

African Child Soldiers and Humanitarian Consumption

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Article:

"Disturbing Memoir Outsell Literary Comfort Food at Starbucks," *The New York Times* reported on March 10, 2007. Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone*, a memoir of the author's experiences as a child soldier in the civil war in Sierra Leone that lasted from 1991 to 2002, and the second selection in Starbucks' book program, sold over 62,000 copies in its first three weeks there. Although child soldiering itself is not a new phenomenon, since the adoption of the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the Organization of African Unity's African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990, 1999), UNICEF's publication of Graça Machel's *The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*, and the UN's adoption of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (2000), research in the social sciences and international humanitarian law on child soldiers has increased significantly.

What seems more striking, yet less studied, is the development, particularly within the past five years, of a growing market for the stories of child soldiers in literature and film. The recent publication and popularity of both fiction and literary non-fiction accounts of African child soldiers, as well as the remarkable success of *Invisible Children* as at once a film (*Invisible Children: Rough Cut*) and an activist organization (www.invisiblechildren.com), focus much needed attention on the conditions of the estimated 300,000 child soldiers worldwide (approximately 40 percent of them in Africa, according to David J. Francis.) At the same time, those successes raise the question of what it means, according to *The New York Times*, to "mesh with a certain globally conscious, humanitarian feeling that Starbucks tries to project." This article investigates what I will call the politics of humanitarian consumption of these texts.

Much of the excellent recent scholarship on child soldiers analyzes the conflicts and gaps between international humanitarian law on children and child soldiers in relation to anthropological and ethnographic accounts of the children themselves. Key areas of analysis include: the definition of a "child" in terms of age, development, and social agency; the framing of "childhood" as a time of innocence, immaturity, and emotion versus one of purposeful labor, communal standing, and decision making; the values, interests, and assets of the international legal community in relation to those of the local community; healing as opposed to retributive justice; healing through individualized psychotherapy versus communal rituals; and the social upheavals of armed conflict as temporary or ongoing conditions. While the ethnographic approaches emphasize the multiplicity of experiences of childhood and are grouped by topic, the narrative arc of texts that foreground humanitarianism frequently follows the trajectory sketched earlier of definitions, historical context, range of experiences, and, finally, (re)integration, healing, and suggestions for future actions. Describing the different assumptions underlying these two approaches, David Rosen writes:

Positing that the transition from childhood to adulthood takes place in universal, naturally determined, and fixed steps, developmental models are based on the belief that children are basically immature, incompetent, and irrational. As children grow older, nature—mediated by enculturation and socialization—transforms the child into a competent, mature, and rational adult. In contrast, empirical studies in anthropology, history, and

sociology offer a new paradigm for the study of childhood. ... It rejects preconceived notions of children as irrational or prelogical beings. Its starting point is the premise that children are active players in the social order who dynamically shape the world around them.

Even those who see children as actors with power to shape the worlds around them often adhere to a narrative that implicitly posits child soldiers as social and military aberrations that humanitarian assistance might correct, rather than as possible products and indicators of global inequalities that would require structural changes to rectify. The developmental model of human life is implicit in other, related discourses as well. As Joseph Slaughter has perceptively analyzed, it provides a blueprint for the literary form of the *Bildungsroman*, as well as the form of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, both of which have inculcatory functions. Sharon Stephens finds this same narrative structure within the Convention of the Rights of the Child, most markedly in its characterization of a child's "culture" as first universalized according to developmental assumptions described above and only particularized in "special cases": "The Convention argues that the child has first and foremost a right to international modernist culture (unmarked, but implicit in the document's framing principles), then to identity (conceived in individual, familial, and national terms), and finally, in special cases, to minority and indigenous cultures."

Child soldiers raise the stakes in debates over these definitions. The romanticization of childhood as a time of innocence and play, insulated from what Stephens terms, "the arduous tasks and instrumentalized relationships of the productive sphere," reflects a prioritization of Western, capitalist values that, I would argue, are inseparable from the history of modern colonialism and the Anglophone novel. Child soldiers (real or imagined), particularly when viewed as wayward products of technological advances in light weaponry, faulty family structures, and postcolonial statehood, seem to mark a failure in discourses of modernity.

Defining childhood primarily by innocence and potentiality simultaneously reinstates an interrelated developmental model of human and nation-state even as the existence of child soldiers points to the failure of the "mature" ends of those narratives. Vanessa Pupavac emphasizes the colonial overtones of these discourses as applied to child soldiers in the global South: "The perception of stolen childhoods ignores the continuing reality that the experiences of children cannot be separated from the conditions in society in general, but singling out the plight of children implicitly or explicitly blames the adults for their fate." As consumers of stories of African child soldiers, we might reflect on our own positions in the global North to ask, following Andrew Mawson, "Can a convenient fiction about what is a child carry the weight of so much violence?"

The activist film *Invisible Children: Rough Cut*, Beah's memoir, and two recent novels of African child soldiers, Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* and Chris Abani's *Song for Night*, complicate the distinctions between narrative structure and purpose. Neither juridical nor anthropological, the texts contribute to an emerging market of multimedia representations of African child soldiers for an eagerly consuming public. In a *New Statesman* review of recent books about experiences of African children in war, including *A Long Way Gone*, novelist Dinaw Mengestu charges, "What attracts immediate and superficial attention to Africa's child soldiers ... is that the brutal existence of a child soldier dovetails neatly with depictions of Africa both as a place born of hell and misery and as a continent that, like a child, can be saved." While the film carries an explicit message of viewer intervention, the literary works, both fiction and non-fiction, make more ambiguous claims. Because the power of all four texts depends on the values ascribed to cultural difference, we must ask, according to Graham Huggan, "What happens when marginal products, explicitly valued for their properties of 'resistance', are seconded to the mainstream as a means of reinvigorating mainstream culture?" To begin to answer that question, we must examine the production of cultural difference in each work as a site of aesthetic and political struggle immanent to and at odds with the depiction of children as such.

Despite their obvious differences in media and genre, the books and film coalesce around the desire to understand African child soldiers through the eyes of children. The website for *Invisible Children* describes "how it all began" when "three boys from Southern California found themselves stranded in Northern Uganda," and promises the viewer that "[t]o see Africa through young eyes is funny, and heartbreaking, quick, and

informative.” Introducing themselves on camera, the three filmmakers (in college or recently graduated, and thus well beyond the “Standard 18” marker of childhood designated by the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child or the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict), Jason Russell, Bobby Bailey, and Laren Poole, characterize themselves as “naïve kids,” hugging their tearful mothers good-bye as they embark on their “adventure.” Initially propelled by a desire to learn more about the genocide in Darfur, their guide and “African mother,” Jolly Okot, soon points them to their story: the Acholi children in Gulu, Northern Uganda, who gather each night in hospitals, bus depots, and other communal “safe” places in fear of (re)abduction by the anti-government Lord’s Resistance Army (LAR).

Invisible Children has had phenomenal success over the past five years in raising awareness and inspiring the participation of high school and college students in the United States on behalf of the displaced children of Northern Uganda. Programs sponsored by the organization include a micro-economic bracelet-making campaign, an educational program to build and supply schools, raise enrollments, and provide mentorship, and the development of a feature film (*Invisible Children: Final Cut*). According to the Invisible Children website in mid-October 2007, the Schools for Schools program, for instance, has garnered the participation of 580 high schools and colleges across the United States, and raised \$1.2 million in donations for partnered Ugandan schools in its first semester alone. Testimonials provided by the organization as well as by my own first-year college students who participated in Invisible Children events in high school emphasize the film’s inspirational power with young Americans (who participate primarily through purchasing the products the organization sells and organizing fundraising campaigns, though other areas of engagement also exist).

Invisible Children’s edgy, MTV-inspired aesthetic underscores the claim of and appeal to youth(fulness), and much of the pleasure of watching beginning sections comes from the self-deprecating naïveté as well as bravado of the filmmakers. That aesthetic simultaneously transforms the circumstances of the Acholi “night commuters” into both enter- and infotainment. Donate your time, talent, and money (“lots of it”), and in return, the website promises, “become a hero.” In other words, the film and website ask us quite explicitly to identify with the filmmakers as opposed to the African children, and the resulting activism reifies, rather than transforms, the relationship between them. The film divorces the crisis in Northern Uganda from the realm of material politics. Although there is brief mention that the Acholi have (unspecified) grievances against the Ugandan government, the catalyst for this “war of madness” is ostensibly the charisma, claims of supernatural power, and Acholi susceptibility to the mystical spirituality proffered by leaders of the resistance movement, first Alice Lakwena and now Joseph Kony.

Despite introductions to children who were part of the Lord’s Resistance Army and commentary by local intellectuals that the “night commuters” exhibit violent, sexualized behavior, the film insists on the children’s innocence. Through local spokespersons as well as the voice over, we hear a story of trauma and victimization that precludes consideration of the children’s agency, either positive or negative: no one joins the LRA voluntarily (a claim that at once obviates child soldiers’ responsibility for their violent actions, as well as the substance of any political grievances or material necessities driving the conflict), the children are brainwashed one hundred percent, and they have been desensitized through violence.

My point is not to defend the abhorrent actions of the LRA nor to indict the children, but to highlight the film’s dependence on a depoliticized, ultimately self-gratifying depiction of the children in order to fulfill the symbolic contract it makes with viewers for their satisfaction. Even those local community leaders, religious leaders, politicians, and historians, who appear on camera, despite their passionate commitment to improving the conditions of the children, have presumably failed to do so and thus need the intervention of young Americans. The cultivation of humanitarian empathy and possibly even a desire to alleviate the suffering of others among young people certainly remains a laudatory goal. My concern here is that the terms defining the relationship between humanitarian and “victim” depend on global structural inequalities, masked by a discourse of universalized childhood, which the relationship itself presumably seeks to address.

The moment of catharsis in the film comes not in the form of political or structural change, but of recognizable psychotherapeutic techniques. Early in the film, one of the filmmakers comments that “African children don't cry,” yet when he asks Jacob what he would say to his brother whom the LRA killed while they were abducted together if he could meet him again, Jacob breaks down. His sobs, with the filmmaker's gentle “It's okay, it's okay” in the background, mark the ostensible progress Jacob has made. The depoliticization of the circumstances in which these children live becomes a precondition for the film's conclusion, which asks us to read them as symbolic of Africa as a whole: “Despite the fact that these children live each day in a completely desperate situation, without an end to this war in sight ... they choose joy, and that is what Africa is all about.” Forever locked into childhood, innocence, inexplicable violence, and desperation, “choosing” joy remains their only form of agency.

In contrast, the filmmakers, whom we have seen transformed from rambunctious kids (whose first actions in Africa are to kill a snake and blow-up a termite mound) to global humanitarians, conclude with a curiously passive description of their own work, a passivity produced by the same static, neo-colonial relationship between donor and recipient: “There is a mind-numbing hurt and fear in Africa while at the same time an unexplainable freedom and strength that shall *forever* inspire any who *are chosen* to go there” (my emphasis). Viewers as consumers may find themselves similarly chosen to become heroes in the production of their own newly globalized, highly stylized humanitarian autobiographies.

The literary texts similarly lend themselves to a humanitarian read, yet they complicate the terms of that transaction. Beah's *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*, as a story of successful rehabilitation, validates international humanitarian assistance for child soldiers. These include programs and offices of the United Nations, NGOs such as the Catholic organization, Children Associated with the War, and psychosocial therapy provided at long-term rehabilitation centers. Through the patient support of his case worker, Esther, Beah begins to tell his stories. Her steady response, “None of what happened was your fault,” reinforces the discourses in international humanitarian law and dominant NGO work of childhood innocence, and allows him to begin to build a restorative trust with those around him.

Descriptions of his years as a child soldier from age thirteen to sixteen in the government army of Sierra Leone during the civil war, however, weave innocence and responsibility together. Beah tells of indoctrination (“Is that how you would stab someone who had killed your family?”), the strategic and consistent use of amphetamines, and his gradual inurement to witnessing and inflicting violence:

The lieutenant pointed at the prisoners. I am not sure if one of the captives was the shooter, but any captive would do at that time. So they were all lined up, six of them, with their hands tied. I shot them on their feet and watched them suffer for an entire day before shooting them in the head so that they would stop crying. Before I shot each man, I looked at him and saw how his eyes gave up hope and steadied before I pulled the trigger. I found their somber eyes irritating.

That unwavering voice refuses the protection of victimhood by never making excuses for itself. Esther's discourse of childhood innocence and exculpability, read within Beah's larger narrative, sounds more like a strategic approach to rehabilitation than a universal model of human development.

Beah's story is further particularized by its paratextual frames. The first, “My Journey,” comprises a map of his travels in Sierra Leone and then an anecdote from his high school years in New York City: “Why did you leave Sierra Leone?” “Because there was a war.”[...] “You should tell us about it sometime.” “Yes, sometime.” After telling his personal story, Beah provides a chronology of Sierra Leone that begins with European contact in 1462 and ends with the imprisonment of former president Charles Taylor, charged with war crimes and “awaiting trial at the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL).” The framing devices align Beah's narrative with the work of the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Special Court, thereby reinscribing international humanitarian law. At the same time, because Beah is writing from New York rather than Freetown, such that the (re)conciliatory “work” of narrative is already displaced, we are reminded of the failure

of those same discourses. Given the change in readers' own positions, from ostensibly ignorant high school students to global citizens united through international humanitarian law, it is difficult *not* to ask how one's consumption of the text in Starbucks is related to the long shared history between the United States and Sierra Leone and why, given everything Beah has told us, the United States is one of only two countries, along with Somalia, that has failed to sign the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The two novels, Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* and Abani's *Song for Night*, come out of a long tradition of Anglophone Nigerian literature, yet they transcend that tradition. As the title *Beasts of No Nation* suggests, Agu, the narrator, speaks for child soldiers who are not bound by the geographic limits of the unnamed West African country of the novel. To whom he is speaking, moreover, raises the broader questions of how and to what ends postcoloniality (in its political, theoretical, and aesthetic manifestations) and human rights discourses, both of which privilege the nation-state as a category of analysis, intersect. The shift away from the nation-state—articulated eloquently by a subject who demands our attention, yet exists beyond even fictional citizenship—challenges both postcolonial theory and human rights discourses in their ability to negotiate competing claims of the representability of and political responsibility for African child soldiers within a global marketplace. Unlike *Invisible Children: Rough Cut* and *A Long Way Gone*, the novels offer an African child soldier's perspective on his circumstances and actions. Because those perspectives are divorced from a specific geopolitical context, however, they resist ethnographic and anthropological readings. Both novels draw the reader's attention instead to the “problem” of speaking, of constructing and bridging cultural difference and of speaking on/from the edges of representability. As Iweala writes, “To me, Agu's voice is as much a character as his person.”

Although Iweala claims Agu's voice “tries to convey the purity and simplicity of childhood in contrast to the complexity and chaos of the events happening around him,” the voice as our guide to that chaos succeeds to the extent that he can represent it. In answer to his own question—“How can I know what is happening to me? How can I know?”—Agu evinces complex perspectives: “Everything is inside out like my shirt I am wearing,” “Behind my eye I am seeing,” and “I am feeling like I am inside the world and I am looking at how everything must look from the inside instead of outside.”

The tension of the narrative comes from the pull of Agu's voice against the pull of the storyline itself. Like Beah in his memoir, Iweala retains hope in rehabilitation within the formulation of a coming-of-age story. Beah's security ultimately rests on his adoption by American Laura Simms. It reinstates him legally and emotionally in recognizable, protected narratives of development. Similarly, Agu seems poised to reclaim his childhood at the end of the book. In a session with his American caseworker, Amy, at the rehabilitation center, he finally begins to share his experiences that “will be making you to think I am some sort of beast or devil”: “I am all of this thing, but I am also having mother once, and she is loving me.” As a conclusion, that line hesitates in fulfilling its intended promise, creating a potentially productive space for doubt, although it clearly posits the reader as his listener with “water ... just shining in her eye.”

Song for Night denies more vehemently the conventional satisfactions of narrative sympathy or humanitarian intervention within existing power structures. It demands instead the reader and author's joint contract to imagine the unimaginable as an (unattainable) goal in and of itself. “What you hear is not my voice,” the mute narrator, My Luck, announces at the outset, adding later,

Of course if you are hearing any of this at all it's because you have gained access to my head. You would also know then that my inner-speech is not in English, because there is something atavistic about war that rejects all but the primal language of the genes to comprehend it, so you are in fact hearing my thoughts in Igbo. But we shan't waste time on trying to figure all that out because as I said before, time here is precious and not to be wasted on peculiarities, only on what is essential.

What is essential is the gesture (chapter headings are signed: “Night Is a Palm Pulled Down over the Eyes,” “Dreaming Is Hands Held in Prayer over the Nose”) of translation, of reaching across alterity without wanting

or believing it possible to domesticate it. As My Luck comes to after a mine explosion and attempts, over the course of the book, to find his unit and/or his home, his journey becomes increasingly mystical and surreal. Revisiting sites of trauma collapses time and space, refusing the possibility of a developmental narrative. Abani's conclusion—the reuniting of mother and son in death—insists that the desire for home, the mother who guarantees one's childhood, the speech that transcends all differences cannot, under these material circumstances, be satisfied in this world. Crucially, intervention is beside the point when My Luck finally achieves these desires. The reader then, too, must re-evaluate her desires for such intimacies and connections, as well as her desire for intervention from afar within the unchanged context of structural imbalances that produce My Luck's traumatic life and death.

By denying both the narrative potential for humanitarian intervention as well as the definition of the child on which it depends and which is its object, *Song for Night* asks the reader to expand his or her capacity to imagine rather than to collapse difference. As My Luck insists, “there is something about the mind's interiority no less that opens up your view of the world.” If “[e]ducation in the Humanities attempts to be an *uncoercive* rearrangement of desires” (original emphasis, Spivak), we might begin our work by “training to learn from the singular and unverifiable” rules of fiction, rather than from the stabilized fictions of law.

Notes

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