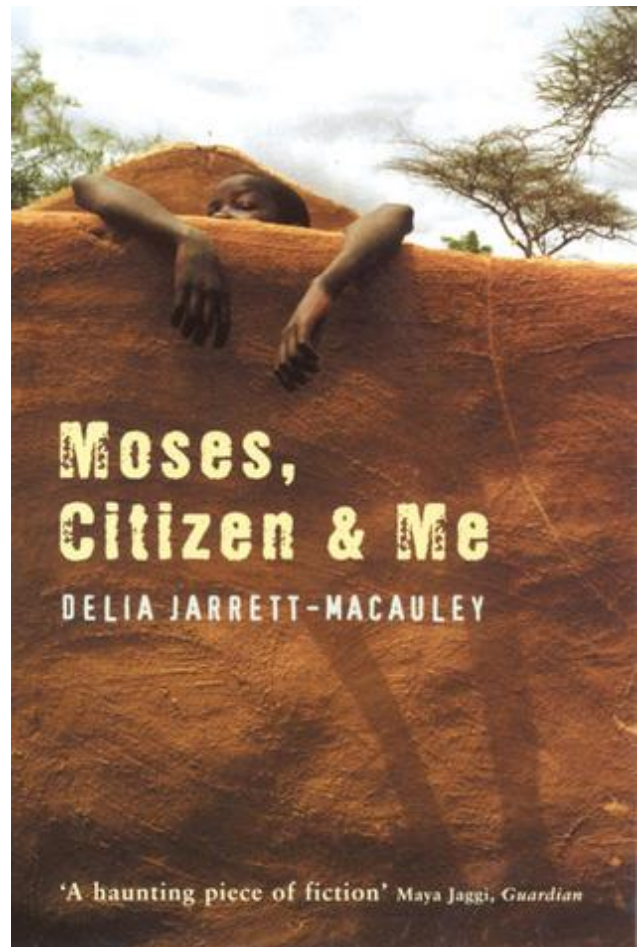
The discrepancy between what the paratextual elements of Kourouma’s novel says of the age of its child protagonist and what that character says of themselves underscores the importance of not taking the paratexts of child soldier narratives lightly, for as McCoy contends, “paratext is territory important, fraught, and contested” (200). The cover page of a child soldier narrative considered paratextually is important as a site for promoting a worldview or an ideology. I consider the cover pages of most African child soldier narratives as sites filled with tensions. The paratextual conditions of these works are marked by unease and unfounded claims that serve to promote the worldviews of their Western progenitors. Such is the case with Jarret-McCauley’s child soldier novel *Moses, Citizen, and Me*. The story is a recreation of the Sierra Leonean Civil War and the overwhelming presence of children in that conflict employed as soldiers. Accordingly, the story’s setting is recognizably Sierra Leone. To summarize, the novel focuses on Julia, a Sierra Leonean resident in Britain. Julia travels from London to Sierra Leone to see her uncle, Moses, whom she has not seen for about twenty years. On her arrival to Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone, Julia learns about the atrocity her eight-year-old cousin, Citizen, has perpetrated. Citizen, a former child soldier recruited by the infamous Revolutionary United Front led by Foday Sankoh, murders Adele, his grandmother, and thereafter leaves the house to become a street kid. This information about Citizen’s soldiery experience and brutal killing of his grandmother changes Julia’s purpose in visiting Sierra Leone. Julia henceforth devotes herself to understanding her cousin. This commitment leads her to encounter other

former child soldiers. A large part of Julia's narration includes dream visions taking place inside her head, within which she travels to Sierra Leonean rain forests and the borders between the country and Liberia. In time, Julia makes it known that her head has become "a map of Sierra Leone, its farmland, diamond mines, mountains, ridges, people, soldiers, fighters, leaders" (51). In a way, the transfiguration of Julia's head into everything Sierra Leonean serves to underscore the authenticity of the setting of the story. It adds to readers' appreciation of being presented with a fictional Sierra Leonean universe.

Contrastively, the photograph on the cover page of *Moses, Citizen, and Me* conveys the idea of a different setting for the novel. The photograph is of a young civilian Kenyan boy. The use of this photo of a boy from Kenya on the front cover of a novel dealing with war in Sierra Leone conveys the erroneous view that child soldiering is a practice that defines the whole of the African continent, so much so that it has become indistinguishably manifest in any African country. This choice of cover is reflective of what Drumbl calls "tiresome tendencies that Africanize a global phenomenon and pathologize African conflicts" (6). In Mastey's view too, the cover photo speaks of the "misguided belief that child soldiers can be found across Africa and that child soldiering is a distinctly-African problem," suggesting that "publishers can use the photo of a child, any child [in Africa] on a book cover to tell potential readers something about what the story contains" ("Covering Child Soldiers"). The boy's photo on the cover of Jarrett-Macaulay's novel also nudges readers to think of Africa as a single homogenous space, within which what happens in one part of it can be presumed to be happening across the entire



(Figure 1)



(Figure 2)⁷

continent. The boy in the photograph appears to be exhaustively struggling to scale a mud fence higher than he is. One possible conclusion that can be drawn from viewing this image is that we are seeing a child in an African context bearing a responsibility inconsistent with his physical resources. Viewing the boy in this manner reinforces the Western humanitarian understanding of the child soldier as a victim of adult unfairness and viciousness. In addition to communicating details about an alien setting, the use of the cover photo serves to establish the story as one centering on helplessness and unfairness. For the image of a child who labours in vain to climb a

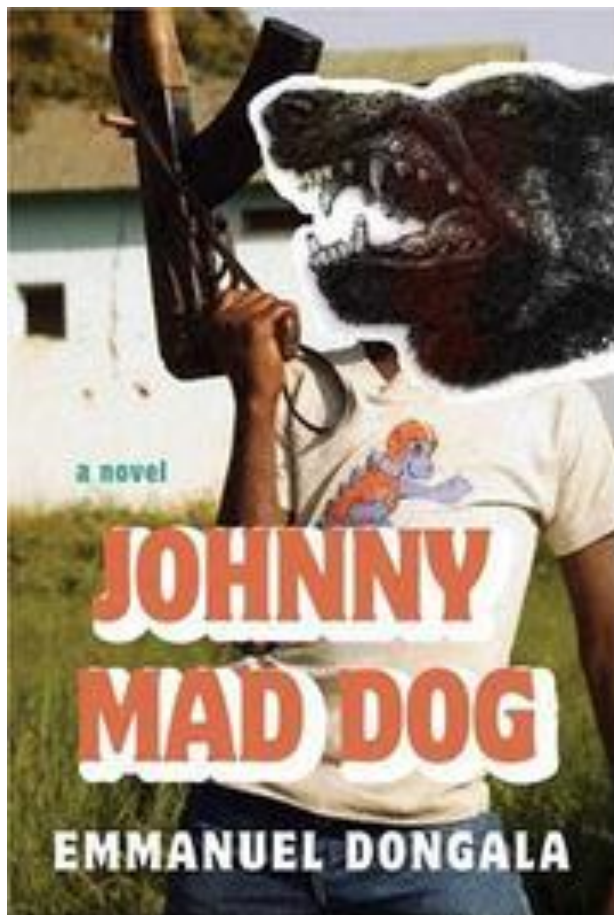
⁷ Figure 1 is the cover of Ahmadou Koroma's *Allah Is Not Obligated* published, Vintage Books 2011; and Figure 2 is Delia Jarret-Macauley's novel, *Moses, Citizen and Me*, Granta Books, 2005.

fence does not convey a positive message. In a sense, the choice of photo and the locale it is taken all encourage the view that the paratext of Jarrett-Macaulay's novel is informed by socially accepted norms and stereotypes about Africa and child soldiering.

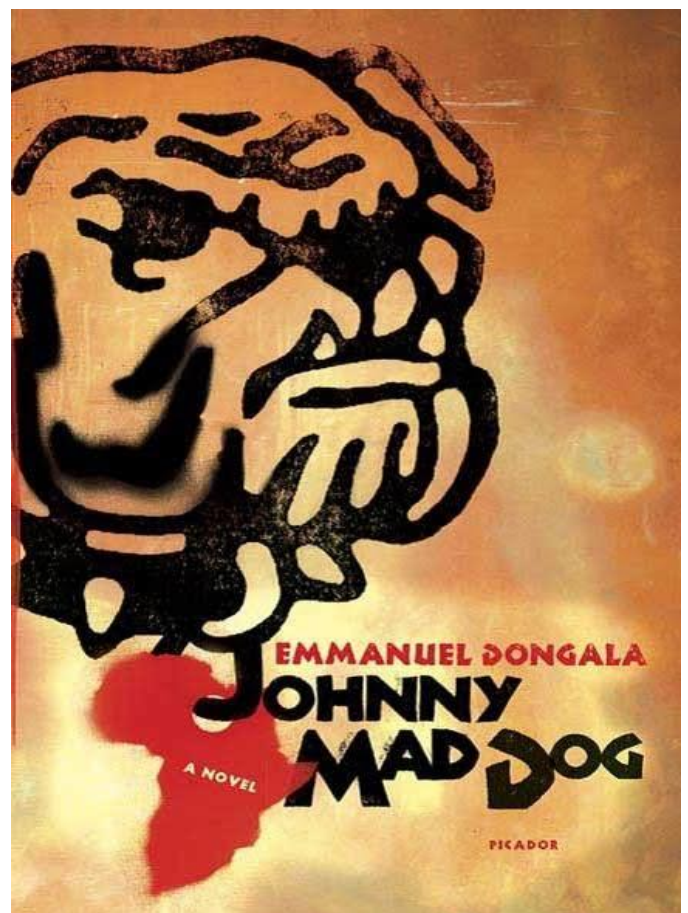
As with Jarret-McCauley's novel, the paratextual effects of other child sold novels are also fraught with implicit biases and visuals that contradict their narrative contents. In the case of Dongala's *Johnny Mad Dog*, for example, which is set in Congo-Brazzaville, one of the editions of the novel published by Picador contains a cover drawing of a bulldog with the map of Africa hanging from a collar around its neck, thereby suggesting that child soldiering is widespread and endemic to the continent, and also that it is dangerous to be a child in such a space. Indeed, the cover of Dongala's novel effectively encourages reading the work as an account of the realities of all of Africa. *Johnny Mad Dog* was originally published in French in 2002. The first English edition, published by Straus & Giroux, contains a cover with the picture of a person whose head has been replaced with the head of a scowling, visibly aggressive black dog. A person in the picture, whose age cannot be determined, wields an AK-47 machine gun in their right hand. The image represents the child soldier as a vicious, implacably ferocious animal, and so in a sense as sub-human. The image presents its viewers with a human child or adolescent who is violently unamenable to reason. The child soldier has lost his innocence and on that account is transforming into an irredeemable monster.

In the second English edition of *Johnny Mad Dog* published by Picador, which is the edition used in this dissertation, the transformation of the child soldier from an innocent child into a viciously barbarous animal is complete. As the map of Africa around the bulldog's neck suggests, readers are to understand the story as being about all of Africa, where purposeless wars are rampant and a place where children are stripped of their innocence and transformed into

dangerous animals. Rosen gestures towards this thinking when he asserts that representations of child combatants in African child soldier narratives (and their paratexts) “draw upon an earlier discourse about Africa that has long served to dehumanize Africans” (*Western Imagination* 57). He expands on this assertion, positing that “we are still writing Africa’s script, and with it the larger story of child soldiers, in much the same way that Joseph Conrad did so many years ago” (57). In this sense, therefore, the paratext of Dongala’s novel serves to promote a stereotypical understanding of Africa as a kind of Hobbesian hell where unimaginable violence shortens lives, robs children of their childhood, and transform them into feral beasts.



(Figure 3)



(Figure 4)⁸

⁸ Figure 3 is the cover photo of the first English edition of Dongala’s *Johnny Mad Dog*, Straus and Giroux, 2005; and Figure 4 is the second edition of the novel in English published by Picador in 2006.

It is in Dongala's story that one finds a sort of unity between what its paratextual element (in this case its cover) conveys and the contents of the story. As I have shown in the previous chapter, the African world of this story is one in which nothing positive happens. Those who wage war against thieving and repressive state rulers do so for reasons that undermine the ideals of justice, freedom, and good governance. As Rosen argues in respect of novels like *Johnny Mad Dog*, there is a complete dissociation of war from the world of politics. "Instead," Rosen contends, "war appears virtually out of nowhere, usually as a result of adult perfidy, to engulf children and to turn them into victims and killers. It is almost as if war was a malevolent natural phenomenon akin to a tornado which lands on a country and destroys it. The novels attribute a kind of random and feral meaninglessness to war that unmistakably echo Conradian representations of the near-riotous inhumanity of Africans" ("Literature" 124). The "inhumanity of Africans" is a motif in Dongala's child soldier novel. The devaluation and ultimately the unimportance of African life stand out in the novel. Two different instances of this unimportance as depicted in the novel are worth examining here.

Laokole, one of the two first-person narrators in the novel, witnesses the two cases I look at, but she is more directly involved with one of them. The first case involves the event within the High Commission for Refugees (HCR) area located in a United Nations compound. A plan has just been made for the evacuation of the white expatriates and their families caught in the war going on in this African country. These foreigners, who "were shouting in every Western language – French, Dutch, English, Portuguese" are eventually "loaded into the enormous military transports" (157). Melanie, Laokole's friend, begins to appeal to Katelijne, a Belgian journalist, to consider her for evacuation since she has lost all her family members to a war that Westerners are being saved from (158). But her appeals are rebuffed. In response, as Laokole

explains it, a “soldier came up to them, roughly elbowed Melanie away, and pushed Katelijne toward the truck [...] the soldier drove Melanie away with a violent kick and shoved Katelijne into the transport” (158). Melanie never recovers from that violent kick; she falls to the ground and in quick succession three military transports conveying the Western evacuees ride over her, with the third vehicle carrying her body “along on its bumper for several meters” before falling “under the immense wheels of the heavy military transport” (159). The girl’s treatment and death indicate that African lives like hers do not matter to those saddled with the evacuation of non-white bodies.

What follows next affirms this point. Hurriedly, one of the three military transports reverses into the compound. While the refugees think the vehicle’s occupants have realized the tragedy that has just happened, it turns out that vehicle is returning in order to rescue a dog belonging to a white woman. The woman is escorted by two armed soldiers into a building and she later walks out the door “caressing the animal and murmuring, ‘There, there, don’t be afraid, my precious! You’re saved’” (161). Soon, the vehicle moves out, “roll[ing] over Melanie’s mangled body for the third time” (161). This scene raises the Judith Butler Questions: What life counts as grievable? When is it grievable?⁹ The novel’s only answer is that white lives matter and the lives of African children matter only “when the mobilization of the urge to give [and save] rests on the contrast between ‘our’ lives and ‘theirs’” (Burman 241). A poodle’s life is worth more than Melanie’s because saving her at that point does not seem to be of any value to the West at this point, after all the war these people are running away from are the making of her

⁹ See Judith Butler’s *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* Verso, 2010.

people. Between Melanie's and the dog's life, there is no doubt that the latter has more relevance in this instance than the former's.

The second case revealing the trifling nature of African lives in *Johnny Mad Dog* also involves the preference for non-human lives. After Johnny and his gang attack the house where Laokole and her mother move to in the wake of the departure of the foreigners from the country, killing the mother and her friend (221), Laokole runs away to a village. The government-backed militia of Johnny Mad Dog invades the village and kills freely (271-2). Laokole narrowly escapes death and takes to the forest. It is at this place that it becomes clear to her again that non-human animal lives are more valuable to most Westerners than hers. Laokole encounters officials from "the International Institute for the Protection of Gorillas and Chimpanzees" who are evacuating these animals because "they're being endangered by this stupid war" (282). She appeals to them to be rescued as well given the sound reason that she herself is "an endangered species. If they could save animals, they could also save me" (281). However, Laokole's pleas for salvation make no meaning to the animal saviors. They anchor their refusal in the argument that they are not "authorized to take passengers. Our insurance covers only animals," promising to notify "authorities [who are seeking to wipe out civilians like her] of her whereabouts" (283). The life of the girl is not precious enough to trump rigid protocols and financial concerns. As with the previous incidence, Dongala's objective in this case is to depict Western humanitarianism and claims to valuing human (African) lives as hypocritical and selective in the attitude they express towards the claim of human oneness. Thus, the image of a feral bulldog on the cover of *Johnny Mad Dog* serves to indicate the inhumanity of not only the African child soldier, but also of Africans generally. The map of Africa around the bulldog's neck lends

credence to this position. The novel's cover, considered as a paratext, echoes the stereotyping of Africa and its wars that is evident in the narrative text.

Ishmael Beah's autobiography *A Long Way Gone* is also interesting for what its front matter communicates. Judging from available records of its sales, Beah's memoir was widely distributed and sold very well in the West. Daisy Maryles reports that in the year of its first publication (2007) a total of 611,435 copies were sold (29). In 2008, an additional 250,000 copies were sold, leading Dermot McEvoy to conclude as of 2009 that more than a million copies of the book had been sold (27). There have been about forty-five editions of Beah's memoir, and more than sixty per cent of these have the same cover design.¹⁰ A quick look at the three different editions from Straus & Giroux (2007), Harper Perennial (2008), and Douglas & McIntyre (2008) reveals that all three have the same cover design, an unusual practice in publishing (Mastey, "Covering Child Soldiers"). On the covers of these three editions is a downcast boy, presumably a child soldier, armed with a rocket launcher, a gun fitted with a bayonet, and a bag hung across his right shoulder. Unavoidably noticeable in the picture is the boy's shabby and holed flip-flop. In focusing on this cover image I observe the following: The gun and rocket the boy carries in the photo represent the child soldier as a dangerous being, a threat. His worn and ragged flip-flop suggests something about his penurious state and that of the society he lives in, while his forlorn and pitiable look indicates his vulnerability. This is the predominant image of the child soldier projected in (and by) the Western imagination, which construes these combatants as contradictory embodiments of vulnerability and ruthlessness. The contradiction in this image encourages readers to think about how a vulnerable, innocent child

¹⁰ See David Mastey's "Covering Child Soldiers: Representing Children Who Rape and Murder" <https://medium.com/@davidmastey/covering-child-soldiers-representing-children-who-rape-and-murder-33c282ae8daa#.kv36mocn2>

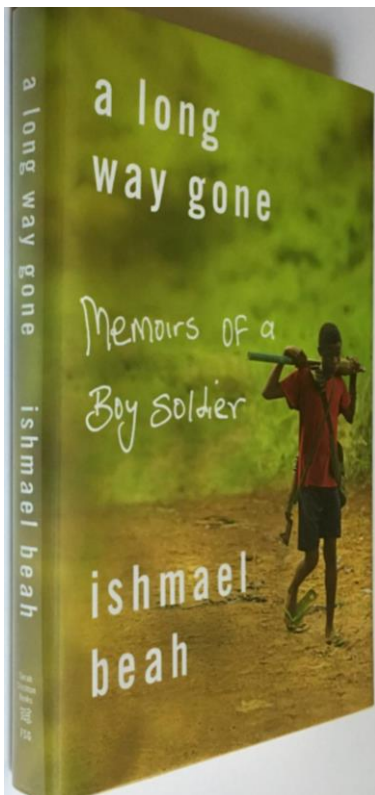
can become a wielder of ruthless power when perpetrating atrocities. In this regard, the responsibility of the horrors that this vulnerable child inflicts “passes entirely to the adult abductor, enlister, recruiter, or commander” (Drumbl 18). As I have argued in the introduction to this dissertation, the narrative voice in Beah’s memoir ultimately sculpts the image of a vulnerable child who is not at fault for the crimes he commits while undertaking soldierly duties. A repeated refrain Beah hears while undergoing therapy – and which he later accepts – is “it’s not your fault.”

However, it bears stressing that not all child soldiers fit the Beah template, for not all children who have identified with armed groups wield guns or look like the combatant shown on the cover of his memoir. As Michael Wessells contends: “Contrary to popular conceptions, many child soldiers never fight, and many neither carry their own weapon nor know how to use one” (*Child Soldiers* 71). Drumbl makes a similar point: “In contradistinction to often graphic media representations, significant numbers of children neither fight nor carry weapons. Even fewer become implicated in the systemic perpetration of acts of atrocity that potentially might fall within the scope of extraordinary international crimes [...] proscribed by international criminal law” (15). Most dominant in imaginative accounts of African child soldiers are images of child soldiers bearing weapons while fully involved in fighting and committing atrocities. In the four novels I analyze in this dissertation all the protagonists are deeply immersed in combat and bear arms. As it is the case with the memoirs of former child soldier, it is difficult to get a sense that not all children who come under the canopy of “child soldiers” see active combat. Therefore, what we have in the African child soldier genre in terms of the roles children in armed groups play involves representations that heavily privilege the understanding of child soldiers as combatants.

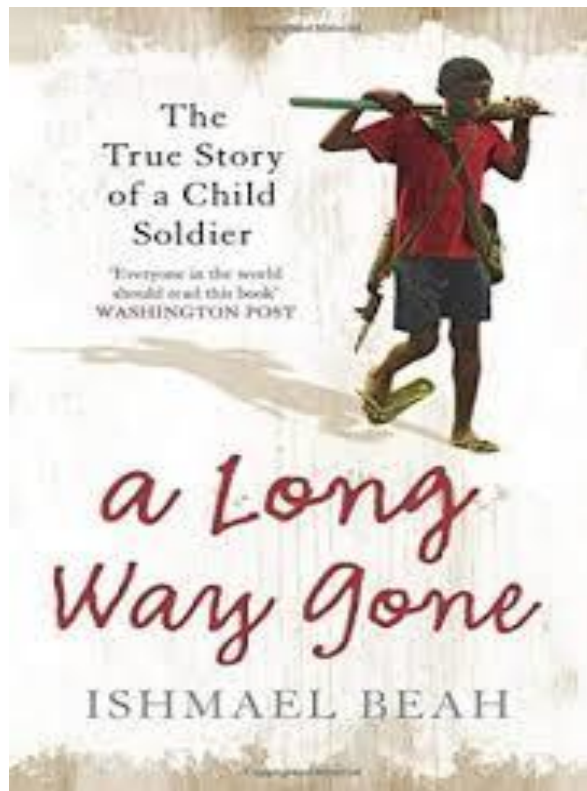
Insofar as it is not Beah's picture that is on the front cover of *A Long Way Gone*, the picture of the "anonymously fungible"¹¹ boy soldier on the cover is susceptible to such interpretation of child soldiering as the dangerous mill through which children everywhere in Africa are continually processed. While some child soldier memoirs bear the photos of their authors on their cover pages, others such as Beah and Grace Akallo do not. As with Beah's, the photo on Akallo's book is not hers. The cover of Akallo's book (co-authored with Faith McDonnell) contains a photo of a young African girl looking somewhat morose. Behind this gloomy anonymous girl in the background are grownups in military uniforms, with the ubiquitous AK-47 gun strapped across their shoulders. The description of the cover photo simply reads: "Cover photo of girl: © Per-Anders Pettersson/Getty Images." However, the respective memoirs of Emmanuel Jal, Senait Mehari, China Keitetsi, and Tchicaya Missamou all bear their individual photos. The question that lingers is: Does the use of a memoirist photo on the cover page of their book or absence of their photo (or where photos of persons other than themselves are used) on their book's cover page validate or violate the autobiographical pact that Philippe Lejeune theorizes? The use of the same picture in the cover of all three editions of Beah's memoir suggests that Western publishers believe that "stereotypical images are also, paradoxically, 'safe' images that reinforce pre-existing ideas among readers" about child soldiering (Mastey "Covering Child Soldiers"). Drumbl's conclusion regarding this assertion is apt: "When responding to Africa, transnational narratives often sensationalize and objectify through intemperate depictions, distorted lenses, and paternalistic hues" (6). Besides, the use of this singular picture by different publishers also has economic significance. The popularity and economic success of Beah's story seems to have been difficult for other, later publishers of the

¹¹ The phrase is from Drumbl in *Reimagining Child Soldiers in International Law and Policy*, 2012, p. 16.

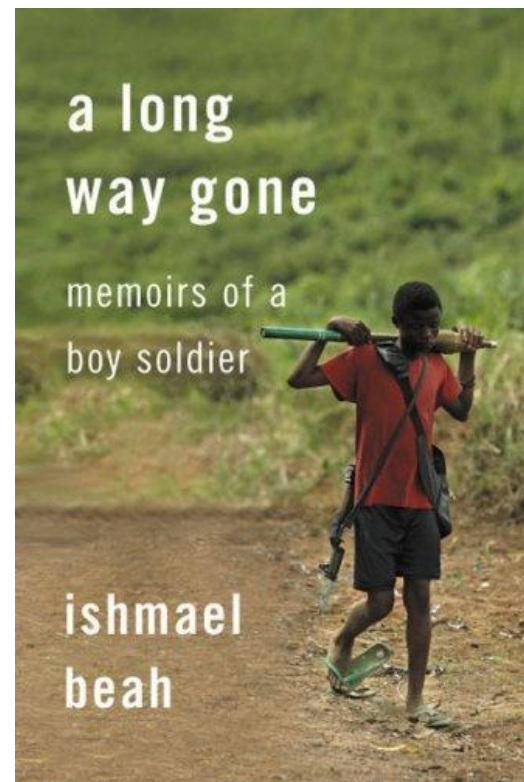
work to ignore. After all, as Mastey argues, book covers are advertisements. They are not just expressions of the sensibilities of graphic designers, they are products of “sales, marketing, and publicity departments” (“Covering Child Soldiers”).



(Figure 5)

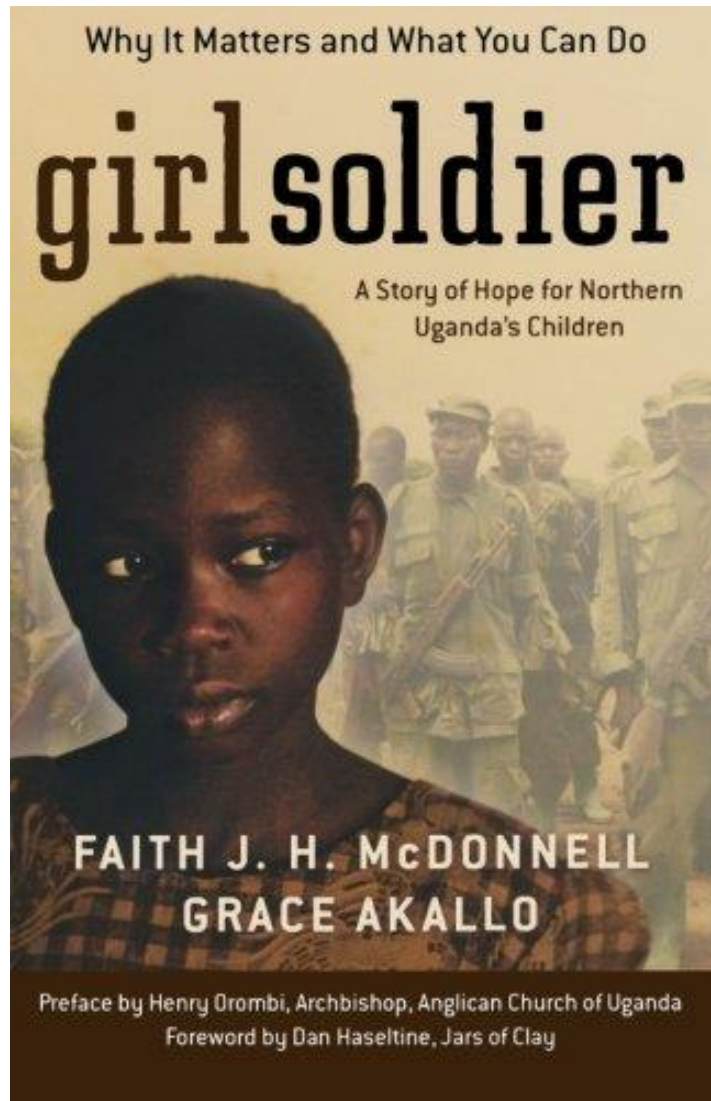


(Figure 6)



(Figure 7)¹²

¹² Figure 5 is the cover of Ishmael Beah’s memoir, *A Long Way Gone*, Straus and Giroux, 2007; Figure 6 cover of the same memoir is published by Harper Perennial, 2008; and Figure 7 is published by Douglas and McIntyre, 2008.



(Figure 8)¹³

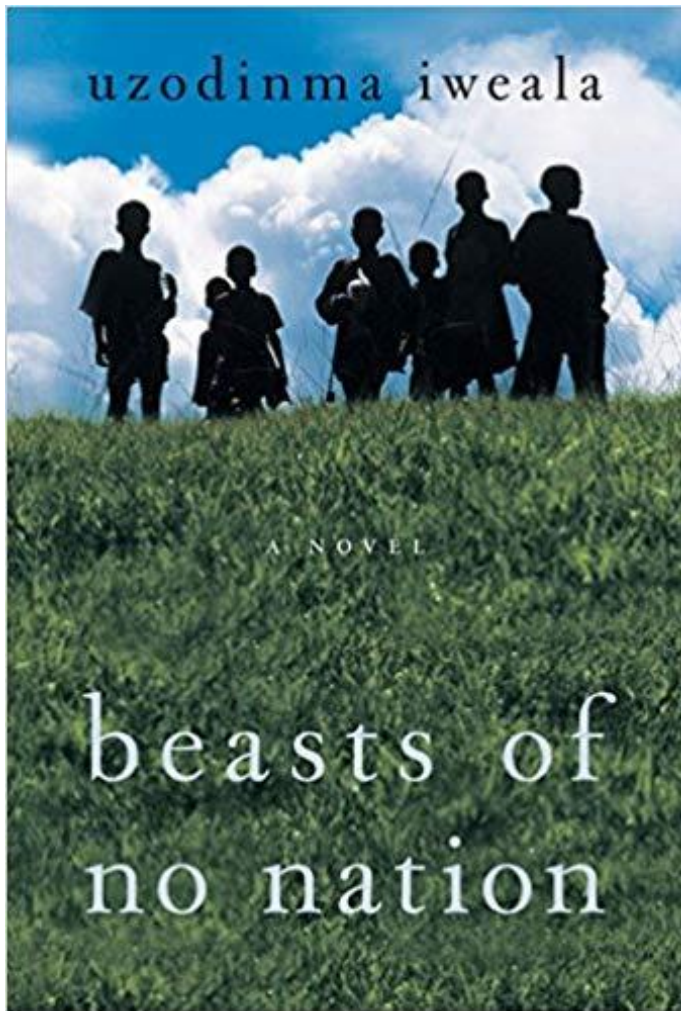
The covers of the four editions of Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* also communicate a story of change from the image of the once innocent African child into beasts on a continent irreversibly plagued by wanton violence. The first edition of this novel was published in the US (which is the edition used in this dissertation), and this edition's cover was later used for the UK

¹³ Figure 8 is the cover of Faith J. H. McDonnell and Grace Akallo's child soldier memoir, *Girl Soldier: A Story of Hope for Northern Uganda's Children*, Chosen Books, 2007.

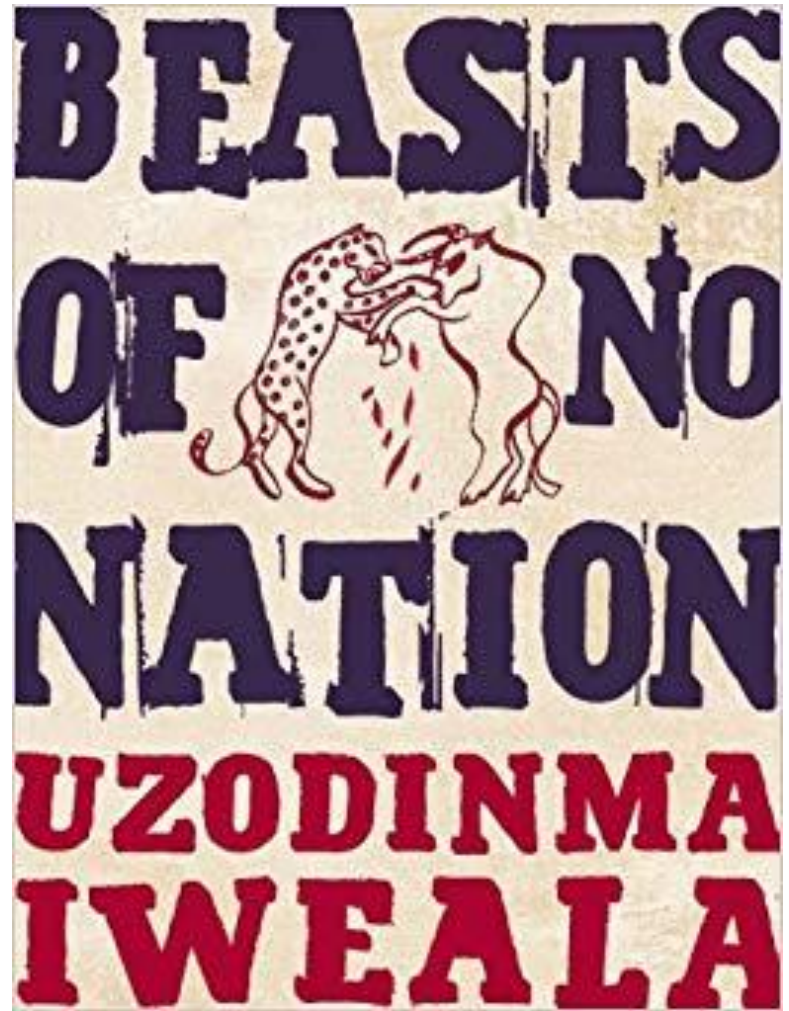
and Romanian editions. The cover image shows seven children of various heights standing against a bright blue sky with patches of white clouds in the background. The children's faces are invisible. This design is an example of another common representation of African child soldiers – namely as abstract beings lacking specific identities. Erica Burman has observed that this form of representation of children from the global South is common in advertisements for various kinds of aid. In such ads, Burman notes, children are abstracted from their “historical, cultural, and political location, as already inscribed within dominant ideologies and cultural representations of childhood” (239). Following the use of this cover design, three other later editions were published by the same publisher, each with a different cover. The design of the second edition has Iweala's name emblazoned in thick letters on the cover and the image of a bull and a leopard locked in a brutal duel, blood dripping from both of them. In relaying his experience after his first act of killing in the armed group that conscripts him, Agu talks about seeing the world, arguably his society, as one battlefield, with blood dripping around: “The world is moving slowly and I am seeing each drop of blood and each drop of sweat flying here and there” (84). It is possible that this scene and others in the story inspired the creation of the cover of this edition of the novel.

What appears foregrounded in this image is the idea of African child soldiers as wild animals, beings physically and psychically damaged as well as permanently socially estranged. One possible source of the animal imagery in this edition is the novel itself. In the novel, Agu, the protagonist-narrator, uses a lot of animal imagery when relating his experience of war. In one such use of animal metaphors, Agu likens fighting to an uncontrollable animal (118). Agu's experience of sexual violence is also rendered using animal imagery. Agu recalls the experience of rape thusly: “[H]e [that is, his commander] was entering inside of me the way the man goat is

sometimes mistaking other man goat for woman goat and going inside of them” (85). The idea of war as something capable of bestializing humans, especially young people, is evident in the cover of the second edition of Iweala’s novel.



(Figure 9)



(Figure 10)¹⁴

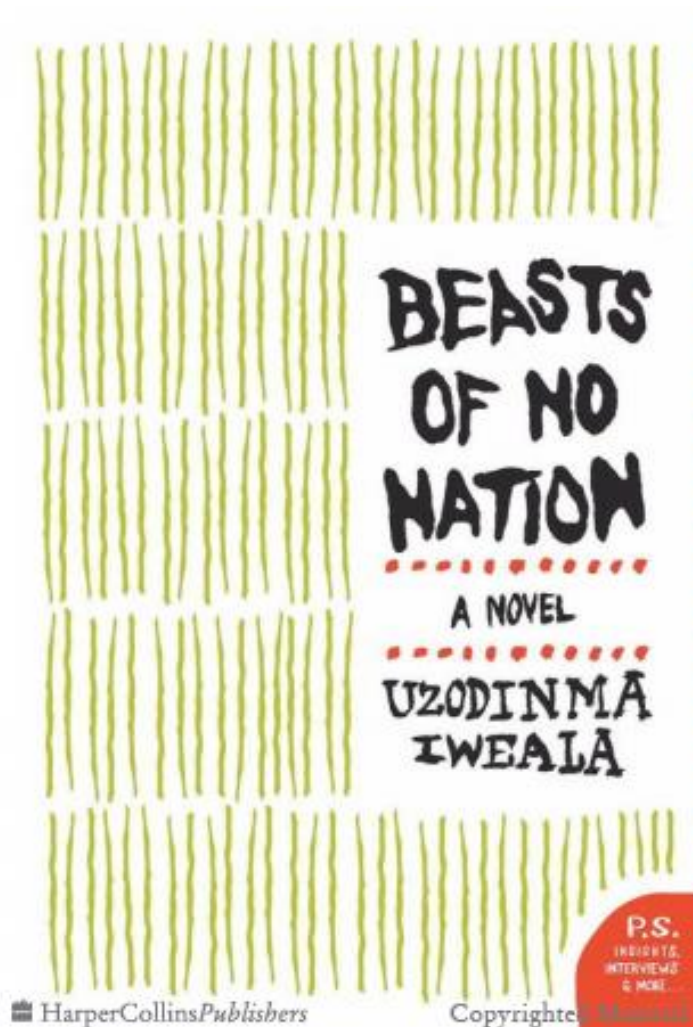
By 2006, two other editions of Iweala’s novel appeared in quick succession with different covers. According to Mastey, typically cover designs of some child soldier novels change with

¹⁴ Figure 9 is the cover of the first edition of Uzodinma Iweala’s *Beasts of No Nation*, published by Harper Collins, 2005; Figure 10 is another cover of the same novel published by Harper Collins, 2005.

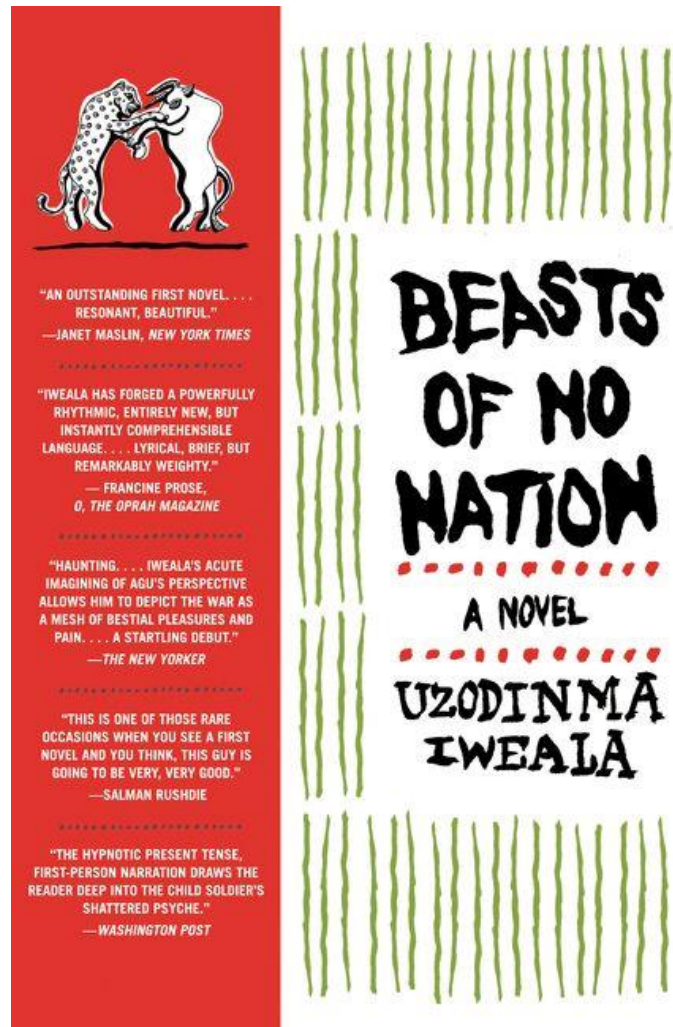
the publication of new editions, a development that has become “a standard strategy,” possibly a market strategy (“Covering Child Soldiers”). In the cover design of the first 2006 edition of the novel, there are five rows of unequal lines with the novel’s title and the author’s name scrawled on the right-hand side of the cover. Beneath this is a patch of red with “P. S.” announcing the author’s interview and a list of other supplementary items. Here the cover design has effectively become a marketing tool. The author’s interview in this edition provides insight into what informed the writing of the novel; it also encourages readerly interest.

Another edition of the novel came out in 2006. This edition retains some of the same features as the preceding one but also has its own uniqueness. The image of dueling beasts returns to this cover and under this image, in a column with a red background, may be found complimentary newspaper and individual testimonies (including by the prominent novelist Salman Rushdie) proclaiming the novel to be excellent. The cover of this edition reinforces the notion of African child soldiers as beasts, even as it improves the cover’s utility as a marketing device. The dueling beasts of the novel’s second edition, published in 2005, have returned to the form of the second of the two editions that was published in 2006. It appears the animal image is irresistible, for as I have already noted this animal image pervades the novel itself. To increase buyers’ interest in the novel as “a more approachable and desirable commodity” (Watts 76), snippets of reviews from leading newspapers such as the *New York Times*, the *New Yorkers*, the *Washington Post*, and even popular literary magazines such as *The Oprah Magazine* are positioned on the cover. Additionally, the novel’s back cover contains a list of the awards that Iweala has won, which includes the Los Angeles Times Art Seidenbaum Award for First Fiction; the Sue Kaufman Prize for First Fiction from the American Academy of Arts and Letters; and the New York Public Library Young Lions Fiction Award. Doubtless Harper Collins has tried to

fully maximize the marketing power of the front and back covers of this edition, proclaiming on the back cover that Iweala's novel is "one of the most acclaimed novels of the year."

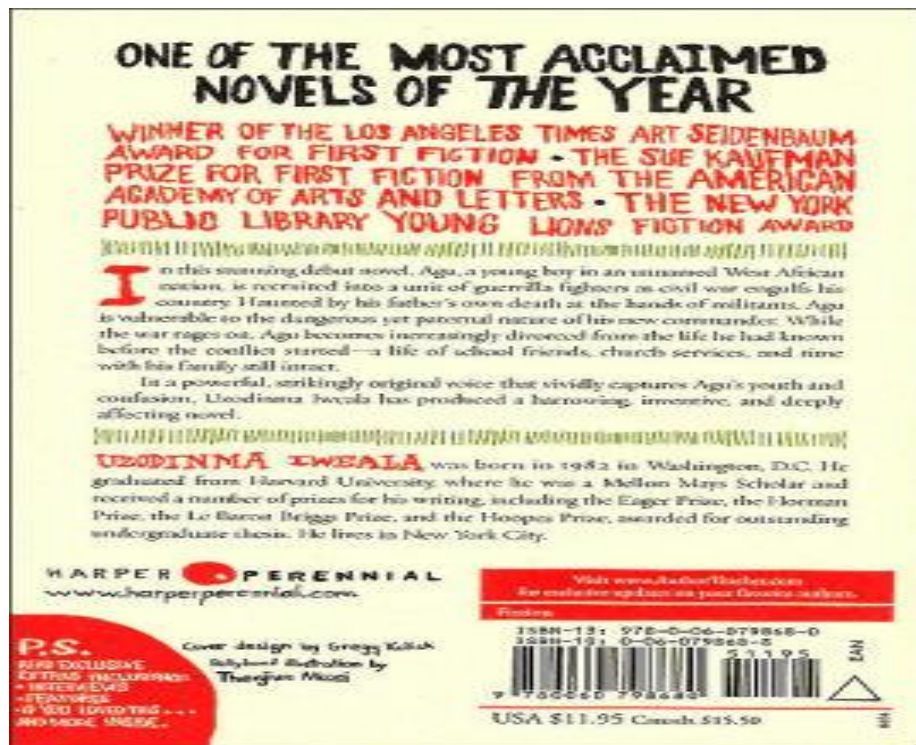


(Figure 11)



(Figure 12)¹⁵

¹⁵ Figures 11 and 12 are different covers of the 2006 editions of Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* published by Harper Collins.



(Figure 13)¹⁶

The paratextual elements of Tchicaya Missamou’s memoir (co-authored with Travis Sentell)¹⁷ entitled *In the Shadow of Freedom: A Heroic Journey to Liberation, Manhood, and America* (2010) are also remarkable for what they imply and for the misinformation they contain. Missamou’s narrative details his journey from child soldier in Congo-Brazzaville to Marine Corps soldier in the United States, a job that had him see action in Iraq. On the memoir’s cover

¹⁶ Figure 13 has the back cover of Figure 12, the front cover of *Beasts of Nation*, Harper Collins, 2006.

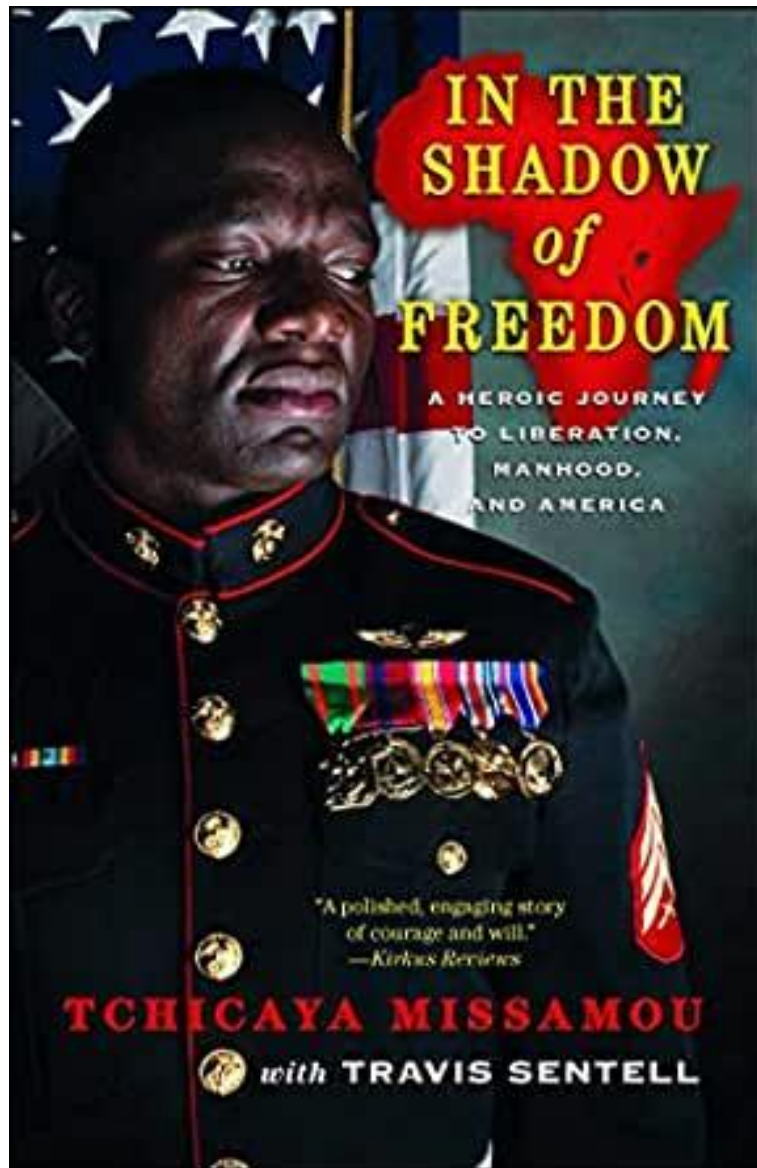
¹⁷ In her essay, “Human Rights, Child-Soldier Narratives, and the Problem of Form” (2011), Maureen Moynagh describes the practice in which some former child soldiers coauthor their stories with foreign journalists and writers or in some cases have their stories ghostwritten as “a division of literary labor” (46-7). Joya Uraizee calls such memoirs “African collaborative child soldier memoir” (see *Writing That Breaks Stones: African Child Soldier Narratives*, 2020, p. 49).

readers are shown Missamou in his US military uniform. Nestling behind his head is the US flag and beside it, to the right, is a map of Africa in red. The flag and the map are significant for what they express. The country that salvages and provides succour to Missamou (the US) is clearly – and aptly – identified as distinctly independent from the other countries comprising North America. The publishers do not use the map of North America. In contrast, the map of Africa used on Missamou’s cover reproduces the Western imaginary’s ignorant and condescending idea of Africa as one homogenous country, and not a continent. Missamou hails from the Republic of the Congo and it is in that country that he joins an armed group in his early teenage years. He was never a peripatetic fighter crisscrossing the borders of various countries on the continent so as to fight in different wars.

One question this African map raises is why the publishers might not use the map of Congo-Brazzaville specifically, or else the country’s flag as we see in the case of Missamou’s adopted country. One possible answer is related to the “tiresome [Western] tendencies that Africanize a global phenomenon and pathologize African conflicts” in addition to “generaliz[ing] an overarching understanding of child soldiering based on the more extreme cases” (Drumbl 6 and 11). While it is likely that the publishers use the map of Africa, rather than that of Congo as a distinctive space, because the map of the continent is possibly more recognizable to audiences around the world than say the flag of that country, the point remains that the context of Missamou’s story is not reflected in the cover of the book. In this regard, it can be assumed that what inspires the cover designers are the underlying stereotypical conceptions of Africa characteristic of the West and elsewhere. As Mastey notes, quoting an art director from a publishing firm, the covers of African titles are so conventional because “designers may know very little about the context of the book for which they are responsible, so

they rely on existing [stereotypical] tropes” (“Covering Child Soldiers”). It is also likely that Missamou, like other authors of African child soldier narratives, had no say in the choice of cover for his story. As Maureen Moynagh explains, “[w]hile the former child soldiers have their own reasons for telling their stories, it is fairly safe to assume that Euro-Western publishers and journalists pursue them because they [conform] or [are] conformable to cultural myths and literary traditions with an already established audience appeal” (46). What motivates former child soldiers to write about their experiences doesn’t necessarily correspond with what interests their cowriters and publishers about publishing their stories.¹⁸ Indeed it is not too strong to claim that the interests and concerns of publishers and artists diverge. But what I question here is the easy recourse by Western publishers of African stories – especially those involving conflicts, child soldiers, rights abuses, and human suffering – to icons and images which decontextualize and generalize, as well as amplify stereotypes about Africa. The map of Africa around the neck of the bulldog on the cover of the second English edition of Dongala’s novel, along with the one appearing on the cover of Missamou’s book, perform the same function of “coupling of child soldiers almost exclusively to an African geography,” indeed a reductive caricature of this geography (Macmillan 37).

¹⁸ See Denov’s *Child Soldiers* (2010) for the story of an erstwhile child soldier who refuses “constant solicitation for interviews, public appearances and offers of large amounts of money to feature his story in book form” (10).



(Figure 14)¹⁹

Missamou’s country of birth is also foregrounded by another paratextual element of his memoir, one that follows immediately after the cover page. This paratextual matter is the page which follows the cover of the book. It misrepresents and conceals details. The paratextual information claims that Missamou was “[b]orn into the Congolese wilderness” and became “a

¹⁹ Figure 14 is the cover of Missamou’s memoir, published by Simon and Schuster, 2010.

child soldier at age 11.” It is interesting to note that in the inside of the back cover where Missamou’s bio appears alongside that of his coauthor, the word “wilderness” is absent. Indeed, the text reads as follows: “Tchicaya Missamou was born and raised in Brazzaville, Congo.” First, the image of the author’s birthplace in the wilderness is consistent with how some Westerners imagine places in Africa.²⁰ It is therefore not surprising that Missamou’s emigration to the US is characterized as a “liberation” in his memoir’s title. As the title indicates, readers are supposed to understand and accept that this former child soldier’s growth has been stunted, and that he is trapped in what one would consider a malformed childhood consistent with what is akin to the reality of wilderness dwellers. Besides, the title encourages readers to accept that it is only through his “liberating” journey to America that Missamou attains his “manhood.” Yet in his memoir, Missamou himself provides an account of his initiation at the age of eleven into manhood and militarism in Congo (49-53). Mastey makes a valid point when he submits that child soldier narratives and their paratexts “communicate factual and conceptual falsehoods about Africa and its communities” (“Child Soldier Stories” 14-15). Compared to the image of the US available in his memoir, Missamou’s birth country comes across as unlivable and violence prone. It is a wasteland.

Second, the contents of Missamou’s narrative do not support the information conveyed by the paratextual material concerning the age he became a child soldier. This misrepresentation of age is reminiscent of what the publisher of Kourouma’s *Allah Is Not Obligated* claims to be the age of the novel’s protagonist, a claim that is inconsistent with what is presented to the reader through a reading of the novel. As the narrator makes clear, at age eleven Missamou was a

²⁰ In 2018 I had my fair share of the question about my country of birth. The inquirer, a white woman in her fifties, sought to know if it is true that the peoples in Nigeria live in huts. But rather than be surprised, I saw in that question a pedagogical moment. That “curious” asker got a detailed response with suitable complement of pictures from Goggle.

schoolboy and did not belong to any armed group. Nowhere in the memoir is it said that at this age the boy bears a weapon due to his association with a rebel or other armed organization.

However, when the schoolboy Missamou discovers that it is fashionable for his peers at school to gather during recess to “brag about the weapons they had at home (pistols, rifles, AK-47s, and RPGs),” he himself “[begins] carrying a pistol to school” (48). This excerpt suggests that the publishers’ paratextual claim that Missamou became a child soldier at age eleven is false and misleading.

To be sure, Missamou’s memoir was published in 2010 – thirteen years after the 1997 Cape Town Principles (CTP) came into existence with its influential definition of child soldiers. That definition does not include children who take arms to school. As the CTP states it, a child soldier is “any person under 18 years of age who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed forces or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters, messengers and anyone accompanying such groups, other than family members” (UNICEF 1997). Based on this definition, Missamou cannot be deemed a child soldier at age eleven since he still attends school and does not have any association with an armed group. Instead, the boy becomes a child soldier only when he turns fourteen, enlists in a militia group, and carries out his first main task of securing checkpoints in the name of the armed group. At this point he combines that task with schooling, which he attends to during the day. The outright distortion of Missamou’s age of enlistment appears deliberate. Nowhere has the act of taking weapon to schools by any school children been considered a sign that the arm bearers are child soldiers I make this claim because, up to now, not one of the schoolboy shooters in the US and Canada or their counterparts in Western Europe (the UK to be more precise) who use knives has been labelled a child soldier on account of bearing and using weapons on school grounds. At the heart of the mislabeling of

Missamou as a child soldier lie both economic interests (e.g., selling the memoir) and deeply ingrained stereotypes. And stereotype, as Chimamanda Adichie reminds us in her famous TED Talk, “The Danger of a Single Story,” thrives on amplifying a one-sided account. In Adichie’s words: “The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.” Clearly, the paratextual elements of Missamou’s memoir purvey half truths.

As my analysis of the covers of various editions of African child soldier narratives published in the West shows, Western publishers construct covers of child soldier narratives in order to reinforce stereotypes about Africa, as well as to attract buyers. Thus, deeply embedded in the constructed and fraught paratexts of African child soldier narratives that Western publishers favour are strong tendencies towards misrepresentation, decontextualization, and stereotyping. Also at work in the paratextual supplements to these narratives are various kinds of marketing logic. Publishers and their designers are largely driven by profits. While stories of pain, trauma, and human rights violations in the global South may indeed be highly profitable, the job of how to market these stories to the public is one that publishers take very seriously. The paratexts evinced by these stories are useful in promoting books and enhancing marketability. Accordingly, paratexts do far more than just serve as “assistants,” “accessories,” or “auxiliaries” to the literary works to which they are attached. It is not going too far to suggest that paratexts are just as important as the texts that they accompany.

Conclusion

My interest in this study has been in the literary representations of African child soldiers as well as the prevailing discourses that, on the one hand, shape our understanding of the idea of a “child,” and on the other inform the way(s) that child soldiers are represented. I have focused on how different African writers – especially Chris Abani, Uzodinma Iweala, Emmanuel Dongala, and Ahmadou Kourouma – represent such matters as: children’s involvement in and motivation for joining armed groups; children’s coping/survival strategies within armed groups and war contexts (settings); the way children exercise their agency, which in turn speaks for their understanding of their role in conflicts and the impact of violence on them; and the question of whether these representations humanize or dehumanize child soldiers. The concerns of humanitarian institutions and transnational NGOs insofar as African children at war are concerned, especially their influence on the discourses created around children and African wars, echo loudly in the literary works that I have engaged with. I consider these works to form an important part of a body of literature that comprises the African child soldier genre. I have argued that humanitarian and human rights discourses are influential in the ways they have come to inform how some African writers and child soldier memoirists construct the image of African child soldiers in their works. The influence of these discourses also may be detected in criticisms of African child soldier narratives in literature and films. However, as I have argued, there are also African child soldier narratives which challenge this “humanitarian” image of the African child soldier and the ideas about children and childhood upon which it rests, and which it propagates.

While some African child soldier writers favour the humanitarian understanding of African child soldiers, which conceives of these combatants as essentially passive innocent

victims (Uzodinma Iweala as a paradigmatic example), others like Chris Abani's *Song for Night* champion a far more complex image of African child soldiers as both victims and perpetrators of heinous crimes. In narratives that uphold the humanitarian view of child soldiers as victims, young fighters are shown as largely vulnerable, dependent, lacking agency, and apolitical. In contrast, those works which represent the multifaceted makeup of child soldiers represent these figures as complex, subversive, politically aware, and full of (morally praiseworthy as well as blameworthy) initiative. These differences notwithstanding, both blocs of representation invite a radical rethink of the notions of "child soldiers" and "childhood." Although I use the term "child soldier" throughout this dissertation, my readings of selected texts show that the young combatants described therein as children are only so on account of biology, and more precisely their age. In terms of actions and undertakings occurring in the context of war, these fighters operate in the same terrain as adults. They transgress boundaries of childhood and adulthood and challenge the idea of childhood as a disability, one marked by "fragility and dependence" that is often "assumed to be stronger due to the experience of war" (Martins 649).

Apart from Uzodinma's Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation*, the other three novels I engaged in this dissertation share something in common with other African novels treating the subject of war and children that were written long before the recent proliferation of child soldier narratives.¹ The common trait in these works is their disinterest in or low emphasis on the issue of corruption of innocence and the age of their protagonists. The subjects of age, innocence, and even human rights abuse is of little or no significance at all in these works, contrary to the conclusions of some critics. For example, in Ken Saro-Wiwa's novel *Sozaboy* the young

¹ Here I refer, among others, to such works as Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* (which critics have described as the precursor to the child soldier narratives) and Biyi Bandele's *Burman Boy*.

protagonist's image is not one built around his abuse and corrupted innocence. In that work, the young fighter's role as an initiator of actions in a war whose historical context is not hidden is clear. The participant-narrator of that novel, Mene, is to some degree political. Although Mene denounces (the) war² harshly in the same manner as Paul Bäumer, the protagonist-narrator of Erich Remarque's iconic antiwar novel *All Quiet at the Western Front*, his character does not seek to be understood as someone whose human rights and innocence have been lost. In contrast, Mene's counterpart Agu in *Beasts of No Nation*, now existing in a different nameless social milieu, is largely defined by his rhetoric concerning the loss of innocence and violation of childhood rights in a war without ideology or purpose. Through and through, in *Beasts of No Nation* the child whose actions in war situations are not very much different from adults' is represented as guiltless and reconnected with his supposedly lost childhood innocence through therapy. As I have argued in the chapters focused on them, the respective protagonists of Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah Is Not Obligated* and Emmanuel Dongala's *Johnny Mad Dog* resist being understood mainly as victims of human rights violations. At issue in these novels is not the corruption of the innocence of these characters. How these young protagonists become members of armed groups, the roles they play therein, and how they understand the war, among other things, prove to be more in focus than, if at all, any concerns with their age and victimhood.

All the narratives I analyze in this dissertation are written by Africans, resident somewhere on the continent or based abroad in the West. Every known former child soldier who has published an account of their soldiering experience is now based in either North America or Europe. Although their rehabilitation after demobilization began somewhere in Africa, it was

² What I mean here by "the war" is the fictionalized Nigeria-Biafra war and "war" refers to armed conflict in general. My point is that the denunciation of war in this novel transcends the specific case of the Nigeria-Biafra war; the rhetoric of the novel is anti-war, a regnant theme in African child soldier narratives.

completed abroad, suggesting that a successful rehabilitation is not possible where the conditions that necessitated the military mobilization of children remain unchanged. These works urge us to think more critically about rehabilitation programmes and, indeed whether countries in Africa are best served by external solutions rather than homegrown ones. And as if in recognition of the parlous and terrible states of their countries, nearly all these former child soldier memoirists have been involved in one form of advocacy or the other for better education, protection policies for children, socioeconomic development, and much more in their individual home country. The individual universe of the writers whose works I examined is African and so are the conflicts represented and most of the characters therein. These works have many other things in common: They are all published abroad and use first-person narration through which their young protagonists address themselves to outsiders who need to know about their soldiering experiences and attendant traumas. The narratives are also similar in their pessimistic and stereotypical portrayal of Africa. Whether they depict familiar wars in recognizable (because they are highly publicized in the West) African conflicts such as those in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and the Republic of the Congo, or they create generic African milieus, as is the case in both Dongala's *Johnny Mad Dog* and Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation*, the African universe of these works come across as homogenous, collectively unlivable, largely dependent on the West, and constantly in need of external salvation. Neither ideology nor some other sense of higher purpose informs the wars that are waged in the undifferentiated Africa readers encounter in these works.

As I have made clear in this dissertation, in the canon of African child soldier narratives the idea of Africa as hell stands out. Afropessimism, "an essentialist position, arguing that today's poorly performing African economies and corrupt politics derive from cultural predispositions that deviate from 'universal standards,'" is a feature all too common to all the

narratives and films of the African child soldier genre (Bryceson 418). In the narratives and films I examine, the notion of Afropessimism is evident in the way violence is framed, and in the locations where it occurs. In this sense, as Jan Sandig reasons, Afropessimism seems to answer to the questions of *where* violence takes place and *why* it happens (198). To the question of where violence erupts, we see in the works I have discussed that the answer is: *All over Africa*. The generic Africa-generalizing inclination of these works as evident in their settings, more specifically those of Iweala's and Dongala's respective novel, encourage the understanding of the conflicts they depict as typical occurrences in all of Africa.³ What these works say in response to the question of why violence occurs is: *This is typical of African culture*.⁴ Other elements of Afropessimism include depictions of sudden and excessive violence; generalization of national or regional sociopolitical and economic challenges; decontextualization of conflict; and dependence on foreign intervention for solution (Evans and Glenn 15). These features are present in the works I have engaged with here.

In my analyses of the four novels at the centre of this dissertation, I examine the idea of African ethnocentric conflicts depicted in them. In the existing criticisms of these novels, not much focus has been accorded the African wars they represent. The Nigeria-Biafra War (1967-70), the first and second Liberian Civil War (1989-1997; 1999-2003), the Sierra Leonean Civil

³ This view of violence as commonplace in all of Africa also resonates in Edward Zwick-directed film, *Blood Diamond* (2006), in which some characters use the acronym TIA (meaning "This Is Africa") to pejoratively underscore the difference between Africa and the rest of the world and to suggest that the conflict and malfeasances observed in the world of that film are representative and defining of all of Africa. For more on this film and its portrayal of African conflicts, see Burcu Sunar Cankurtaran's "'This is Africa': The Melian Dialogue in *Blood Diamond*," in *The Interplay Political Theory and Movies: Bridging Two Worlds*, edited by Ulrich Hamenstädt, Springer, 2019, pp. 217-34; and Martha Evans and Ian Glenn's "'TIA – This is Africa': Afropessimism in Twenty-First-Century Narrative Films," in *Black Camera*, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 14-35.

⁴ I have relied on Jan Sandig's thoughts on the questions of "where" and "why" in my explanation of the Afropessimistic contents of the African child soldier genre. See "'Beasts of No Nation': Afropessimism and the Rationality of Warfare in Africa," in *The Interplay Between Political Theory and Movies*, edited by Ulrich Hamenstädt, pp. 195-214.

War (1991-2002), and the Republic of the Congo Civil War (1997-99) are recreated in varied forms in the four novels in ways that indicate that African wars are to be considered meaningless, greed-driven, and misplaced. Whereas notable bits and pieces of clues regarding the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War are present in Chris Abani's *Song for Nights* and clear pointers to the Sierra Leonean and Liberian civil wars are manifest in Kourouma's *Allah Is Not Obligated*, in Iweala's and Dongala's respective novel the impression we have of the war in them is that it is an African reality, that is, the sudden outbreak of war largely defines the continent. All these wars are represented without specification of any ideological underpinnings; they are wars seemingly propelled only by the avarice and selfish interests of those waging them. The wars break out suddenly and easily; they are defined mainly by abrupt violence and the involvement of children; and they target civilians. These characteristics make these wars fit the idea of "new war" that has been advanced both by Mary Kaldor and the framers of the humanitarian discourse on children and war.⁵

Thus, in the existing body of criticisms on these novels these wars tend to be analyzed primarily as criminal enterprises comprised of moments and sites where the children involved in them lose their innocence. Such analyses affirm the humanitarian position on war as a criminal activity and is the space within which the innocence of children mobilized as soldiers is lost. In humanitarian discourse on child soldiers, the actual socioeconomic and political realities of prewar times experienced by the young fighters do not seem to matter. They also do not seem significant in most critical discussions of African child soldier narratives. Such thinking is present in Elliot P. Skinner's essay, "Child Soldiers in Africa: A Disaster for Future Families"

⁵ See David Rosen's argument on contemporary humanitarian narratives on war in *Armies of the Young: Child Soldiers in War and Terrorism*, 2005, pp. 9-14.

(1999), in which the author thinks of child soldiers uniformly as victims of adults' evil. Skinner does not make any attempt to examine the root causes of child soldiering in the countries where it was present on the continent. For Skinner, the wars involving children as soldiers in Africa are nothing more than mere criminal activities imperiling lives of the young and destroying society. Skinner sees African countries as incapable of managing their internal affairs and so proposes intervention by the international system as an appropriate solution to "the scourge of the so-called 'children soldiers'" (7).

My own analyses of the ethnopolitical conflicts represented in these texts differ from those in the extant criticism. For example, by considering the trajectories of violence in Liberia and Sierra Leone, from precolonial to postcolonial times, through my analysis of Kourouma's *Allah Is Not Obligated*, I have been able to show that the loss of childhood innocence, often invoked in humanitarian discourse on children and war, does not occur in contexts involving armed/rebel groups. Instead, the social environments, economic realities, and especially the kinds of political logic that underpin governance practices in those two countries did much to victimize and prepare young people to perpetrate wanton atrocities as members of rebel movements during the civil wars. Moreover, in my exploration of other countries' sociohistorical and political histories, it becomes clear that most of the children and young people who responded to the calls to arms were neither politically unaware nor were they strangers to the language of violence. Those children show that war is not the exclusive preserve of adult society wherein children are mere automatons senselessly mobilized to prosecute it. In their choice to join armed groups, and in the roles they played therein, the young people of Liberia and Sierra Leone exercised the agency they had acquired during the crises of peacetime. For them, "[w]arfare was a cruel extension of prewar conflicts in which [they] were already integrated into

an exploitative and violent political system” (Rosen, *Armies of the Young* 90). Accordingly, in his child soldier narrative, Kourouma nudges us to think of the role prewar realities played in diluting or otherwise compromising the innocence of most children who become child soldiers. My point here is not to be understood as insinuating that necessarily all children whose prewar experiences were unpleasant went on to become child soldiers willingly. Rather, I am arguing that novels like Kourouma’s invite us to take cognizance of the damaging capacities of prewar socioeconomic and political experiences of children mobilized as soldiers in any attempt to design workable policies for their rehabilitation and prevention of the use of children as soldiers in future wars.

Thus, while my textual-interpretive analyses of the selected novels underscore the Afropessimistic moods of the African child soldier genre, its contrasting representations of children and the ambivalent image they provide of child soldiers, they also stress the importance of some works being taken up in and contributing to ongoing campaigns against the mobilization of child soldiers and the rehabilitation processes employed by international organizations and transnational NGOs concerned with children at war. In this regard, my critique of African child soldier narratives reveals understanding the prewar conditions in the societies of children instrumentalized as soldiers proves vital to initiating viable policies for the protection of children. More crucially, my dissertation makes a notable contribution by demonstrating how the African child soldier genre helps us to understand the complex phenomenon of children’s involvement as soldiers in war and the discursive forces shaping the representations of such experiences. Similarly, my work illuminates our understanding of how the African child soldier genre has become a formidable channel through which the changing meanings of childhood are

reflected, as well as how the discursive practices informing our understanding of African children's military enlistment and atrocities are processed.

My dissertation provides an alternative reading of the literature on African child soldiers. In this alternative reading I challenge dominant assumptions concerning the discourse on African child soldiering, pinpointing the influence of humanitarian discourse on both the practice of writing and critical judgements concerning literary representations of African child soldiers. My focus on individual texts in each chapter enables a comprehensive and multifaceted set of readings that expresses an enriched (and enriching) understanding of the literary construction of child soldiers, the manner of their recruitment, the nature of the conflicts they are enmeshed in, and the role they play in war. Accordingly, my dissertation makes a useful contribution to the growing critical reception, in the West and elsewhere, of African child soldier narratives. It is my hope that this dissertation broadens current understanding of recent wars in Africa while providing critical insight into the deeper humanistic concerns of African writers who have taken on the burden of imagining the realities of wars occurring across the entire continent. I also hope that my work will inspire further scholarship and debate on literary representations of children and warfare in Africa.

Given these hopes, I do not share Aaron Bady's somewhat hasty assumption that "[w]e are probably done with the child-soldier novel [and] those who follow African literature seriously have moved on" ("The Last Child Soldier"). I disagree with Bady's supposition for two reasons. One, there are still many more areas to critically explore in the fictions (including graphic novels such as Jessica Dee Humphreys and Michel Chikwanine's *Child Soldier: When Boys and Girls Are Used in War*), memoirs, films, and photos of the African child soldier genre. The fact that some of the texts of this genre have received more attention than others means that

in time to come we are likely to see more critical discussions emerge. Two, virtually all the known African child soldier fictions which have received profound critical attention have been written by men. In these works, the privileged gender is often male, thus sustaining the “traditional perceptions of armed conflict as a phenomenon occurring between males” (Denov 11). Similar exclusionary practice abounds in the body of works detailing the experiences of the famous “Lost Boys of Sudan,” young people, boys and girls displaced during the Second Sudanese Civil War. But child soldier fictions by women writers representing girl soldiers – not just as characters but as protagonists – are emerging. The underrepresentation of female child soldiers in fighting forces are increasingly being addressed by the publications of novels such as Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani’s *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree* (2018) and Edna O’Brien’s *Girl* (2019). These novels deal with the representations of the widely reported abduction of over 276 schoolgirls in Chibok, Nigeria, by the nihilistic Islamist terrorist group known as Boko Haram in April 2014. However, unlike those written by men and whose protagonist-narrators are boys, these new emerging child soldier narratives by women have not yet attracted substantial critical attention. In other words, these works deserve a strong, scholarly focus. A comparative study of male and female writers’ representations of child soldiers, among others, is an immediate possible area to explore. In this sense, we are not possibly done with the child soldier novel and memoir; neither have we heard the last word on their filmic adaptations.

For those who follow African literature, there is still more work to be done in our engagement with the literature on African child soldiers and children affected by war. To the best of my knowledge, there has not been any critical works on the prevalent use of humour as a narrative device in African child soldier narratives. Why there is so much humour, including sarcasm, in stories dealing with terrors, atrocities, and perilous conditions of human life seems to

me a viable area of inquiry. Similarly, the filmic adaptations of novels like Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* and Dongala's *Johnny Mad Dog* do also need and deserve more robust analyses.⁶ Such studies are important in view of arguments that some critics have advanced in their analyses of these films. One of such examples is Catarina Martin's view on the film adaption of *Johnny Mad Dog*, which was released in 2008 and directed by the French filmmaker Jean-Stephane Sauvaire and produced by French producer Mathieu Kassowitz. For Martin, the film "converts an excellent novel into a very noisy and extremely violent chaos" (444). This position indicates the critic's lack of appreciation for the realities of the world created in Dongala's novel. Nothing in the world Sauvaire creates in the film contrasts with what is available in the novel. The inspiration for the world created in the film comes from the novel, which I have analyzed in chapter four alongside relevant textual evidence.

While it is true, as Martins observes, that some of the acts of balancing that the presence of Laokole as a second narrator produces in the novel is "reduced to incomprehensible bits and pieces" in the film, that reordering on the part of Sauvaire does nothing either to rupture the nastiness of the world created in the novel or to exaggerate it. Laokole's presence in the novel does not effectively create the impression that the Africa of her co-narrator is different from the one she inhabits. Much as we understand that world through Johnny's perspective, we also distill some more depressing things about it from Laokole. As Laokole's migration abroad reveals, the death of the likes of Johnny Mad Dog does not mean that her country has once again become livable. The state of exception encountered in the work is not one that is amenable to a positive transformation through the deaths of child soldiers like Johnny. And as the ascension to power of

⁶ Both films are available on Netflix; *Beasts of No Nation* was "the first feature film to be distributed by Netflix simultaneously via its streaming service and in theatres" in 2015 (Joya Uraizee's *Writing That Breaks Stones*, 2020, p 109).

“the leader of the faction currently in power, President Dabanga” (250) shows, while a country in the state of exception may experience a transition of power from one group to another, it does not mean there will correspondingly be a positive transformation. Put differently, both the novel and its film adaptation underscore the point that the state of exception in which child soldier operates changes without being positively transformed. In their representation of African conflicts, the novel, as well as the film, proffers stereotypes of African conflicts as meaningless and irrational. If Sauvaire’s adaption of Dongala’s novel privileges the Afropessimistic contents of the novel, it is because those negatives define the novel much more than any positives a second protagonist-narrator like Laokole represents. Clearly, issues with existing critiques such as Martin’s indicate that more and more robust analytical work is needed in order for there to emerge a fuller and richer appreciation of child soldier cinema. I hope too that my dissertation stirs more interest in this direction.

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