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**Synthesizing Narrative Analysis with Peace and Conflict Studies:
The Case of African Child Soldier Autobiographies**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Literary & Cultural Studies from
The College of William and Mary

by

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When two elephants fight, it is the grass that gets trampled.

- African proverb, from *They Poured Fire On Us From the Sky* -

This paper will serve as an examination of the experiences of child soldiers in sub-Saharan Africa. Using autobiography as the central medium of analysis, I will examine the experiences of selected child soldiers, taking particular note of their self-analysis (such as their commentary on agency, culpability, and identity formation) and their interactions with the military or paramilitary¹ organizations that have recruited them. I will focus on why or how the individuals came to be child soldiers, the experiences they had as soldiers, the difficulties of reintegration post-conflict, and the lingering effects of what they have witnessed and done. My hope is to draw conclusions about the psychosocial impact of the selected conflicts, ultimately arguing that these conclusions are less ambiguous and estranged than those which might be developed through other disciplines. Grounding myself in narrative analysis, complemented by psychology and political science, I will approach the autobiography with a dual humanities/social sciences approach. I will illustrate how the autobiographies of African child soldiers are windows to conflict in continental Africa. In addition, I will demonstrate the value of autobiographical data within peace and conflict studies. These sources have been under-used in international relations, becoming linked to the larger issues of Western ignorance and marginalization of broad-scale wars being waged in Africa. However, they provide new insight into hidden societies and allow a stark analysis of the effect of war on individuals, and thus on conflict-ridden societies.

CHILD SOLDIER PARADIGMS

For the purposes of this thesis, a child soldier will be defined as “any person below 18 years of age who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or

¹ Military-like but not part of any state’s formal armed forces

armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys and girls, used as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities.” This is the definition determined by the 2007 Paris Principles (UNICEF 2007), the result of a decade of activism which began in 1996 with the publication of Graça Machel’s disturbing, groundbreaking article “The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children,” which brought the long-term impact of child soldiering to international attention and elicited a United Nations response. Note that it doesn’t distinguish between the willing recruit (including individuals who lie in order to become soldiers) and the abducted one. Both are considered child soldiers in the eyes of international law. The term itself is oxymoronic, and rightly so, for it vacillates between the definitions of a child and a soldier. One denotes innocence and naiveté, while the other suggests agency and a predominant role in conflict. A definitional gray area results, because while a soldier is clearly defined and a child is clearly defined, the concept of someone who is both remains complex and lacks distinct parameters (Podder 2011a).

As child soldiers have come into sharper focus in related international relations fields, a number of key questions have demanded answering: how do children become soldiers, what role do they play in armed conflict, and when they return to civilian life what unique issues do they face? Much of the media discourse has been fed by human rights reporting and child psychologists, whose normative advocacy goals heavily influence how child soldiers are viewed. The result of their efforts has been the development of four predominant viewpoints, which Mark A. Drumbl describes in *Reimagining Child Soldiers in International Law and Policy* (2012). Child soldiers are

either (1) demonized as terrorist or bandit children who enjoy killing; (2) dubbed heroes who stand up for political change; (3) dismissed as irretrievably damaged human beings, devastated and irreparably seared by conflict (supported by Singer 2006); or (4) pardoned as faultless victims, passive automatons used as tools and weapons of war (supported by Dallaire 2011). All of these paradigms limit our ability to understand the problem, and also have profound legal consequences, resulting in a system in which there is an intriguing double standard: with adult perpetrators of atrocities, personality is blamed—the character of the individuals rather than context. In child soldiers, this rhetoric is completely flipped, and they are defined as being situational victims who committed crimes, not out of free will, but as a forced consequence of their situation or circumstances.

“Can these explanations, however, properly be universalized?” Drumbi asks. “Do all child perpetrators kill, mutilate, or rape solely because they are pre-rational? Immature? Overwhelmed by constraint? Drugged? Can reintegration and reconciliation be truly viable if based solely on these explanations?” (Drumbi 2012, 81). Child soldier experiences are incredibly individualized in spite of a few common tendencies (such as exposure to violence and witnessing atrocities). Data collected by Schauer and Elbert (2010) in IDP camps in Northern Uganda breaks down a vast myriad of roles which child soldiers played within the LRA, and found that, in a sample of 1114 children and youths,

43% were formerly abducted children and many of them were recruited temporarily as child soldiers. The most common traumatic life events of those who had been abducted were forced to skin, chop, or cook dead bodies (8%), forced to eat human flesh (8%), forced to loot property and burn houses (48%), forced to abduct other children (30%), forced to kill someone (36%), forced to beat, injure, or mutilate someone (38%), caused serious injury or death to somebody else (44%), experienced severe human suffering, such as carrying heavy loads or being deprived of food (100%), gave birth to a child in captivity (33% of women), were threatened to be killed (93%), saw people with mutilations and dead bodies (78%), experienced sexual assault (45%), experienced assault with a weapon (77%), and experienced physical assault including being kicked,

beaten, or burnt (90%). The PTSD rate of the children, who were never abducted, was found to be 8.4%; of those who had ever been abducted, 33%, and those who had spent more than 1 month in captivity, the PTSD rate was measured at 48%. (322)

While abuses such as forced manual labor and starvation are rampant, many of the experiences can only be generalized to a third or half of the population studied, illustrating the lack of significant consistencies in individual child soldier trajectories. This applies both when comparing the experiences of soldiers within the same unit, as well as on a broader scale such as the one this paper takes, examining distinct conflicts and conflict zones. Quantification of child soldier experiences only serves to highlight just how varied and distinct each child soldier's story is. From social sciences research to the sphere of international law, the plight of child soldiering needs to be recognized as a complex issue warranting a multi-layered and detailed response.

Romeo Dallaire (2011) points out two key areas of child soldiering which have been neglected in research and policy. The first is the value of child soldiers—the tactical advantages of using them, and why they're being recruited in the first place. The second is the child's own experiences during conflict, and shedding light here will be the intent of this research. What is the reality of child soldiering, and how might a different paradigm—the child soldier as rational actor or social navigator—change how we analyze both them and the conflicts in which they are embroiled? Examining autobiographical data with the thorough analysis of a humanities approach will shed the necessary light on the components of child soldier memories that truly matter: not the bare facts, but the psychological mechanisms that foreground their strategic decisions within a war environment. I will also be pointing out how child soldier are not mutated by but consciously adapt to the environments they find themselves in, and how after so

many traumatic experiences, child soldiers' own self-reflection and self-analysis through the autobiographical process provides them with a therapeutic and empowering forum.

THE SELECTED AUTOBIOGRAPHIES: AFRICAN NEW WARS

Four child soldier autobiographies—all from sub-Saharan Africa—will be examined: *Heart of Fire* by Senait Mehari, *War Child* by Emmanuel Jal, *A Long Way Gone* by Ishmael Beah, and *Girl Soldier* by Grace Akallo. In the 1980s, six-year-old Senait became a soldier in the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF). Emmanuel served as one of the reputed *jenajesh* (fierce child soldiers) within the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA). Ishmael was a child soldier from 1993-1995 in Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front (RUF). Grace was an abducted child soldiers in the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in northern Uganda.

Even with similar backgrounds, culture, traditions, etc., these children's stories are still worlds apart. Their experiences differ greatly and illustrate the lack of a generalized framework for the experiences of African child soldiers. They may not be completely representative, yet they are still valuable documents, useful as accounts of ongoing self-construction and social adaptation within conflict zones. These documents are scarce—most child soldier data is taken in interviews, not self-recorded in long, detailed narratives—and they provide information about hidden societies (such as bush-based paramilitary groups) where daily life has long eluded the eyes of the media. Their content contains valuable information—reflections of individuals who have gone through extreme and unparalleled experiences within African intrastate conflicts. Only through

analysis and comparison with other data can the value of these autobiographies within peace and conflict studies be fully discerned.

The autobiographies used have come from four major African conflict zones within the last fifty years: the Eritrean independence movement and Civil War (1960-1991), the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983-2005), the Sierra Leonean Civil War (1991-2002), and the Lord's Resistance Army insurgency in Uganda and neighboring countries (1987-present). All of these conflicts fall into the category of *new wars*. War is a concept that evolves constantly to deal with new eras and new types of conflict. Wars were historically fought solely between soldiers on battlefields separated from civilian life. Over the last several decades, violent conflict has taken on a new form, in which fighting is dominated by irregular or paramilitary organizations and in which the vast majority of casualties are civilians. The proportion of civilian deaths in armed conflicts has gone up to more than 90%, and half of these victims are children (Schauer and Elbert 2010, 313). The players in these new wars tend to justify them with ethnic identification; however, in reality many of these conflicts are driven by economic factors. Players fight over access to resource wealth without an end goal in mind, committing systematic atrocities upon the civilian populations they encounter and often making regions under their control inhabitable (Schauer and Elbert 2010, 312-313). These conflicts are often intrastate in nature, and can thus be considered civil wars, but in a new sense of the term, a war in which civilians are a primary target, "and power over them is the principal gain—a war where combatants mingle with civilians and use them as shields, as camouflage, as bait and as recruits for the 'cause'" (Dallaire 2011, 2).

Around 80% (Schauer and Elbert 2010, 311) of the forces waging these wars are child soldiers (40% of which are girls), which number between 250,000 and 300,000 around the world. Their economically-motivated, predatory recruiters, “focused on asset seizure, are particularly dependent on this new doctrine of using children. Small fringe groups that would have found it impossible to mobilize—and thus been marginalized in the past—now can vastly expand their power by using children” (Singer 2010, 106). The heavy involvement of child soldiers is another characteristic of many new wars, and the juxtaposition of rampant conflicts and large numbers of children has made Africa ground zero for the use and evolution of the child soldier. Africa has been the seat of the most accelerated growth in the use of child soldiers. This is no doubt due in great part to Africa’s “baby bonanza”—according to a 2009 article, “one African in two is a child” (The Economist 2009). It is a young continent, where the median age is 19.7 compared with the global median age of 30.4, and the population is growing rapidly. Africans will make up 24% of the global population by 2050 (they only account for 13% now), and the number of children and adolescents will also increase by the hundreds of millions. Only 5% of Africa’s population is over the age of 60 (Janneh 2012), and the AIDS pandemic is only aggravating this imbalance, creating a microcosm in which children vastly outnumber adults. Recent research has found a “strong correlation between violent outbreaks, ranging from wars to terrorism, and the proportion of young males to the overall population. Once the ratio of young males grows too far out of balance, violent conflict tends to ensue” (Singer 2006, 42). The abnormally high ratio of young males to adult males also may account for the increase in the use of child soldiers: to keep numbers consistent in an environment where adult soldiers are in short supply, child

soldiers are a viable fall-back option that becomes increasingly more alluring. Within paramilitary organizations, though girl soldiers are by no means absent, the large numbers of boys, coupled with the military culture of desensitization to violence, takes this phenomenon to a new extreme. Along this same vein, the average age of African child soldiers is decreasing from mid-teens to as low as nine years old (Achvarina and Reich 2010). This is a sharp contrast to the global average of 15-17 for most child soldier ages (Drumbl 2012).

Moving into a brief overview of the conflicts, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) started in 1960 as the first major independence movement for Eritrea's independence from Ethiopia. The Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) emerged as a splinter group from ELF in 1971. The two groups fought each other briefly during the Civil War in the early 1970s, and the EPLF went on to lead the Eritrean war for independence, ultimately winning nationhood in 1991 (Bernal 2000, 62). Senait Mehari was sent by her father to a training camp for ELF when she was six years old. She recalls, "These schools in the country were organized by the freedom fighters, this particular one by the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), for which my father had fought. It was under that corrugated iron roof that we first learned about the ELF vision of a free Eritrea, a socialist state for a better future, and absorbed their slogans, songs and dreams" (Mehari 2006, 43). Her "schooling" would quickly morph into military training.

Sudan tops the list for child soldier use, with as many as 100,000 children fighting on the two sides of the decades-old civil war. "Since 1995 the Islamic government in the north has conscripted boys as young as twelve into the army and the paramilitary Popular Defense Forces . . . The government has also targeted children in the towns it holds in the

south to use against their kinsmen in the rebel Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA)" (Coulter 2009, 24). Simultaneously there is a secondary problem of tens of thousands of ethnically Nuer and Dinka boys who have been displaced by this conflict. Known as the Lost Boys of Sudan, they present an easy target for SPLA recruitment. The collective autobiography *They Poured Fire on Us From the Sky* by Alephonsion Deng, Benson Deng, and Benjamin Ajak, while not a child soldier narrative, is the tale of three such Lost Boys, and provides an interesting counter-narrative to Sudanese Emmanuel Jal's *War Child*.

War Child and *A Long Way Gone* are similar in that both Emmanuel Jal's and Ishmael Beah's recollections contain numerous anecdotes of their own shocking acts of violence, and they both attest to being on the frontlines of multiple battles, something which our two female subjects never experienced. *A Long Way Gone* is by far the more well-known of the two. The Revolutionary United Front (RUF) was the major instigator of the Civil War which desolated Sierra Leone from 1991-2002. Led by Foday Sankoh and with support from Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), the RUF began with the goal of overthrowing President Joseph Momoh, but gradually devolved into a rampaging, destructive gang bent on gaining control of resources, particularly diamonds in Sierra Leone's eastern and southern regions, in order to continue functioning. Another counter-narrative will be briefly mentioned in contrast to Ishmael Beah's experiences: *The Bite of the Mango* by Mariatu Kamara. Mariatu's tale is not a child soldier memoir; rather, it is the account of a 12-year-old girl whose hands were chopped off by RUF child soldiers, providing a graphic example of how child soldiers are often unleashed on civilians—even children like themselves.

In Uganda, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) has been ravaging the northern, ethnically Acholi region since 1987. Its leader, Joseph Kony, has adapted a blend of twisted Christianity and magic to an agenda of ethnic hatred in order to motivate and justify the actions of his young soldiers: "he preaches that he is a direct conduit of the word of God, as well as a spirit medium, sent to found a Christian state based on the Ten Commandments and Acholi tribal traditions . . . Kony's group is a splinter of Alice Auma's Holy Spirit Movement, which rose up to resist the Muslim advances of Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Army, which in turn had overthrown the Acholi president of Uganda, Tito Okello" (Dallaire 2011,135). 60-80% (Bøås and Dunn 2007), or as much as 90% (McDonnell 2007) of the Lord's Resistance Army is composed of abducted child soldiers. The forces are concentrated in the Acholi region, which has been so thoroughly ravaged that almost its entire population now resides in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps (McDonnell 2007).

The autobiographies chosen for this project are the only full-length (book-length) African child soldier autobiographies in existence. They came to be written in different ways, but inevitably these are their stories, conveyed from mind to page by the ex-combatants themselves. The question that inevitably arises for both social scientists and cultural studies scholars is that of representation, i.e. how representative are these particular case studies of the vast population of child soldiers? The only norms for the experiences undergone by child soldiers is the overwhelming commonality of (1) exposure to violence and atrocities, (2) manipulation and displacement of identity, and (3) the devastating conviction that returning to their previous life is impossible. These trends exist regardless of the country, conflict, or time period in which the child became a

soldier. They are the same experiences that *any soldier* might undergo, or any victim of a trauma, yet in this respect, they still cannot be generalized. Child experiences during conflict vary immensely between states, between military or paramilitary organizations, and even within these units.

One of the most important things to keep in mind is that the ability of *these* child soldiers to tell their stories in autobiographical form is a unique quality in and of itself. These African child soldier autobiographies are the only ones we have. Not many have emerged intact from the war, violence, and chaos described here. Far fewer have been able to publish their own stories. Not to use these autobiographies means ignoring a unique and potentially valuable source. They are extraordinary case studies, with a wealth of unique strengths. Rather than emphasizing the typical research technique of searching for generalizations, they allow us an unprecedented view into the nuances of behavior on the most micro level, to how specific individuals from a particular group of actors identify themselves and their actions—a valuable find in political science research. Bent Flyvbjerg provided five arguments in favor of case studies. He points out how “black swans” have been vital to advancing knowledge about particular topics throughout history, saying “a discipline without exemplars is an ineffective one” (Flyvbjerg 2006, 242). As such, these “stories that fail the test and diverge from established ‘truth’ can sometimes be the most interesting, indicating silenced voices and subjugated knowledge” (Riessman 2008, 186). They have an ability to produce context-dependent knowledge which emphasizes depth instead of breadth. There needs to be more of an overlap in qualitative and quantitative techniques within the social sciences, and case studies such as these autobiographies provide a forum for this interaction.

THE VALUE OF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL DATA

The autobiography is the “inroad par excellence” (Freeman 2007, 120) for applying narrative analysis research to the social sciences. Within peace and conflict studies in particular, autobiographies can serve as windows into worlds where field research is difficult if not impossible—hidden societies. They offer the social scientist a firsthand account that they would not otherwise be able to obtain. They also solidify a group of incredibly marginalized voices, providing counter-narratives to the generalizations which currently form the backbone of child soldier international law.

“There is an essential openness to the historical past, and there always exists the possibility that the story of what happened will be rewritten, again and again” (Freeman 2007, 137). The autobiography is a sort of crystallization of personal experience which allows us access to the elusive concept of the *self*—including individual subjectivity and agency—while serving as a mechanism for understanding broader society, and even the human condition. Autobiographical data is historical in the sense that it involves a process of reflection on a personal past, which necessarily incorporates the contexts of place and time. Some scholars have pointed out the obvious shortcoming of documenting the past based on individual human memories, which are inherently flawed. The autobiographer has no choice but to employ a certain artistic or literary license in recalling and recounting the content of his or her story. As Hayden White (1966) argued, we the readers and analysts can never truly be where these individuals were, seeing things through their eyes. In essence, language serves as a mediating force which gives us access to information without truly giving us access to the past itself. One must be

aware that one is hearing the voice of “someone who at the same time sees the world differently... and understands it another way,” which creates, not a barrier, but a “positive atmosphere for dialogue” (Kapuściński 2008, 43). This is why both scientific and literary insights must be taken in tandem in order to extract the significance of these works. There has been much debate as to whether this disqualifies autobiographical data from the pantheon of valid, truthful, or legitimate data. I’d argue that this quality—that of memory, of the subjective, inner experiences of an individual shaped by a highly specific environment—actually lends a unique strength to autobiographical data. It uses “historical consciousness, which may be understood as that specific form of narrative consciousness that entails an interpretive engagement with the ostensibly unrepeatable past” in order to tell us how things *happened* rather than how they *happen*. Narrative form becomes a major key to extracting the substance out of memory. Autobiographies tell “a cogent, believable, perhaps even *true* story of how the present came to be by looking backward and situating the movement of events within a more or less coherent narrative form” (all Freeman 2007, 122). In doing so, it bridges the gap between science and art, proposing a humane and arguably fuller perspective from which to study the human race. Historian Peter Fritzsche says that autobiography is a self-conscious narrative form through which the experience is *relived* through a “second reading” which is truer than the first because it is compounded by the act of self-reflection, and the resulting self-consciousness toward events that already happened (Maynes et al. 2008, 78).

Unlike an interview or journalistic approach, which is facilitated and thus attempts to steer narrative a certain way, the autobiographical process allows individuals

to elucidate their experiences how they please, along their own trajectory, and in their own true voice. As James Agee wrote in his volume about the lives of poor sharecroppers in the Dust Bowl, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*: “It seems to me curious, not to say obscene and thoroughly terrifying, that it could occur to an association of human beings drawn together through need and chance and for profit into a company, an organ of journalism, to pry intimately into the lives of an undefended and appallingly damaged group of human beings. . . for the purpose of parading the nakedness, disadvantage and humiliation of these lives before another group of human beings, in the name of science, of ‘honest journalism’” (Agee 1969, 5). The subjects of such journalism are aware of what is happening, are aware of their stories being taken and used by others, while their lives remain unimproved. As Chris Coulter (2009, 26) describes her research in Sierra Leone, she recalls how one woman said, “The white people always come and write our names in books and then leave and we never get anything to show for our cooperation!” The reader of an autobiography is approaching the autobiographer indirectly, and is thus a less imposing and coercive force than the interviewer. There is no distrust, no suspicion which must be overcome. The tale is being told by the will of the child soldier, not a third party reporter. Even where an intermediary assisted in bringing the autobiography to fruition—all the selected works other than *A Long Way Gone* have secondary authors—the questions of relative power, of whose voice is being recorded, are trumped by the autobiographers’ own agendas in “agreeing to talk or deciding to write their stories” (Maynes et al. 2008, 111). The analysis of their personal narratives is “enriched by attention to these different and often competing agendas because they tell us about the social processes involved in and having

consequences for the production of knowledge” (Maynes et al. 2008, 111). In their cases it was necessary to have an intervening Western author in order to get these stories published as large-scale trade books. The autobiographies thus stand at an intersection of pre-existing models (such as the autobiography genre) and their own “unique opus” (Maynes et al. 2008, 77); like oral storytellers, they constantly negotiate between the two to produce the meaning and effect desired. As historian Joan Scott argues, “testimony from personal experience cannot be read as a transparent form of evidence, but rather is always produced in and through broader discourses that have been the focus of postmodern critique” (Maynes et al. 2008, 41).

Clearly then, interpreting autobiographical data is not without ethical issues. Because narrative research involves obtaining and then analyzing the lived experiences of individuals, it does not escape the research relationship (Josselson 2007). Is it ethical to analyze and report on others’ lives? This calls into question the ethical duty of narrative researchers to be respectful of the autobiographers’ dignity and privacy. There are many challenges which confront the researcher as she is bringing the personal elements of someone’s life into the realm of research. “The task of the narrative researcher is to relate the meanings of an individual's story to larger, theoretically significant categories in social science, a task distinct from the individuals' specific interest in their own personal story,” but there is a clash between the explorative phase (gathering data and clarifying the narrative) and the reporting phase (analyzing and applying concepts to existing scholarship). “Thus, at the level of the report, the researcher and the participant are at cross-purposes, and I think that even those who construe their work as ‘giving voice’ and imagine the participants to be fully collaborative with them in the research

endeavor are in part deluding themselves” (Josselson 2007, 549). In the case of these autobiographies, however, my purpose and that of the autobiographies is the same: awareness and activism. In addressing the flaws in current child soldier discourse (which lumps African child soldiers together into a faceless mass to make the task of creating reactionary policy easier) and instead emphasizing the real lived experiences of child soldiers, narrative analysis produces counter-narratives to established child soldier paradigms.

I: PRE-SOLDIER LIVES AND IDENTITIES

“In my culture, every story is told with the purpose of either imparting knowledge, repairing a broken bond, or transforming the listener and the teller” (Ishmael Beah, in Kamara & McClelland 2009, 7). As with many sub-Saharan African societies, the social institution of storytelling and oral histories plays a very important role in social relationships and identity construction. In Grace’s homeland, evening gatherings were not complete without these narratives: “In the evening, families came together outside around a fire... This was the time when elders told stories to their children and grandchildren. Stories and lessons to be learned from them were taught from generation to generation. Youngsters were instructed so we could keep our treasured tradition alive and take our family on into the next generation” (Akallo, in McDonnell & Akallo 2007, 49). Literary structures are learned, and the traditional beliefs passed on to these youths by their elders become central facets of their cultural identities. The autobiographers’ manner of ordering and expressing their memories is thus conditioned (at least partially) by these literary traditions learned in youth.

Beliefs can be family-based as well, and these are important, for they help to structure memories and give form and meaning to events. Benson Deng describes a traditional belief in his family about a great-grandfather who took a sick lion into his home to save it from the hyenas. “Early the next morning he offered a lamb to this wounded lion and opened the door for him to leave the house. Later, when famine came, the lion killed an antelope and dragged it into my great-grandfather’s house in gratitude . . . Our family lineage honored this partnership. The lion would not harm any of our herds; instead, he protected them and the family members gave the lion an animal to eat as a reward” (Deng et al. 2005, 28). When a lion kills their livestock, the covenant is deemed broken, and Benson’s father goes out to kill the lion, returning successful but bearing scars which mark him as a warrior. This concept of warrior is traditional, the result of a natural conflict with the surrounding environment. It is the epitome of the soldier as he should be, a sharp contrast to its mutilated form in the physically weak, mentally twisted child soldier who is taught to employ unprovoked violence, not against natural enemies, but against his fellow human beings. The child soldier that surfaces later in the narratives thus appears as a deformity, a thing that is neither natural nor honorable.

“There were all kinds of stories told about the war that made it sound as if it was happening in a faraway and different 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.” Thus begins the memoir of Ismael Beah, a Sierra Leonean who became a soldier at the age of thirteen. It’s fascinating how the opening sentence conveys this concept of displacement: not only is the *author* Ismael distanced from his naïve pre-war self, but

the written Ishmael feels distant and estranged from the war he hears tales of, just as the reader does. There is this momentary connection, where both storyteller and listener regard the idea of the far-off war, feeling concerned but not implicated (this is a familiar feeling for the Westerner who reads an article about or views photographs from a foreign warzone). This connection is severed with the second sentence, which firmly entrenches Ishmael Beah in his world: Sierra Leone in the early 1990s, falling into the chaos imposed by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). Ishmael is not immediately embroiled in this conflict; rather, the narrative begins with description and stories of his youth. This is an important element which appears in most complete African child soldier autobiographies. Though they are writing after having gone through the experiences of becoming and being a child soldier, as well as the experiences of escape and rehabilitation, they still remember their home lives. They remember the children they were before they became soldiers. These kinds of memories serve an important role in literary framing, and resurface later in post-conflict settings.

All of the child soldiers studied recount some elements of their pre-soldiering lives in their autobiographies. Grace Akallo lived in a beautiful village: “I remember I used to go hanging on the trees... jumping from one tree like a monkey... I enjoyed my life until the first time I saw a gun” (Akallo, in Raymonde 2010). It’s important to recognize that they are making connections between their past and present selves. These recollections serve a variety of purposes. They entrench the narrator in the relevant setting, emphasizing the social dimensions through which he or she constructs his or her own identity.

Michel Foucault and poststructuralists influenced by his work supported this idea that individuals and their stories are primarily constructed through discourse; agency thus becomes “a complex illusion created by environmental cues, or training mechanisms, so to speak, which infiltrated all institutions” (Maynes et al. 2008, 57). Narrative analysis demonstrates that individual agency is best understood in connection with culturally embedded social institutions. These institutions—family, school, oral traditions, etc.—are replaced with mutated replicas within the rebel groups, with the *child* itself being relabeled and redefined as *soldier*. These children were not always child soldiers, nor do they identify themselves only as child soldiers in their present state, as authors of their own memoirs. The memories—real or constructed—of their former lives provide them with a piece of their pre-soldier state that they can fall back on in traumatic times. In the context of the child soldier narrative, being able to tap into these peaceful recollections is a great source of strength. It is the anchor that keeps them from completely drifting away, and this becomes incredibly important when they reach the rehabilitation stage and try to reclaim elements of their pre-soldier lives.

“I was born in Kabarikole, a village in the northeast part of Uganda in the district of Soroti,” writes Grace Akallo. “The village I knew when I was a child was a special place. We children felt loved and taken care of . . . So just as the land was very important to the Uganda of my childhood, so was the community and the family. These were the things that gave life meaning. No one could imagine that one day we might have to give up these very things” (McDonnell & Akallo 2007, 49). There is certainly a sense of nostalgia, a statement on their sense of their own lost innocence. These reflections also serve as a literary device, for the ensuing violence seems all the more horrible after the

description of such peace. The contrast is a marker of how profoundly the child's environment changed. Even in a homeland where daily life included natural dangers, the clash between man and nature is still a stark contrast to what comes later: the fight of men against men. When Benjamin Ajak's Sudanese village is threatened by bands of *murahaleen*—militias sponsored by the Arab Sudanese government—there is no pride to be gained by bravery, no purpose in fighting. Benjamin recalls:

People scattered everywhere. Roofs went up in flames. I left our goats and ran to join my parents, but I couldn't get past the gunmen who stood in the middle of our yard. The village was destroyed. I hoped my parents had fled. I ran back into the bush to hide, afraid that the gunmen might come back and capture or kill me. I watched them kill our cattle, set the millet and sorghum fields on fire, destroy all the things that human life needs to survive. (Deng et al. 2005, 64)

The striking juxtaposition here between the natural villains—hyenas and other predators—and the unnatural ones—fellow men attacking to destroy, not to gain anything—sets the attacking *murahaleen* apart as a significantly worse foe. This new foe warrants a new reaction: fleeing is no longer dishonorable, but the only way to survive.

Even where human foes are an accepted facet of life, the rebel groups of these escalating conflicts are significantly worse, unbearable where the old enemies were feared, but still tolerable. In northern Uganda, the Karamojong tribe would conduct cattle raids in Acholi villages. Grace Akallo's beloved grandfather died "after the day the Karamojong beat him. I remember that day... Things changed with the coming of the Karamojong in 1986. Then they changed far more for everyone in Uganda with the coming of Joseph Kony" (McDonnell & Akallo 2007, 51). Here Grace uses the haunting experience of the Karamojong attacks to put into perspective just how exponentially worse the rise of the LRA was. Again, the pre-soldier recollections become a point of comparison, offering a life already filled with danger as the now-preferred alternative to the latter. These memories of "before" serve as mental safe havens that child soldiers can

retreat to later, but only in their minds. The days of being only a child are sharply ended, and cannot be restored, with the onset of conflict or war. When their environments become terrifyingly out of control, memory is the one thing that cannot be taken away, though it simultaneously cannot be restored.

It's important to keep in mind that the autobiographer is a culturally-specific individual, what Ryszard Kapuściński described as “a person as bearer of racial features, and as bearer of culture, beliefs and convictions.” This is one of two beings that he argued was in every narrated individual, the other being the “person like the rest of us” who “has his joys and sorrows, his good and bad days . . . he feels pain as suffering and misery, and good fortune as satisfying and fulfilling” (Kapuściński 2008, 14). He is the human in all of us that we can relate to. This duality is at the center of the individual-social conundrum, i.e. how are individual lives intertwined with broader societies? As these autobiographers wish to take time to define themselves in the context of their upbringing—their homes, families, traditions, and beliefs—it should be duty of the analyst to treat these anecdotes as relevant pieces in the construction of not only an individual life but a cultural phenomenon, a world in which children become child soldiers. For Benson Deng, his pre-soldier identity was constructed around his tribe, the Dinka. His memories of his home life are structured through tribal customs. For example, he remembers his mother in the context of her signifying Dinka markings: “My mother wore the radiating five-line scarification mark on her forehead as a sign of her bravery. Any woman who had this scar could even join men in battle. Taller than my father, she was the third and most respected of his five wives” (Deng et al. 2005, 3). One of his most vivid memories of his pre-soldier childhood is his own Dinka initiation from

boyhood to manhood: circumcision. He remembers many details of the day they performed the surgery on him. “When the man finished they washed me with very hot water and my father carried me home on his shoulder while I dripped blood all down his shirt... I was happy to have passed the uncircumcised stage, but it wasn’t worth the pain I went through” (Deng et al. 2005, 9). This particular recollection is significant because it provides him with an overwhelming fear that lingers with him even after years of arguably worse situations to endure. The recollection of the pain and helplessness he felt in *that moment* resurfaces when he thinks upon more recent events. “When I sometimes have nightmares about all the things that happened when our peaceful village life turned to chaos, that feeling of not being able to move during my initiation still overcomes me” (Deng et al. 2005, 10). From a psychoanalytical viewpoint, the fact that he links the two in his mind marks his impressment into the role of soldier as a symbolic castration, filling him with the same feelings of powerlessness.

Many of these narratives strikingly involve pre-soldier glimpses of war. All of these individuals have already seen death before they’re recruited or abducted. Death is something which haunts each and every one of their autobiographies. It is one element they cannot escape, even in their highly adaptable state:

Inside I was like water—moving to flow around whatever dropped into my path because children adapt easily to change, whether good or bad. But two things I could not get used to. The first was waiting for war. At least when it came, you had something to run from as your heart hammered, but waiting was like having the breath slowly squeezed out of you. The other thing was death. The dead were everywhere... (Jal 2009, 17)

All four of these narrators repeatedly describes death as something that “gets inside you” or “becomes part of you” when one witnesses it, and this is a theme echoing through all of their narratives. Death is encountered and then lingers with them indefinitely, marking them forever. Before they become soldiers, they see the signs of war: dead bodies on the

roads and in the rivers, burning villages, the smell of rotting flesh. In Senait's recollections, we find that death is something that children have every right to fear when she presents us with a scene in which children are specifically targeted by an attack:

The planes' cargo had dropped into a small hollow not far from the school, so no one else apart from the children had seen it. Curious, we edged towards the strange objects lying in the hollow, some of which had broken apart from their hard landing on the stones . . . Suddenly, there was a mighty explosion in the hollow, followed by screams of pain . . . Crying and screaming filled the air. We ran over, and were greeted by a picture of desolation: blackened children, broken bodies and unidentifiable burning objects. And dolls. There were dolls lying everywhere: some a little damaged, some broken, and others whole. One of the children who had just arrived picked up one of the dolls and was engulfed in a fiery explosion. The child fell to the floor in a fireball, writhing and screaming, and then fell silent. As we stood there transfixed with horror, the grown-ups pulled us away. The dolls were filled with explosives; they had been specially constructed and scattered to maim and kill children. (Mehari 2006, 44-45)

This scene is particularly horrifying. The concept of dolls rigged with explosives to lure children to an agonizing death is sickening, but displays a clear message: these are not adults' wars. Children cannot be shielded from war when the battlefield is their homes and communities, when children often witness their own families' death or see their entire town burned to the ground by an implacable enemy. In such a world, children feel a strong reactionary calling to join in the fight that they cannot escape. In an environment that constantly reminds them of their own powerlessness, the child's mind turns to the need for power—in whatever form it can be gained. The jump from feelings of helplessness to violence is not a far one; being able to inflict pain is an easy way for a young mind to reassure itself that it can control something. In his own analysis of *A Long Way Gone*, Mark Sanders finds that Ishmael Beah is actually a child “with a preexisting propensity toward violence” (Sanders 2011, 211). He is repeatedly getting into fights at school: “Sometimes I stoned kids I couldn't beat up. Since we didn't have a mother at home, Junior [Beah's 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 town” (Beah

2007, 42). There is also a marked disconnect between the young boy and his father, illustrated in numerous flashbacks: “Just three days earlier, I had seen my father walking slowly from work . . . I was sitting on the verandah. I had not seen him for a while, as another stepmother had destroyed our relationship again” (Beah 2007, 10). The estranged father is a theme in Emmanuel Jal’s story as well. While on his way down the Nile to Ethiopia, the boat he is on capsizes and many drown. Jal survives, but is wounded by the fact that his father doesn’t show up to make sure that he is alive. While these comments are subtle and do not make up a major theme of the autobiographies, they are still an intentionally-presented facet of their pre-war development.

There are other factors influencing Emmanuel Jal’s propensity for violence, however: his strongest memory of his early childhood involves a scarring experience with Arabs, forming the basis for Jal’s overwhelming hatred for Arabs and later his all-consuming goal to kill as many as he can as an SPLA soldier: Jal is in a truck with his family, and a small group of Arabs is sharing the ride as well. It is obvious that they don’t like sharing the truck with Jal’s African family—“The man looked at me angrily whenever my eyes met his, and his friends spoke softly to each other as they stared at us...” (Jal 2009, 4). The Arabs steal and start to eat the small amount of food that Jal’s mother had packed for the journey, and when Jal’s uncle tries to retrieve it the Arabs begin to beat him. Jal’s mother tries to intervene and when one of the Arabs strikes her Jal enters the fray himself. He tries to bite the leg of one of the Arabs but suddenly feels “a hand tighten around the back of my neck . . . The hand was so strong, so powerful. I couldn’t move, couldn’t hear” (Jal 2009, 6). This scene opens his autobiography, and Jal freely admits that it was this occasion which filled him with hatred and irrevocably

tainted his view of Arabs. “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 . . . But the 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 twist and my heart beat faster” (Jal 2009, 6). Jal’s ability to recognize that his young mind was able to feel immense hatred and rage without being able to put a name to it offers an intriguing juxtaposition: the adult emotion of all-consuming vengeance, contrasted with the young boy, physically weak enough to be pinned down by a single adult hand (which, we should note, serves the same purpose as Benson Deng’s circumcision memory).

These memories together illustrate just how powerfully these individuals have clung to fragments of their pre-soldier lives. The preexisting legal conceptions of the child soldier as *tabula rasa*, ready to be easily forged into an automaton, seem narrow-minded indeed when faced with these complex personalities, already adapting to environments that make them no stranger to pain, death, and even war “Humanitarian and human rights advocacy around child soldiers leads us to believe that human beings under eighteen years of age are made into agents of violence by adults” (Sanders 2011, 198), but what we see instead are children whose experiences are nurturing qualities in them which might given them a propensity for violence, for willingly joining a rebel group. Powerlessness, fear, resentment, indignation . . . these are important emotions to note, not only because they are expressed so strongly, but because they make the voluntary transition from *child* into *soldier* much more comprehensible.

II. RECRUITMENT

Recruitment occurs both voluntarily and involuntarily, but political and legal discourse has historically emphasized involuntarily recruitment (such as kidnappings), unwilling to tackle the complexities of voluntary recruitment. The reality is that *only a third of child soldiers are forcefully abducted*, meaning the majority (two thirds) exhibit youth volunteerism (Drumbl 2012). Vengeance can be a strong motivator in an orphaned youth determined to fight the group that attacked and killed their village or family; in other cases, joining a paramilitary organization might simply be a matter of survival in a region where an assortment of environmental aggravations—such as poverty, disease, loss of parents, lack of education, large family size and neglect—make desperate measures a necessity. To these nascent individuals, feeling victimized and powerless, military and paramilitary groups offer alluring inducements, such as food, glory, a sense of belonging, a sense of adulthood, the promise of material wealth, and power—it shouldn't be surprising that a child cognition would choose to stay in such an environment willingly (Ames 2010; Singer 2010; Lischer 2010; Peters 2011).

Both Emmanuel Jal and all three authors of *They Poured Fire On Us From the Sky* ended up at one of three giant refugee camps in Ethiopia called Pinyudu. This is where Jal was eventually recruited by the SPLA, but when he first arrived he had high hopes, expecting a good lifestyle and education. He was lied to, and instead he finds a living hell: “Life was harder than I'd ever known before. Where once I'd been able to run from death when it came hidden in tanks and guns, there was nowhere to escape anymore. Death's icy touch was all around me as disease spread quickly through the camp and boys died day after day . . . our skin crawled with lice, and the worst were

chiggers—mites that burrowed into our skin and laid their eggs” (Jal 2009, 59). Benson Deng’s recollections of the place are no kinder: “Swarms of flies followed us wherever we went. They liked to sit on us, and bite and pick and spread the common killer diseases dysentery and diarrhea. Many boys became very sick. There was little food or medicine. Many died. To survive we used all of the little strength we had to scavenge for food. We were so hungry we went into wet grasses . . . to collect the kind of grass leaves that we could cook for soup” (Deng et al. 2005, 91). Daily life is filled with utter misery, so much so that it cannot even be fully comprehended: the authors have to allude to it with a random assortment of grievances, a list of examples in support of the overwhelming desolation of this place.

When these Lost Boys see the *jesh a mer* (Red Army) for the first time, they are awestruck: here are boys their age who are respected soldiers, uniformed and armed. Their young minds eat up the recruitment propaganda—“The Red Army is our future.” “They have been chosen because they are so brave. There is nothing braver than a *jenajesh* [child soldier]. They never run from a battle, they would fight a lion if they had to.” (Jal 2009, 64)—and these *jenajesh* increasingly become a beacon for the boys who have nothing, who are barely surviving in Pinyudu. “How lucky they were to have guns and boots while we scratched in the dust,” Jal says (2009, 64). These child soldiers have everything he and his friends could want: purpose, security, power, respect. . . . The stability offered by a structured paramilitary organization is alluring in their highly volatile world (Peters 2011). Though Jal is only nine years old, when the recruiting commander calls out for volunteers to become like the intimidating *jesh a mer* before them, he raises his hand, along with every other young boy present.

My heart hammered as I listened, 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 . . . Noise exploded all around me as I punched my hand into the air. Beside me, Nyuol also lifted his arm. We were not alone. Every boy in the crowd had raised his hand. 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* [Arabs] what had been done to me and my family. (Jal 2009, 75)

His choice to join the SPLA here is not forced, yet it seems that the opportunity is presented in such a way that he could not sanely refuse. Remaining in Pinyudu much longer would have likely killed him—the invitation to become a child soldier may not come again, and so appears as Jal’s only escape. According to Podder (2011), the primary variable which determines whether or not children voluntarily join a paramilitary group is the presence or lack of an opportunity for escape. In the case of the Lost Boys of Pinyudu, there truly is no escape. The decision to join a paramilitary group can be heavily circumstantial, and can indeed involve some degree of manipulation, yet when it does ultimately fall to the individual children to decide, in spite of their youth and malleability, they are still rational actors, and should be viewed as such. Their strategic social navigation continues even into later post-conflict stages where they are reflected on their past decisions. Mats Utas’ use of interviews in Liberia and Sierra Leone illuminated an interesting phenomenon:

At the beginning of my research in Liberia, all child soldiers stated that they had been directly forced to join a rebel army. The forceful killing of the father, or someone else of close kin, was a common story that was narrated to me. Another was the rebel army coming with trucks and just picking children and young men up at gunpoint. However in my own work, after a few months staying with the same group of young people, interacting on a daily basis, I was intrigued by how their stories changed. In the end none of the former combatants that I worked with maintained that they were recruited by direct force. When a deeper trust was established, they simply changed narratives. (Utas 2011, 218)

Similarly, in Krijn Peters and Paul Richards’ interviews with demobilized Sierra Leonean child soldiers, they found that few of their subjects admitted to killing alone, but many admitted to killing as part of a larger group (Peters & Richards 1996). Both studies

address the contrast between a “victimcy narrative” which emphasizes feelings of powerlessness and marginalizes the child narrator, and an “active narrative” which empowers the child narrator. The autobiography authors juggle the two in such a way to produce an absolute whole: a story of victimhood that has the potential to morph into one of intentional violence and chaos. Nowhere is this contrast sharper than in the moment when Beah and some fellow recruits undergo “killing practice” on a line of RUF prisoners:

I had already begun staring at my prisoner. His face was swollen from the beating he had received, and his eyes looked as if they were watching something behind me . . . I didn't feel a thing for him, didn't think that much about what I was doing. I just waited for the corporal's order. The prisoner was simply another rebel who was responsible for the death of my family, as I had come to truly believe. The corporal gave the signal with a pistol shot and I grabbed the man's head and slit his throat in one fluid motion. (Beah 2007, 124-125)

Beah gives an unabashed account of this murder, presenting with sharp clarity the beliefs which allowed him to so easily slice open the man's throat at a word from his commanding officer. Through RUF training and his own isolation from his family, Beah has committed himself completely to the belief that he has already been victimized by the rebels he is now killing. Any blame for his own pain or misfortune has been displaced onto them, and now he does the most natural thing: acts! He is now in a position of power, and he uses it to avenge what he has lost. Here we can see how the autobiographer gains agency through this process of “writing back” to the “cultural stories that have scripted them as particular kinds of subjects” and altering these representations (Smith & Watson 2010, 235). He realizes now that he was acting on the ideology fed to him by the RUF, but recognizes that in that moment, this was the only truth he knew. Within the autobiographical act, the narrator becomes a reader of own

experiences, “bringing discursive schema that are culturally available to them to bear on what has happened” (Smith & Watson 2010, 33) and on his own self-presentation.

Switching gears to the third of child soldiers who are *abducted* rather than recruited, we see the victimcy narrative taking over and leaving little room for decisive agency on the part of the child. Paramilitary organizations intent on increasing their numbers—usually fringe movements that would be marginalized without what they see as cheap, expendable weapons—sometimes eschew seducing new recruits for simply abducting them. The LRA is famous for this, “recruiting” by targeting schools, hospitals, and even refugee camps for their increasingly widespread and systematic abductions. “When the LRA attacks, the parents and other adults often are killed immediately. Frequently they are hacked to pieces with pangas, and their homes are burned. As terrible as these incidents are, it is better to die at the hands of a stranger than to live long enough as a prisoner to see your child being forced at gunpoint to murder you. This is a tactic Kony uses to dehumanize children” (McDonnell, in McDonnell & Akallo 2007, 117). This is a two-sided dehumanization: not only are the children themselves amputated from their communities and severely traumatized by the atrocities they’re forced to commit, but the communities who witness these acts are become convinced that the children are monsters. They begin to fear child soldiers, and then children in general. This results in a community backlash: when children trying to escape the LRA wander back into villages, they are rejected or chased out of town.

When Grace’s large Catholic girls’ school in Aboke, Uganda, was raided by the LRA, 139 girls between the ages of 12 and 15 were taken into the bush. A Sister was able to secure the release of 109 of them, but Grace Akallo was one of the 30 who

remained in captivity. She was asleep when soldiers smashed a dormitory window to get in. Grace woke up instantly and rolled under her bed. “There were people under the bed, my friends were already under the bed shaking, and I was asking what is going on. Nobody was answering me.” (Akallo, in Raymode 2010). Soldiers tied the girls wrist-to-waist in a long line and marched them through the forest. Grace recalls, “[W]e were told if any one of us tries to escape, the rest of the 29 will be killed. The thought of me running away and then leaving my friends to be killed was enough to just let me stay” (Akallo, in Raymonde 2010). No doubt there were other factors that forced her to stay—the LRA soldiers were fearsome and constantly threatened the girls with beatings or death. While we do not doubt Grace’s childlike loyalty to her friends, it is also her physical weakness and youth which makes her an easy victim, powerless enough to be mentally chained to not only her classmates, but to the LRA. In the following months, opportunities to escape arise but Grace cannot take them on her own. She truly cannot abandon her friends to the LRA.

There is no volunteerism at work here; Grace wants nothing more than to go home, but instead finds herself being forced into the LRA’s socialization and indoctrination tactics. Where recruits don’t join freely, armed groups need to create a sense of group cohesion, and they often do so by any means necessary. “Threats, punishments and rewards are the most straightforward ways to prevent desertion and nurture feelings of loyalty . . . It is generally assumed that children are more receptive to these loyalty and group binding processes” (Peters 2011, 76). An act of violence may in some instances serve as an initiation into the group, producing a shared sense of guilt that helps to ensure group loyalty. It is the inciting incident that becomes the conceived

“point of no return” for a freshly-created child soldier. After committing an atrocity, even though they were forced, there’s no going back: “Their only two anchors in life become their guns and their fellow fighters. After this, their compliance to orders will often be near total” (Singer 2006, 74).

III: RETENTION

For any military or paramilitary organization engaged in conflict, failing to retain recruits could threaten the survival of the group as a whole. Retention thus becomes just as important as recruitment, and different methods are used to keep soldiers than were used to recruit them. Gates (2011) lists a variety of methods used to lock child soldiers in: compliance, role adoption, internalization of group norms, cognitive dissonance reduction, habituation to violence, diffusion of responsibility onto the group, deindividualization, and dehumanization. He points out that a child might join a violent group for a particular set of reasons, but stay on for others (Gates 2011, 1). Methods for retention might differ between child and adult soldiers.

Soldiers respond to soldiers, and rebel groups employing child soldiers instilled a respect for rank early on. Many rebel group based in the bush operate within a meritocratic system of reward and punishment, in which the better fighters were given rewards or promotions. To the young and marginalized, this is an attractive system, replete with opportunities to rise to prominence within the group (Peters 2011; Podder 2011b). Prominence is often achieved through violent means, however, and it is here that brutality first becomes part of the child’s conditioning. Socialization—both formal and informal—within the LRA is distinctly violent. The process begins from the moment

children are abducted. “Formal socialization is achieved by ‘boot camp’; an intense military training which drills the newly abducted children as soldiers. In addition, informal socialization takes place through a ‘welcome ceremony’ of initiation rituals and having to register its new members” (Vermeij 2011, 177). Through such rituals child soldiers are symbolically “reborn” into the organization. The RUF accomplishes the same goal by supplementing beatings with drugs. Child soldiers would be forcefully injected on a daily basis with jamba (marijuana), cocaine, and even heroin (mixed with gunpowder to make “brown-brown,” popular within the RUF) to make them “strong and brave”. “Where needles were not available group leaders make incisions around the child’s temple and arm veins, pack the drugs in, and then cover the wound with plaster or a bandage” (Singer 2006, 81). Ishmael Beah becomes addicted to the “white capsules” they give him, but he also describes an instance in which he takes all these drugs at once: “I began to perspire so much that I took off all my clothes. My body shook, my sight became blurred, and I lost my hearing for several minutes. I walked around the village aimlessly, as I felt restless because I simultaneously felt a tremendous rush of energy and numbness” (Beah 2007, 121). The combination of energy and numbness keeps him coming back for more and is just one more element binding him to the RUF.

Training and monitoring reinforces the punishment and rewards system, but better yet, through the process of socialization, by “inducting members into the norms and rules of the organization or community” and subtly encouraging the internalization of these rules, the costs of maintaining child soldier allegiance are substantially reduced (Gates 2011). Though Jal was a more-than-willing recruit, he is soon undergoing daily beatings as his initiation into the SPLA. “There were many different punishments for all the

mistakes I made—sometimes my feet and hands were tied up and I was beaten as I lay on the ground; or I was chased to the banks of the river and whipped in the mud until I thought I would drown; or I was made to hop on one spot until my leg felt as if it would break. I didn't want to be a soldier anymore. I was too small to be one, not strong enough" (Jal 2009, 79). There are echoes here of that same powerlessness he felt under the Arab's hand—this abuse is shocking, is not something he ever expected when he joined the SPLA, and all of his enthusiastic determination to be a child soldier is whisked away in a whirlwind of confusion and pain.

Because of this routinization of violence, child soldiers eventually become numb to it. They adapt to survive by creating what's known as a *trauma membrane*, "a defensive protective layer that trauma survivors establish to protect themselves after experiencing a trauma . . . may be thought of as an individual layer of defensiveness or as a social or societal layer of defensiveness" (Worthington & Aten 2010, 62). "Just as I had learned to do with sadness at Pinyudu, I now wrapped up my rage deep inside me" (Jal 2009, 79).

If the violence inflicted on child soldiers as initiation into the group functions as a symbolic and psychological castration, then the presentation of one's own gun to the child is the opposite: an empowering moment, a sort of ersatz penis, a symbolic coming of age. "I was a man, not a coward. We had AK-47s. We were brave and strong. We were trained fighters who would win this war" (Jal 2009, 100). The moment when a child soldier receives their gun is highly significant. Psychologically, these young individuals whose powerlessness has been repeatedly reiterated to them through every previous aspect of their recruitment/abduction and training, are now being provided with

a means of self-protection and power. Senait Mehari is given her Kalashnikov by Agawegahta, the female commander whom the young girl greatly admires. “I hardly needed to be told to look after my Kalashnikov. Everyone in the camp took their guns everywhere with them and slept clutching them. Nobody was allowed to touch anyone else’s machine gun – guns were sacred” (Mehari 2006, 84). With the right to a gun, however, comes increased responsibilities and a new level of training. For some (such as Jal), this is an exciting opportunity to rise through the ranks. For young Senait, however, this marker of her new rank rapidly becomes a symbol of her weakness. “The gun quickly became a burden to me, a very clear sign of my physical weakness. Life was already hard enough with the heavy work I had to do in the camp and the daily military training, but the worst think that I and everyone else had to bear was the hunger... All I cared about was how I could get something to eat” (Mehari 2006, 86). Benson Deng takes note of this dual nature of the right to a gun: “I liked the colorful uniforms I saw on the soldiers who jiggled along with an AK-47 assault rifle at their side. But I knew that once you had a gun, you could not go anywhere of your own will. The rebels controlled you like a dog” (Deng et al. 2005, 235). He sees through the symbol itself to what it really entails: embedding the child soldier deeper in the military or rebel group.

Rebel groups are often structured as jungle micro-societies, and this was especially true for the RUF and the LRA. Beah recalls how isolated he was from the rest of the world within the RUF: “We were always either at the front lines, watching a war movie, or doing drugs. There was no time to be alone or to think . . . It was as if nothing else existed outside our reality” (Beah 2007, 124). They initiate the children, train them, and minimize the risk of desertion by creating a sense of group cohesion and loyalty.

They are most successful when they are able to serve as ersatz families for recruits from broken families who now see this as a more intact—and thus preferred—alternative. In the bush the RUF “rebel villages” took on the structure and social composition of pre-war villages. Each consisted of “around “two hundred people divided into smaller groups comprising several household units. These household units can best be described as pseudofamily based, in which every commander would be the head of his compound with several ‘wives,’ many children, his junior officers, bodyguards, and sometimes even old people.” (Coulter 2009, 102). Rebel camps echoed normal village models, but there were still significant mutations: hierarchies of age were reversed and youths could have command of elders, the presence of drugs significantly increased violence in the camps, people could be killed at any moment, and all traditional ties of kinship, language and tradition were obliterated (Coulter 2009, 95).

The child soldiers truly begin to see the organization as their family, and their commanders and superiors as “father figures” (Vermeij 2011: 181). Their inherent “childness” makes them particularly susceptible to becoming submersed in this new society; in their eyes, their families have abandoned them. Because of their youth, they are looking for guidance and a parent figure within the armies. For Senait Mehari, whose mother abandoned her when she was born and who was handed over the ELF (along with her two sisters) by her father, the search for a stable parental figure becomes focused on the surprising number of female soldiers in ELF, and in particular on her semi-mentor, Agawegahta:

Agawegahta was one of the three or four most powerful people in our ELF unit, but I regarded her as the most important of them all, for she was the only woman among the leaders. I looked up to her, and she sometimes looked out for me. She was a strong woman, as powerfully built as any man. She had broad shoulders, muscular arms and sinewy legs, but still looked like a woman, for her face was feminine and she wore her

hair long in the Afro style of the time, though she sometimes braided it. Agawegahta walked quickly and talked loudly, in a voice too deep for a woman but too high to be a man's. She seemed very mature, but in reality was only about eighteen or twenty. She could holler and kill like any brute soldier, but you would not have known that she was capable of such violence by just looking at her. She commanded respect, and I regarded her with a mixture of fear and wonder from the very start. (Mehari 2006, 69)

Here, Senait combines her adult analysis of Agawegahta with the memories she has of her young mind's impressions of the woman. Agawegahta is a fantastic role model for Senait; the fact that she is a woman but still garners respect as a soldier and as a leader makes her an idealistic symbol of the power and control that Senait desires. Agawegahta is fully committed to the ELF's cause, and the admiration that Senait has for her works as a conditioning mechanism that pulls the young girl further into the web of the organization's ideology and self-validation.

Grace and Senait were never in a battle, but this doesn't necessarily disqualify them from title of child soldier. Child soldiers are not all employed in actual soldiering. In fact, the vast majority are used for more menial tasks, such as carrying equipment and doing other hard labor. It's far more common for children to be used as pack mules by African military and paramilitary organization than used as soldiers. "We were forced to eat lizards, rats, wild fruits, leaves, roots and soil. We walked about three miles from the camp to look for water. We had to dig in the sand with our fingers and then wait for hours for moisture to seep out. Some could not wait. The path to the water place was strewn with corpses" (Akallo, in McDonnell & Akallo 2007, 110).

For nearly all female child soldiers, rape or "bush wifhood" is unavoidable. Within the LRA, the soldiers give multiple girls to commanders to become their wives. Female child soldiers who recount the horrors of their time in captivity describe this as the worst part by far. Grace Akallo says, "It was the worst thing ever. Even the walking the everything was not as much... but to become somebody's wife forcefully... affects

your spirit forever, but because you want to survive we became the wives” (Akallo, in Raymonde 2010). Grace and the other Aboke girls were highly prized as brides because they were educated. The unique trauma of forced wifhood in the bush has a serious impact on the girl’s physical and mental health. A study of Liberian girls and women who had survived sexual violence illustrated common symptoms among victims: “feelings of humiliation (91.5%), insomnia (72.8%), confusion and embarrassment (70.6%), feelings of hatred (37.4%) . . . and a sense of powerlessness (22.1%)” (McDonald 2010). Senait was also raped while at the ELF training camp, but she was so young that the incident made little sense to her:

I did not know anything about the female body. I did not know what was happening when one of the three boys who had attacked me the first time grabbed me one day, half-strangled me, tore at my clothing, and thrust himself inside me. I felt pain, shame, hatred, revulsion and helplessness, but I had no idea what it was all supposed to mean . . . I knew that what had happened was a matter of great shame both for them and for me, which I had to bury deep inside me. So I never told anyone about it, and the pain and the shame writhed deep within me. (Mehari 2006, 125)

Even though it was taboo to talk about sex or rape within the ranks of the ELF, there was no segregation of boy and girl soldiers, and frequently girls fell pregnant. Even so, it continued to be an issue that was ignored. “I saw girl after girl growing large with child. In the beginning, I used to ask where they had got so much to eat that made them so fat—I thought they had secret sources of food that I did not know about” (Mehari 2006, 124). The truly childlike simplicity which characterizes Senait’s thought process indicates how inappropriate her presence at a paramilitary training camp is. Not only is she being raped and starved, all the while constantly surrounded by death, but she is so young that none of it registers to her as inherently backwards.

Senait’s ignorance contrasts sharply with Grace’s self-awareness of her own humiliation, abuse, and complete lack of control over her own fate or even her own daily

existence. Of the four autobiographers, her narrative contains the strongest tone of a victimcy narrative: “Finally I was so tired and sick that I could not do what they asked any longer. My sight went black, and I fell down while a group was out looking for food.” She passes out and is assumed dead. “I was buried in a shallow grave. After I awoke and dug myself out, I followed the others until I reached them. They thought I was a ghost. I don’t know why I went back to them, except that I didn’t care any longer” (Akallo, in McDonnell & Akallo 2007, 110). At this point Grace is so hopeless, convinced that life within the LRA is her present and inescapable future, that she doesn’t even try to escape. She seemingly rises from the grave and, ghost-like, trails silently after the LRA, after the ones who have turned her into something almost non-human. Their hold on her is very strong, for all intents and purposes, complete. “‘Come,’ a voice I recognize calls to me. When I reach the two, they look at me like I have come from another planet. Maybe that is the truth. I can’t really tell who I am anymore. And I don’t have any clothes on me. I am just like the day I came from my mother’s stomach. I am not ashamed at all. I walk to them, they give me something to cover my nakedness and they let me sleep near them” (McDonnell & Akallo 2007, 29). This scene is a sort of “rebirth,” but into a world of death, where her zombie-like return to her captors is in fact an incredibly frightening moment of complete defeat. As she says of herself and the other girls, “*We are all walking corpses, I thought, condemned to die in this wilderness*” (McDonnell & Akallo 2007). She has let death slip inside her, and it has consumed her.

Ultimately, once the child has passed all the indoctrinating stages (and if he or she is still alive), he or she receives a gun, and becomes an official soldier. Now within the ranks, the individual has to contend with following orders and avoiding punishment by

superiors; however, there is the silver lining of finally being able to reap some of the rewards. “Becoming a fighter was also a form of freedom, there was/were free food, free drugs, alcohol, girlfriends; everything youth often did not or could not have access to during the pre-war period due to low levels of education, high unemployment and economic dependence” (Podder 2011b, 59). The pattern of abusing and terrifying children, then providing them with guns and tell them that using violence will make them a powerful adult, makes violence a chain—it was what the child soldier endured, and is now what he perpetuates in order to escape further abuse within the group. “There might have been a little rhetoric at the beginning. But very quickly the ideology gets lost. And then it just becomes a bloodbath, a way for the commanders to plunder, a war of madness” (Ishmael Beah, quoted in Dallaire 2011, 115).

Coupled with the dehumanization of the enemy—be it another military or rebel group, or simple civilians—this makes for truly formidable child soldiers: “Burying machetes into the trunks of trees, watching big SPLA plunge their knives into bags stuffed with rags and painted the light brown color of Arab skin, learning how to bite someone on the throat and dig my fingers into his eye sockets...as the days turned into months, the child inside me hardened into a soldier” (Jal 2009, 86). Grace describes how quickly a child can become desensitized to inflicting violence: “I felt like if you killed one person once the second time is not difficult . . . it becomes a game, because the seven-year-old only want to learn something, they’re happy to impress somebody, they want to survive . . . give them guns and tell them go and kill . . . you’re making them killing machines” (Akallo, in Raymonde 2010).

The dichotomy of “child-soldier” is most striking here. In the child’s mind, one has been replaced with the other: “I was a soldier, not a child. They must listen to me” (Jal 2009, 101). These dual identities are provisional and intersectional, occasionally symbiotic but usually at odds with one another. Outside of the child’s own mind, there is another dichotomy at play, that of “soldier-weapon” (the child component being lost or repressed). *Soldier* implies a sense of autonomous agency; *weapon* is a term for something that is used or wielded by another. Again, we see the victimcy narrative and active narrative vying with one another within child soldier identities. The result is the inevitable grey area—they are constantly hovering between these extreme points of tool and agent. Because of their extreme malleability, Dallaire (2011) argues that child soldiers fall more into the category of weapons than soldiers. Indeed, this is what he believed he witnessed himself in Rwanda during the 1994 genocide: “High school kids, junior high too, boys and some girls. They wore the blood that spattered all over them with pride. They hacked, mutilated, all the while smiling at the faces of fear and horror they created. Adults looked on and encouraged them, even proposing new methods of using the grossest of weapons, the machete, on pregnant women and little children to see the effects of different strokes and twists” (Dallaire 2011, 40). This reinforces the mindless, passive victim ideology which Drumbl mentioned as one of the popular themes surrounding child discourse today. The reality is much more complex and nuanced. The autobiographies suggest that child soldiers begin as victims, but may end up as perpetrators. Whether this is the result of brainwashing, their own vengeful motivations, or the child soldier’s need to violate taboos more fully than adult soldiers in order to prove themselves within the structures of their ersatz “families,” it can result in the most

monstrous of child soldiers, devoid of normal morals or possessing inverted morality where bad is good and good is bad. The first time Emmanuel Jal kills one of the Arabs he has so detested since his youth, he murders with frightening violence—all the more shocking for the clarity of conscience behind the act:

Pictures. Pictures. In my head.
A crackle of branches. A face standing in front of me. A *jallaba*. Hands held in front of him. Surrendering...
Lam and I lifted our guns. We fired together at the man's legs and he fell to the ground.
We walked up to him.
He stared up. Panting with pain, his hands still in the air. Surrendering.
Pictures. Pictures. In my head.
First we shot his hands. We had to make sure we finished him. He was stronger than us, quicker. The *jallaba* cried as he lay on the ground. The spear twisted inside me as Lam raised his machete and looked at me. I lifted mine. We held our hands up together. The blades plunged down as one.
Blood covered my legs and shorts when I stood up. I felt my chest heave and my throat contract. I was going to be sick. I stared around. Everything was blurred. I heard a laugh as I breathed deeply, gulping air down into my lungs to stop my stomach from revolting. I stared at Lam, silent for a moment, as he laughed, before it bubbled out of me too. My head rolled as I giggled breathlessly. (Jal 2009, 158)

Emmanuel Jal's repetition of *Pictures. Pictures. In my head.* is a literary device that constantly takes him back to his earlier memories of losing his family and his home, and to the numerous attacks and acts of cruelty he witnessed at Arab hands. It provides justification for his acts of violence. The phrase surfaces multiple times when he finds himself in a situation where the power dynamics are reversed: when he, a small child, has an Arab at his mercy. The violence is shocking, but flows as a natural consequence of Jal's all-consuming desire for revenge. When he encounters an old civilian woman in a village that the SPLA are attacking, the violence is not as easy to justify with revenge, especially since she's not even an Arab woman:

"Lie down or I'll cut your head," I screamed as I turned once again to the women in front of me. "Don't make noise. Lie down, I said."
Lifting a stick in the air, I started hitting the old woman. Again and again I beat her until my arm hurt.
"Please, please, don't touch us," she cried.

Pictures of my village flashed in front of my eyes. Memories of all that I had
 seen writhed like ghosts in the air around me. . .
 Anger burst hot in my stomach. "Shut up," I screamed at the old woman.
 She looked up at me—her eyes dark in her velvet skin.
 Grandmother.
 Something else stirred inside me. Pity.
 I screamed at her again. "*U-lu-lu-lu-lu-lu-lu-lu-lu-lu.*" The cry of war, the cry of
 bravery, the cry of revenge . . .
 "Down," I shouted, and the old woman was silent once again.
 I was in charge now . . . What had happened to my people was happening to
 these. Now, it was their men who were dead, their women who were afraid, their
 children who were crying.
 The boy next to me raised his panga. I stared at him as the old woman cried.
 His eyes were empty as he looked at her.
Finish her, a voice screamed in my head. (Jal 2009, 102-103)

An older soldier stops them before they kill the old woman, but it is clear from Jal's
 account of that moment that he was fully prepared to murder her. There is a brief surge
 of pity—he has not completely lost the sense of morality instilled in him by his past life,
 and he sees a flash of his loving grandmother in this old woman—but it is quickly
 smothered. By what? *War. Bravery. Revenge.* These are all very human emotions that
 have been twisted within Jal's young mind so that they conform to the SPLA goals. Jal's
 personal quest to kill Arabs has been superseded by the immediate goals of the SPLA to
 attack non-Arab "enemies." Being in control, feeling a sense of power over others'
 lives, is what he seeks—no doubt because underneath his hardened exterior he feels
 completely powerless, forced to carry out SPLA orders and not his own. He is no better,
 no more human, than those he claims to fight: mindless villains deriving satisfaction from
 destruction.

Sometimes child soldiers are able to maintain a sense of their pre-soldier values
 and morality. When one of the girls in Grace's group tries to escape the LRA and is
 captured, Grace and the other schoolgirls are ordered to stone her to death. "All of us
 tried to pick something small that doesn't kill and pretend that you're beating . . . I was
 beating the legs, pretending that I was really beating . . ." Then a rebel took an axe to the

girls' head and she died (Akallo, in Raymonde 2010), making her attempts at mercy pointless and plunging her deeper into powerlessness and depression. At other times, however, the indoctrination and brainwashing of the rebel group becomes all-consuming, resulting in truly formidable child soldiers who commit all sorts of atrocities upon the orders of their superiors. When Mariatu Kamara's village is attacked by the RUF, she is asked "Which hand do you want to lose first?" (Kamara 2009, 39). An adult soldier grabs her when she tries to flee and overpowers her, but it is three child soldiers who actually take her to a large rock and proceed to hack off both of her hands with a machete. She tries to connect with them, but to no avail:

"Please, please, please don't do this to me," I begged one of the boys. "I am the same age as you. You speak Temne. So you might be from around here. We would have been cousins, had we lived in the same village. Maybe we can be friends."

"We're not friends," the boy scowled, pulling out his machete. "And we're certainly not cousins."

"I like you," I implored, trying to get on his good side. "Why do you want to hurt someone who likes you?"

"Because I don't want you to vote," he said. One of the boys grabbed my right arm, and another stretched my hand over the flat part of the boulder.

"If you are going to chop off my hands, please just kill me," I begged them.

"We're not going to kill you," one boy replied. "We want you to go to the president and show him what we did to you. You won't be able to vote for him now. Ask the president to give you new hands." (Kamara & McClelland 2009, 40)

Mariatu doesn't even know what a president is when this happens to her. Her attempts to reach out to the child, to the human, within these young soldiers proves completely pointless. She sees no sympathy in their faces; they completely ignore her pleas and go about chopping off her hands while Mariatu watches, goes numb, and faints. The emotionless affect of these RUF child soldiers is incredibly haunting: there are mere shells where child used to be.

The reality is that child soldiers need to be viewed on a spectrum with lower level soldiers—they engage in circumscribed action, they have (limited) freedoms, and their mental capacities as children are much more evolved than they're given credit for. As

individual soldiers, their discretionary zone of behavior ranges from merciful to merciless. There are child soldiers who fall at either extreme; most fall somewhere in between. Some resist or subvert authority (shoot at the ground, not the heart, etc.), while others are cruel and murder or torture in order to rise within the military hierarchies of the organization (or for no reason at all). They are not moral equals, nor have they experienced conflict in equivalent fashion (Drumbl 2012). With this reality in mind, we can give demobilization and rehabilitation systems for a child soldiers a much more candid analysis, taking note of how and why current programs have significant shortcomings.

IV: REHABILITATION

Child soldiering facilitates mass violence, allows military and paramilitary organizations to continue restoring their numbers and thus prolonging conflict, and ultimately results in a fractured society in which children are vilified by the communities they were once part of. Ultimately, child soldiers find it exceedingly difficult to reintegrate into civilian society. They have been severely traumatized and in many cases their identity has been consumed by the roles of soldiering.

In populations exposed to armed conflict, risk factors for severe mental illness run rampant. “On average, *half of all refugees* present with some form of trauma, distress, or mental-health disorder,” according to the World Health Organization (Eide 2010, 112). “Some of the most common mental-health disorders, which develop in response to trauma include acute stress disorder (ASD), posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) . . . as well as depressive and substance-abuse disorders” (McDonald 2010, 217). Numerous

studies show that, regardless of how much time passes, children and youths affected by PTSD will continue to suffer its symptoms. There is an effect of *cumulative exposure* when it comes to traumatic events, which means that ex-combattants, particularly those who have spent the most time within military/paramilitary organizations, face serious vulnerabilities. Reintegration is comparatively harder with child soldiers because they are being “reintegrated” into a community that they were never a part of: adult civilian society. Overall traumatized individuals need to feel safe and secure, need individual empowerment, and an ultimate return to “normalcy.” They can only achieve this by being able to provide their own input and express their own needs during all stages of rehabilitation and reintegration.

Post-conflict, child soldiers want schooling, occupational training, and employment. What they get (when they get anything at all) is usually psychotherapy and not much else (Drumbl 2012). Sometimes the problem of access to resources is self-enforced: in many of these societies, there is a cultural stigma associated with mental illness and with seeking treatment for it, resulting in “immense silent suffering, avoidance,” “the inability of victims to fully articulate what they feel and need,” and ultimately a disposition to avoid seeking help (Schauer & Schauer 2010, 395). Other times it is a matter of distrust, as for Beah: “I had learned to survive and take care of myself . . . People like the lieutenant, whom I had obeyed and trusted, had made me question trusting anyone, especially adults. I was very suspicious of people’s intentions. I had come to believe that people befriended only to exploit one another. So I ignored the nurse and began to stare out the window” (Beah 2007, 153). War has conditioned him to think like a soldier, not a child, and to be very hesitant about trusting anyone. It is only

through the gradual construction of a relationship with Esther, a nurse at the rehabilitation center he goes to, that he begins to loosen the war-enforced restrictions on his own expression of emotion. He gradually finds relief in sharing and addressing the traumas that have shaped him.

The major reason psychotherapy is made the cornerstone of most disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs is the postulated worry that the effects of trauma “may be magnified on children in the long term, or that children will suffer from what is known as the ‘exhaustion model.’ This is where even those who develop coping mechanisms to deal with trauma in the near term eventually run out of the energy needed to cope with the stress over the long term. Thus, even if the psychological harms are not evident at the start, their effects might magnify later” (Singer 2006, 196). The other issue is that many child soldiers have become adults within the ranks of these twisted paramilitary rebel groups; once they develop into adults (around 18-25), their habits and values become much harder to change.

Though post-conflict reintegration treatment centers would like to believe that they can find a way to return child soldiers to being children, there are many elements of their pre-soldier lives which can never be reclaimed. In *A Long Way Gone*, Beah can’t seem to escape the statement “It’s not your fault,” as made first by his friend Gasemu, then later by rehabilitation works, as a method of allaying child soldier guilt. Beah finds this phrase irritating at best—

Like other former youth combatants, Beah recalls responding to the rehabilitation mantra with anger . . . One key reason is that . . . the NGO makes *theft of childhood* the keystone of its program of “psychosocial therapy” . . . Although Beah recalls his anger at being told that nothing was his fault—just as when a child soldier, he began to accept the army’s suggestion of the idea that the enemy combatants he killed are the murderers of his parents—the notion that his *childhood* was *stolen* from him and his cohort (rather than *lost*) begins to shape his narrative retrospectively, planting in him the idea that that stolen

thing might be recovered, if only the barrier between him and it formed by “war memories” could be broken down. (Sanders 2011, 215-216)

The notion that their lost childhoods can be returned to them is a ridiculous hope that only infuriates child soldiers such as Beah. They cannot ever fully return to the life they had—even if they are reunited with their families, as is the case with Jal. He is reunited with his sister Nyaruach. They haven’t seen each other since before the war, and at this point Jal is a young man living in the United States. He hardly recognizes her, and even when he accepts that this truly is his long-lost sister, he struggles to connect with her on more than a superficial level:

Something inside me stirred. This must be my sister. The woman standing before me was part of the family I had cried for at Pinyudu until my heart was dry and no more tears would come.

“I am happy you are here,” I said slowly, and smiled again.

But Nyaruach looked at me with sad eyes as she held on to me and wept.

“I know you are a Lost Boy,” she whispered. “And I have heard what has happened to men like you. Lost Boys don’t feel anything for their families, they have learned to deaden their hearts, but I hope you will help me.”

My head rushed as I looked at Nyaruach—her cries cut into me and her tears burned me as memories of all the sadness I had seen as a boy moved inside. She was right. I felt the rush of responsibility toward my sister, but my heart was not moved in the way it should have been. It felt still as I looked at her. (Jal 2009, 230)

Later he says, “Today I understand why. To open my heart fully to my sister would have taken me back to my childhood—a place to which I could never return” (Jal 2009, 231).

Again, for the child soldier, the pre-soldier life is something that can never be returned to. It is not necessarily forgotten, and indeed, as we have already seen, these autobiographers spend ample time collecting and going through their remaining memories of their childhoods before they were soldiers; however, any attempt to become the child who they were before is a waste of time. They will never be able to separate their experiences and memories as soldiers from how they define themselves.

Rehabilitation efforts need to begin by creating an environment of security, yet for child soldiers this is often a failed effort. When many child soldiers tried to return

home, their shamed families rejected them. Child soldiers in Sierra Leone would even be discouraged from participating in DDR programs because it would identify them as ex-child soldiers and further bring negative attention to their families (Coulter 2009). Female soldiers are even concerned about rape within DDR camps. They haven't escaped any of the dangers by transitioning into the rehabilitation schematic. In worst cases, female ex-soldiers even have to resort to a life of prostituting themselves to support themselves (and any children they've had in the bush). Grace Akallo describes a rape attempt after taking shelter in an army barracks:

In the second barracks, I was the one who was almost raped . . . He called me to his shelter. I went, thinking he wanted to tell me something since I was the only one who could speak a little English. Instead he ordered me to remove my clothes and said he would shoot me if I did not do it.

This boy is joking, I thought. I have passed through the fire, and he thinks I will be afraid and just obey him.

"Remove your clothes," he screamed at me.

"No," I said.

"Do you see these?" he said, pointing at his gun and knife. He pulled me down, but I grabbed the knife from him and told him to hand the gun to me. I put the knife blade to his stomach. There was no way he was going to get his gun around and shoot me. I took the gun, too, and just walked out. I handed the gun and knife to their leader. From that time, the boy never came near me, but he convinced his friends to come and threaten me and the girls. I stood my ground. (McDonnell & Akallo 2007, 179)

This moment is a sharp contrast to Grace's zombie-like march from the grave back to the LRA, and to her numbness immediately following her escape: "I was in captivity for exactly seven months, and when I escaped I left behind my friends. Even though I was safe, I felt dry, like a branch plucked from a tree" (Akallo, in McDonnell & Akallo 2007, 189). This lack of feeling is still with her when the boy threatens her, but his instigation provokes something that Grace had lost: the will to live. She realizes in this moment that in spite of her spiral into depression and corpse-like adherence to the LRA's daily life, she has still managed to escape them. The worst is behind her, and now she realizes that she can cease being a numb, passive victim, but can fight for herself. The sudden success

and self-sufficiency is a seemingly out-of-place message of hope. Out of all of the turmoil, Grace has emerged bearing her suffering like an exterior shield instead of an internal handicap. The hope is that, in spite of being victimized in every way possible, she is now able to triumph over her past and her debasement and rise up, reborn not as an LRA automaton but as one who has “passed through the fire” and now returns to and reclaims fragments of her pre-soldier self.

The military “family” cannot be a transitive site of therapy because they were responsible for the separation of the child from his or her family, community, and childhood. Socialization within rebel groups can be so consuming that it often undermines the rehabilitation and reintegration process. In many cases, just as it was their malleability that allowed them to become child soldiers, their malleability will bring them back. Still, it can be exceedingly difficult for child soldiers to give up the habits they have formed through training and extended time in a military setting. Child soldiers can become so embedded in their recruiting organizations that they submerge themselves in this identity, and find they cannot adapt to a lifestyle that doesn’t condone it. For Jal, old habits are all that remains of SPLA life, and he had committed so entirely to being a soldier that he now recoils from outside efforts to shape him back into a child. Jal never enters any sort of rehabilitation programs; instead, he is effectively “adopted” by a woman named Emma McCune, a British aid worker married to SPLA commander Riek Machar. Living in her home, he cannot help continuing to act like a soldier. He relies heavily on the habits the SPLA instilled in him, continuing to playact the soldier:

I wasn’t a boy. I was a soldier . . . and still slept with one eye open to make sure I could see my enemy. I missed my AK-47 and wanted a pistol to keep me safe . . . Arabs were nearby, hiding in the bushes and waiting to shoot at me. I dived to the ground and stayed still, lifting my head a little to stare down the garden. I knew I was safe to be a soldier while Emma and Sally were out. They didn’t like it if I hid in the dark and shouted to

surprise them when they turned on a light or when I pointed at anything that moved and pretended to shoot . . . Emma also didn't like the pictures I drew of jeeps, tanks, and houses on fire instead of hippos, birds, and crocodiles. "You must draw beautiful things," she would say. (Jal 2009, 182-183)

There is a cruel irony to this moment: though Jal seems very childlike through his imagining of Arabs "hiding in the bushes" and his drawings of war images, these are not childhood fantasies but traumatic recollections that he cannot get rid of. Jal's childhood has been irretrievably taken from him, ended years ago, and these are simply mechanisms that provide him with order. It's actually a shame that Emma doesn't allow Jal to illustrate his war memories with art. This is a widely-used therapeutic tool, but she just finds it disturbing and tells him to stop. Instead of accepting his soldiering background, she tries to reverse the clock and return him to his pre-soldier childhood, something that can never be accomplished. The only thing that can be done is moving forward.

All of our autobiographers eventually find outlets for their frustration, aggression, fear, and any other lingering negativities surrounding their soldiering memories: art, music, religion, political activism, and (obviously) the autobiographies themselves. They have also turned to religion and political activism to give themselves purpose and meaning. For both Senait Mehari and Emmanuel Jal, music becomes their life, a far more significant outlet than writing their memoirs. "I am my music. My music is me. I found a way to save mine through religion and music. My faith is something private, but I share my music with the world because I know it is the only thing that can speak to your mind, soul, heart, and spirit—enter into you without your permission and influence you" (Jal 2009, 256). Singing and performing is, for Jal, a much more powerful way of expressing his memories. Being on stage fills him with a similar rush to going into battle, and provides him with an agency that is adaptive to post-soldier life. It was actually on

the battlefield that he first connected being a soldier with being a musician: “As the hours passed, I learned that battle is like music—it ebbs and flows, screeching and silent in turns. Some moments I thought my ears would burst as guns, grenades, and rockets exploded, then everything would fall silent as troops on both side reloaded” (Jal 2009, 120-121). Now, he allows himself to reconnect with his past as a soldier, to give that side of himself recognition, and then to channel that battleground energy into something positive: an empowering performance. Both a coping mechanism and a way of sharing his story with others, Jal’s songs have given his post-soldier life new meaning and purpose.

Memory and trauma are closely linked, but language might not be able to capture the horror of the traumatic experience. Even so, there is something to be gained in the retelling. Both song lyrics and the autobiography serve this therapeutic purpose for child soldiers. “In therapeutic settings and in life writing, individuals turn to narrative to excavate and reassess memories that may have been fragmented, chaotic, unbearable, and/or scarcely visible before narrating them . . . In a dynamic way then, narrative constitutes past experience at the same time as it provides ways form individuals to make sense of the past” (Riessman 2008, 8). The autobiography thus provides them with a conduit for close self-analysis, allowing them to retrace their decisions and reflect on why certain choices were made, and how these choices led them to others. Once a logical path is traced, they are more able to cope with their present state, and move forward.

Autobiography forms the basis for a successful post-traumatic treatment program referred to as Narrative Exposure Therapy (NET), which, according to Schauer & Schauer (2010), “can prevent or greatly reduce the severity of PTSD and co-existing

symptomatology, which in turn enhances survivors' mental and physical health and their economical and social functioning” (417). NET involves cognitive-behavioral techniques, but “rather than focus on a *specific* traumatic event, clients are guided through the development of a narrative of their *entire* lives, with a focus on traumatic events that occurred over time (McDevitt-Murphy et al. 2010, 301). This is a more-structured version of the same practice which our autobiographers have organically decided to undergo in writing down their experiences as trauma narratives. They engage with their personal traumatic or obsessive memories “to find ways of telling about events and sufferings that defy language and understanding.” The narrator might find it difficult to locate words that “speak the unspeakable,” (Smith & Watson 2010, 250) but the therapeutic relief comes from the attempt: “Now that I have written everything down, I am free. This book will give me peace. The story I have to tell is a terrible one. But I do not want those who read it to see only the darkness. I want a door to open as they read it. So light comes through – and hope” (Mehari 2006, 1). As trauma narratives, their stories follow a “descent into hell, this journey into the land of bondage . . . discontinuous with what came before”. Ultimately, once “a ritual period of purification has been undergone (rehab in one or other form), the protagonist may, despite having been damaged by the ghastly interlude, pick up his or her life’s trajectory again” (Sanders 2011, 208).

The main reflection here is that navigating evolving spaces of post-war landscapes involves an element of manipulation and agency on the part of child soldiers themselves which is overlooked in international donor support and nongovernment organization (NGO) programming” (Podder 2011a, 150). Child soldiers also need to be treated, not as children who need to be “fixed” or psychologically reverted back to their

original state—this is something that our autobiographers stress over and over again: there is no going back, only healing and moving forward.

CONCLUSION

Child soldiers have been called victims, willing participants, and even dehumanized weapons by various scholars. Their roles in conflict can vary so widely, that some have found it necessary to lump them into the more general category of *children affected by armed conflict*, or CAACs. They are a heinous and inappropriate weapon, because they are expended “at the expense of humanity’s own future: its children” (Dallaire 2011, 3). Interestingly, within international law all child soldiers are given moral equivalency regardless of what they did: they are not held accountable for their actions. The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers holds that child soldiers who have committed atrocities should be treated as *victims of adult crimes*. International law thus holds the recruiting adults responsible. This standard (1) overgeneralizes child soldier experiences, (2) deems voluntary recruitment of child soldiers impossible, and (3) ultimately encourages a flawed perception of child soldiers as mechanical individuals lacking their own agency.

Within the social sciences, narrative analysis—a diverse toolbox of interpretive approaches to spoken, written, and visual texts—has become increasingly visible, though not yet well-established. The experiences of underrepresented groups within the context of the social sciences have begun to earn a more respected place in theory, research, and application. A work of art does not necessitate a response from the reader, but that is what these authors are often seeking: agency. “I was a person who never spoke much but

I believe in my heart that if I can tell my story to the whole of these people maybe they can rescue my friends,” Grace Akallo says (in Raymonde 2010). The autobiographical act—and with it, the act of remembering—have underlying motives and constitute an act of passing on a social past that they have some motive for revealing. Ultimately, with these life stories, there is an activated potential “for reshaping a future of and for other subjects” (Smith & Watson 2010, 26).

The selected autobiographers have all become political activists for war-affected children, and this is the main vein through which their stories can reshape the future. The only major steps toward a deterrence system for the use of child soldiers have come very recently. In March of 2006, Major Jean-Pierre Biyoyo became “the first person to be convicted in a national judicial process for recruiting child soldiers” (Chikuhwa 2010, 48). Also from the DRC, the warlord Thomas Lubanga was the first person ever to be tried and sentenced by the International Criminal Court. He was sentenced to fourteen years in prison for using child soldiers in the Ituri region of the DRC during 2002-2003. This certainly shows that the use of child soldiers has reached the top of the international community’s list for heinous crimes and human rights violations. However, child soldiers are still legally defended as being hopeless cases, incapable of growth after having their innocence stolen by adult perpetrators. This superimposition of the adult voice usurps the child’s own right to speak for their choices. I propose that we give them back the voices that have been repeatedly confiscated from them.

This involves both humanities’ and social sciences’ analytic skills. The detailed individual accounts provided by autobiographers are incredibly useful in redefining child soldiers as social navigators with unique motivations that may not necessarily be

generalize-able to their comrades or to wide cultural groups. Individual spectrums of behavior vary from the most merciful to the most merciless child soldiers. This doesn't mean that they should be held fully responsible for their crimes or even considered fully rational—the reality is that the developing mind of a child soldier makes them particularly vulnerable to all sorts of ideological and psychological conditioning. At the same time, to “close the book” on their deeds “without attempting to know or to comprehend them . . . may be a form of dereliction” (Sander 2011, 200). Their stories are both victimcy narratives and active narratives, and the autobiographers constantly struggle to reconcile the two. When the analyst matches the autobiographers' efforts to understand the nuances of their behavior as they themselves do, what results is a thorough (and more broadly-applicable) understanding of these complex beings who can simultaneously be both child and soldier.

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