

“Reading for the ‘Real’ Africa”:
African literature, American readers, Oprah, and exotification
by
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Abstract

Though the African Writers Series increased the Western readership of 20th c. Anglo-African literature, it is possible that the novels in the AWS encouraged foreign audiences to look at the literature with an “anthropological gaze.” Contemporary African literature today still has a comparatively small presence in the West, inevitably limiting the views in which Western readers imagine Africa and the life of Africans. According to Binyavanga Wainaina, many authors are writing what the West wants to hear about Africa: naked children, disease, and saintly Western aid workers. Moreover, the subject matter of journalism that strives for content that is marketable may reinforce the content in these books as truth.

The first chapter examines child soldier narratives and their Western popularity in the last ten years. I argue that the child soldier narrative is similar to and complicates the Bildungsroman, a form that aids in the techniques of human rights literature. Uzodinma Iweala's fiction piece, *Beasts of No Nation*, tells a story from the perspective of a child soldier. The novel lacks a particular time and exact location, encouraging the reader to sense an eternal warfare throughout the continent. Ishmael Beah's memoir, *A Long Way Gone*, exemplifies the role that nonfiction plays in audience expectations and the implications of a memoir written through the eyes of a confused boy. Both books introduce Westerners as the savior figures that bring the children out of the chaotic, barbaric warfare.

The second chapter discusses two sets of short stories. I suggest that Uwem Akpan's *Say You're One of Them* tells the news that the West wants to hear, by illustrating the stories of youth suffering in sub-Saharan Africa. By examining Uwem Akpan's collection as an Oprah's Book Club (OBC) pick, I suggest OBC's reading protocol encourages a therapeutic method of reading that can result in readers feeling helpless, especially when they identify with the protagonist residing in what seems like hopeless suffering. Chimamanda Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck* presents stories of Nigerians and Nigerian immigrants in the U.S. that have experiences relatable to the general human experience of life, loss, and love. In doing so, she presents a lens of Africa that is not so foreign to the lives of Americans. I suggest that Adichie's collection successfully challenges the conception that Africans face entirely different trials and obstacles than Westerners.

I conclude with discussing the importance of literature as a source for readers' exploration of other cultures around the world, in their own country, in their own city. The tendency for readers to take African fiction as reality is encouraged by coverage of similar stories in news media. Since development and progress within Africa is rarely described in the news, African literature offers an opportunity to explore lives that do not just “bleed.” The way Americans envision Africa is important: if the feelings towards Africa continue to be pitying and demeaning, then systems of development like monetary and food aid will persist and an approach towards sustainable African countries will not be attained.

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Short Titles

- “Achebe”: Achebe, Chinua. “An Image of Africa.” *Research in African Literatures* 9:1 (1978). 1-15.
- “TAYN”: Adichie, Chimamanda Ngogi. *The Thing Around Your Neck*. New York: Knopf, 2009.
- “SYOT”: Akpan, Uwem. *Say You're One of Them*. New York: Back Bay Books, 2009.
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- “Slaughter”: Slaughter, Joseph. *Human Rights, Inc.* New York: Fordham University, 2007.

Introduction

What is Africa?

- *“...one country...”*
- *“... 900 million people who are...busy starving and dying and warring...”*
- *“... female genital mutilation...”*
- *“The Starving African...Her children have flies on their eyelids and pot bellies, and her breasts are flat and empty. She...look[s] utterly helpless”*
- *People who are “empty inside, with no dialogue, no conflicts or resolutions in their stories, no depth or quirks to confuse the cause”*
- *A place “...to be pitied, worshipped or dominated...”*

According to Binyavanga Wainaina's satirical piece “How to Write About Africa,” quoted above, there are certain Western preconceptions of Africa that are fed by stories and descriptions within literature. These are the images many expect of the continent that has undergone centuries of exploitation and is the main recipient of pitied attention from the U.S. agenda. However, literature is a source of information that has the power to form foreign readers' ideas about the African continent that they most likely know little about. Literature can influence the way in which readers realistically think about the actual continent, its people, its conflicts, and its situation. Stories and memoirs become, for some readers, the insight into the truth about Africa. The tradition of writing about Africa from the outside, as identified by Wainaina, makes an analysis of literature written by African authors an important point for comparison. Therefore, this thesis will cover four pieces of contemporary African literature that have found widespread popularity and acclaim outside of Africa, analyzing how their content, physical appearance, and

setting in America's literature landscape influence how American readers imagine Africa.

African literature has a long history of publication abroad, reminiscent of a neo-imperialistic force. To preface this thesis, it is important to discuss the history of African literature, especially its history in the Western hemisphere. Printing presses in Africa became actively devoted to the first political parties after independence was achieved in the 1960s-1970s. But these printing presses only had limited services, so publishing abroad was necessary (Lizarribar 33). Heinemann Publishers entered the continent with the hopes of “acquiring overseas schoolbook markets” in former English Commonwealth countries, reflective of the “second form of domination” post-independence: the enforcement of the British school system and English language (73-4). C.B. Lizarribar, whose dissertation discusses the history and effects of Heinemann's African Writers Series (an English publisher for African literature), suggests that Amos Tutuola's novel *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, the first printed piece of literature about Africa written by a black African, was meant to play on the notions of “bad English” in its use of “illiterate” language (88). However, it was interpreted by Western audiences as the epitome of African literature because of its resemblance to Western stereotypes of African culture. The novel became an example of “authentic” African writing for the West, signaling a struggle for African writers to be “African” enough for Western readers and “savvy” enough for African readers (88-9). Chinua Achebe dealt with this tension and tried to challenge the Western image of Africa in his 1958 novel *Things Fall Apart*.

A break-through for African writers was the creation of Heinemann's African Writers Series (AWS) at Heinemann Publishers, in 1962, for which Chinua Achebe became the first Editorial Adviser, based on the success of *Things Fall Apart*. The establishment of the Series launched an African voice in literature about Africa in the West, after centuries when African

history and fiction had been written and defined by Europeans. In the 1970s, “80 percent of the [AWS] books were sold in Africa, about 10 percent in Britain and 10 percent in North America” (Currey 581). Between 1962 and 1984, “Output peaked at 22 titles in one year, and for some years 15 or more were published annually,” including the publication of the three African winners of the Nobel Prize for Literature (582). However, even when there was local interest in local authors as a support for local publishing, international publishing would provide for not only local readership, but readership abroad. C.B. Lizarríbar suggests that “African authors will often turn to foreign publishers because of a general mistrust in local publishing, and to be assured of a higher quality product. Therefore, both writers and books are geared primarily towards an outside audience” (58). She cites the challenge of African authors having multiple audiences and though they have the desire to print with a foreign publisher, the need they also have to satisfy the demands of both Westerners and Africans.

The founding of the Series meant there would be a publisher of African literature that had “no holds barred in sexual, moral or political terms,” important ideals for African authors at a time when many African states had gained their independence from the colonial powers (Currey 576). However, Lizarríbar writes that “...the initial audience was not African, so that the testing ground for what would later be considered a classic in African literature was actually foreign soil” (86). It was the Series creator Alan Hill who praised *Things Fall Apart*, which became an African classic abroad, for its affirmation of “permanent human and social values” among African tribes for a Western-educated audience (90). The AWS allowed the well-respected Achebe to decide whether a book would be published, with little bureaucracy; reviewers included both African and British novelists, poets, and playwrights (Currey 580). However, the Series hit a lull in the twenty years between Achebe's novels, demonstrating a reliance somewhat

on his dominance and “prevailing attitude,” which shaped the body of literature within the AWS, the key access point for African literature published in the West (Lizarribar 162).

In his book *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, Graham Huggan suggests that though the AWS was “well-intentioned,” it also “may have contributed to the continuing exoticisation of Africa through misdirected anthropological images” (50). Reading African literature as anthropological is part of the “misconceived notion...that an African text offers unmediated access to an African culture...Hence the frequent recourse to exoticising readings...begin[s] by latching onto the cultural information putatively presented in the text” (39). Furthermore, an African's version of Africa has been “subjected to a self-empowering, implicitly neocolonialist ‘anthropological gaze’”: the foreign audience reads for a window into a foreign culture, exploring another world through literature (50). The books in the Series, Huggan argues, demonstrate a “reconfirmation of exoticist stereotype [that] masquerades as the newly minted expression of a previously misunderstood cultural reality” (53). Huggan suggests that African books pose as products of post-independence, new-found feeling and experience that are in contrast with life under imperialist domination of government, social order, and culture. In reality, this literature is not a demonstration of political and cultural activism but reconfirms European “exoticist” stereotypes of Africa. Western readers look to this new generation of post-independence literature (a movement that made the AWS plausible) as demonstrative of the African reality that was previously overlooked or misinterpreted by Western fiction from the 18th and 19th centuries about the continent.

Still frequently read in many high school English classes, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* draws a very distinct image of Africa from stereotypes that were common for England in the late 19th century, when Africa was under colonial rule. In Chinua Achebe's essay “Image of

Africa,” he addresses the racism in *Heart of Darkness*, published in 1902, and addresses the need to recognize the effects of a novel still often read and considered a classic; such a novel forms an important basis upon which people imagine Africa and its prejudices should be acknowledged, as they were and are the “dominant image of Africa in the Western imagination”¹ (Achebe 13).

Conrad positions Africa as “the other world” or “antithesis to Europe” through Marlow's comparison of Africa to Europe's past that is so remote that Europe does not even remember it, as if they are in different ages (Achebe 3). To those who gloss over Conrad's racism and argue that Africa is just the setting for the decomposition of the mind of Mr. Kurtz, Achebe argues that the fact that Africa is only the setting “eliminates the African as a human factor” (9). Considered a defining novel in the history of Africa's presence in the Western literary scene, Conrad's novel is a representation of a primitive, barbaric Africa, an image created by a European man.

Things Fall Apart has often been put side by side with Conrad's classic because it was one of the first African novels to become very popular in the West. The novel discusses the colonial experience from an African perspective and it, too, has become a touchstone for imagining Africa and African literature for many readers. Huggan suggests that *Things Fall Apart* is a ethnographic parody that exposes the limited knowledge of the reader and his/her ability to interpret the text, as well as the failure of translation within and outside the novel. However, I would agree with Huggan and argue that most readers of this “ultimate African novel” use an anthropological approach to read it. The ethnographic desire that Achebe tries to thwart, I believe, goes unacknowledged by most readers. In “An Image of Africa,” Achebe points to a letter he received from a high school student who was glad to read Achebe's novel because

¹ Alan Hill suggested that the AWS, unlike European authors who wrote about Africa, had “given [Westerners] a true picture of African traditional societies as they move into the modern world, depicting... a mixture [of images] very familiar in the history of Western European civilization” (Lizarribar 109-10).

he liked that he could “learn about the customs and superstitions of an African tribe” (2). The student's response confirms the expectations of some readers to read foreign literatures anthropologically, interpreting a timeless, ethnographic present in the book's depictions. The student's response confirms the expectations of some readers to read foreign literatures anthropologically; the student, in this case, was eager to learn of culture and place so different from his own in New York, but does not acknowledge the setting that is late 1800s Nigeria. It seems that this student believes that he is reading about the Igbo culture of today and assumes a static African culture. As one of *Time's* All-Time 100 Novels, *Things Fall Apart* remains the best-known African novel and as a result, Africa is at risk of being continually exiled to the colonial past, even though *Things Fall Apart* brings humanity to the Africans that Conrad left language-less. Readers still show evidence of taking Achebe's word for what Africa is; he has helped to form an impression upon the West of what Africa is even if he did not intend to do so. As Achebe wrote, “it is the desire – one might indeed say the need – in Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe” (Achebe 2). So in a Western desire for Africa to be the “other,” the Western audience reads with an agenda to find not only difference from their own culture, but the differences that make the continent “problematic.” Simon Gikandi argues that Achebe, himself, fosters an anthropological reading of his work, as Achebe said in an interview with Kalu Ogbaa in 1980, “If someone is in search of information, or knowledge, or enlightenment about the total life of these people – the Igbo people – I think my novels would be a good source” (Achebe Interview 1). Again, the relationship between the content of a book and the protocols of reading is identified. This psychological legacy and the legacy left by the literature of Conrad and Achebe are still at the forefront of Western minds when approaching African literature today.

Where are African writers now, 49 years after the founding of the African Writers Series?

Pius Adesanmi is often attributed with coining the term “third generation” to apply to Nigerian writers born after 1960 (Adesanmi Interview). He calls in this shift to a third generation after a first generation of writers who illustrate a “reaffirmation, self-assertion, and delinking from centuries of Euromodernist misrepresentation” and a second generation of writers who consider “post-independence disillusionment” and the general problems that have followed independence (Adesanmi). In this thesis, I will address three Nigerian authors considered part of the “third generation,” including Chimamanda Adichie, Uzodinma Iweala, and Uwem Akpan. Ishmael Beah, another writer to be included, is Sierra Leonian, but could also be considered in this same group of young, up-and-coming writers. Expectations of literature has lead American readers to choose books they will read for particular reasons, whether they make their decisions based on prominent reviews or book club choices. Their unfamiliarity with African literature would make it more likely that they pick up a copy of a more publicized or readily available version of Africa in literary form. There are countless awards and “Best Of” lists that try to influence choice for the bedside table, such as those published by the *New York Times* and *Granta*. These lists represent an intersection of global literature and the contemporary media landscape in the West, and these lists are often highly regarded by those reading for pleasure. Expectations of literature and Africa collide in the genre of African literature, as an African author holds a position of authority different from the American reporter. Yet preconceived notions about Africa from news sources, solicitations for charity on television, and campaigns by political activists have predetermined for them what it means to be African.

Uwem Akpan, in response to his book of short stories, *Say You're One of Them*, received the following reader review on Amazon.com:

“To be sure, the circumstances are horrifying - tribal wars, destruction, rape, poverty,

starvation. I sometimes had to put the book down because each page is so densely packed with raw emotion and brutally honest storytelling. There is no sugar-coating here. What kept me coming back and reading late into the night was Akpan's intensely visual story telling that has us bear witness to what's happening in countries all across Africa. We are unable to turn away as we make our way through the book and we feel compelled, even obligated, to do something, to say something, to change something. Through literature, he found his voice while also giving a voice to those who are unable to speak for themselves.” (C. Avampato, “A powerful story teller”)

The reader describes the book as a powerful form of “visual story telling” that kept them reading even when the subject matter was hard to confront. However, the reader also reveals the belief that the book of short stories is a window onto what life is like “in countries all across Africa.” For this reader, these fictional stories are real; what is happening across Africa is “horrifying” and there is no way out, unless the reader, who feels called upon to “do something,” does something. The stories have confirmed this reader's expectations that have been formed by media about the current state and needs of African countries. The ethnographic expectations of a Western audience when reading about a foreign culture demonstrate a tendency of reading as a “witness” to what is happening abroad, as if the stories are windows onto the real life of an unfamiliar world. The responses to fictional and nonfictional accounts of suffering in African literature illustrate a tendency among readers that they have in some way experienced first-hand what life is like in different African countries. Some readers use the stories as a pure, unmediated version of what life is like in that country; it cannot just be a “story” like many novels they read about their own culture, but it is actually “true life.” At stake in the reader's notion of “bearing witness” is their assumption of Akpan's role as teacher, which is emphasized by Akpan's ambition

to embrace such a role, similar to the way in which Achebe did.

Binyavanga Wainaina, a Kenyan who has been published in the *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, and *National Geographic*, is critical of this suffering literary genre that has plagued the Western image of Africa. In “How to Write About Africa,” he discusses the issues of Africa that are marketable and perpetuate the stereotypical, helpless images of Africa. He recognizes the same pattern and desire of Western descriptions of Africa as Achebe: to “set Africa up as a foil to Europe” (Achebe 2). Included in his description are images he claims that will sell: a cover with “An AK-47, prominent ribs, naked breasts... If you must include an African, make sure you get one in Masai or Zulu or Dogon dress”; “The Starving African, who wanders the refugee camp nearly naked, and waits for the benevolence of the West”; “Avoid having the African characters laugh, or struggle to educate their kids, or just make do in mundane circumstances” (Wainaina). His piece demonstrates the need for extreme situations and severe misfortune in order for a book to be publishable and able to draw a large audience in the West. If publishers figure that only these kinds of books will sell, then there will be only a certain genre of African literature that will be available to American readers as the “voice from Africa.”

Few African writers have been selected for “Best Of” lists and awards like the Nobel literary prize. Pascale Casanova recognizes that it is “terms of the number of candidates for legitimacy and of the actual extent of autonomous consecration (via translation, commentary, critical notice, prizes) that the properly literary credit of a capital is reckoned” (167). Consecration of texts, through the literary prizes and the attainment of respected reviews, brings authors and their work notoriety and greater access to the public. Consecration, therefore, is the key to African literature making it into the hands of Americans. Oprah did not choose an African writer for her Book Club pick until 2009. Wole Soyinka was the first and only black, sub-Saharan

African to win the Nobel prize for literature in 1986 (“All Nobel Laureates in Literature”). Chimamanda Adichie was the first African to become a MacArthur Foundation fellow for her literature². The *New York Times*' “100 Best Of” novels, included two black African writers in 2006 (Adichie and Uzodinma) and three in 2007 (including Beah), with J.M. Coetzee, a white South African, being listed in 2003 and 2008 (“100 Notable Books Of...”). And for many American readers, the African novels that are selected are the limited scope with which to evaluate and imagine Africa outside of the news. I therefore examine reader response to and general interpretation of these consecrated, African texts in order to explore the reason for their consecration, determine their potential effects on American readers, as well as analyze trends in the responses of readers imagining Africa.

In African literature, according to Wainaina, if the story is dramatic, romantic, or portrays the West as “savior,” then the book or newspaper will be more likely to sell. In this thesis, I examine contemporary African-authored books that have made it past the publishing gatekeepers to American bookshelves. For example, the African child soldier novel, currently a popular item in bookstores, is a distant relative of the Nigerian war genre; however, its brutality and the type of sympathy the main character evokes from the audience is directed primarily at a Western audience by a Western publisher. Do these internationally published books cater to an international audience, both Africans and the rest of the world? Many African authors are criticized by Western book reviewers for “delivering the 'news' the West wants to hear about Africa: pitiful victims, incorrigible villains, inspirational survivors” (Row). Despite such lingering criticism of this type of African literature, novels and memoirs of stories and experiences that Americans desire to hear continue to be published: reformed child soldiers, religious slaughter, and corrupted and vengeful family members.

² The prize, however, is restricted to residents and citizens of the United States (*MacArthur Foundation*).

I acknowledge the assumptions that I bring to reading African literature. I assume that literature has the potential to influence the ideas and beliefs of readers. I assume that literature from Africa claims a role in forming Western opinions about what is the “real” Africa. I assume that literature can take on an important role in changing expectations and for this reason, and others, literature is very relevant to a reader's outlook on the world. I expect African literature to bring some clarity to the complexity of the continent that news media does not. I was formally introduced to African literature through a “Topics in African Literature” course taught by Joseph Slaughter. He brought to my attention the social importance of differences in literary traditions within Africa. He exposed me to African literature that is not so well known in the United States through awards and “must read” lists. The culmination of these assumptions and academic courses has shaped the framework I bring to African literature and has forced me to look critically at its content. There have long been debates about what constitutes African literature, including questions of language, audience, and locations of publishers and authors³. This thesis will delve further into parts of this debate and its current importance in the American literary landscape.

The first section of this thesis examines two examples of child soldier literature with almost identical plots, *Beasts of No Nation* (2005) by Uzodinma Iweala and *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (2007) by Ishmael Beah. The former received praise from many well-respected sources, including *Granta* Magazine's list of 20 best young American novelists and recognition as one of Barnes & Noble's “Discover New Writers” picks. Beah's memoir was named one of the “Top 10 Nonfiction Books of 2007” by *Time* Magazine's Lev Grossman, ranking third. More interestingly, Beah's memoir was chosen by Starbucks coffee shops in 2007

³ Included in this debate is the question of what does it mean that African literature is written by Americans? This argument, however, will not be covered in my thesis and could prove a further line of inquiry.

to be sold as part of their book promotion, and as a result he appeared on “The Daily Show with Jon Stewart.” If appearances on talk shows cause Americans to read this suffering genre of African literature, then readers will consume a certain suffering image of the African child: the life of a child soldier during war, his survival, and his eventual safety found in America with a woman (“savior”) he met at a UN peace conference. The suffering of the telegenic young author, the protagonist, is at the forefront, and as a result, becomes “commodified as the new authenticity out of Africa” (Coundouriotis 23). This commodification is further supported by the West-as-savior endings, which portray America or Americans as the source for a happy ending.

The second section of this thesis focuses on two books of short stories: *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009) by Chimamanda Adichie and *Say You're One of Them* (2007) by Uwem Akpan. While Adichie's stories present a mix of visions of hope, reconciliation, Nigerian poverty, and Nigerians in America, Akpan's book is a compilation of stories about children struck by severe misfortune from all over the continent. He shows that stories and cultures differ from country to country, but he homogenizes the continent in terms of its general suffering. Laura Suski, in her essay on publicized child suffering, argues that in the context of international humanitarianism, children are the faces of poverty, especially for television campaigns, because the American audience sympathizes with the sense of a lost childhood. Akpan's stories feed the fire of American sympathy and desire for hope in children, but leave the reader with little more than a feeling of general helplessness towards the continent whose children, the future, are lost. Though *The Thing Around Your Neck* has not won any awards thus far, Chimamanda Adichie has marked herself as an award-winning writer with her 2007 novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, which won the Orange prize and earned her the MacArthur Foundation fellowship in 2008. Her work opposes Akpan's focus on suffering as a daily occurrence throughout Africa; Adichie illustrates the

suffering of Nigerian immigrants in the United States, Nigerians suffering from universal problems not specific to West Africa, and Nigerians not suffering in daily life. In doing so, she offers a look into some of the political and social effects that have helped to form what Nigeria is today.

In the past five years, a handful of African authors have achieved consecration in the American literary scene. I have chosen four particular texts for my case study because they are some of the few African texts that have been well-publicized or have received media attention in the United States. Other relevant texts include the work of Chris Abani⁴, *Moses, Citizen and Me* by Delia Jarrett-Macauley⁵, and *Johnny Mad Dog* by Emmanuel Dongala⁶. I have chosen novels that have a larger readership and greater visibility due to awards, media coverage, and book reviews on amazon.com and barnesandnoble.com. For my analysis, I am interested in both the protocols of reading that certain modes of popularity have brought to books (when such information is available) as well as the kind of representation of Africa and Africans the books offer.

The literature I have chosen to focus on in this thesis represent some of the most popular pieces of contemporary African fiction and nonfiction in the United States. Therefore, I analyze the texts' content and the text's position in the American literary sphere in order to suggest the ability of these novels to influence a reader's image of Africa. I examine reader interpretations as well as actual examples of reader responses in forums and book reviews. I look at the ways in which these narratives are marketed to and interpreted for/by audiences, factors that play a strong

⁴ Chris Abani's, a Nigerian and Guggenheim Fellow in 2009, newest novella, *Becoming Abigail*, covers the topic of sex trafficking. His other novels include accounts of child "mine sweepers" in unnamed African countries and children living in a brutal, African, developing country. (From amazon.com citing *Publisher's Weekly*)

⁵ A British woman born to Sierra Leonian parents, Jarrett-Macauley's novel focuses on the narrator's relationship with a cousin, a former child soldier. (From amazon.com citing product description)

⁶ Dongala's, a Congolese Guggenheim fellow, plot focuses on children fleeing from war and militiamen. (From amazon.com citing *Publisher's Weekly*)

role in what people take away ideologically from literature they read. For the many Americans who have never visited Africa, these books can take on the role of teacher if so interpreted by the reader.

Chapter 1

“I’ll take that child soldier with my frappachino”: Child Soldiers, Bildungsroman, and Starbucks

The interest and activism on behalf of child soldiers has grown in the past ten years. The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers was started in May 1998 (“Child Soldiers”). In 2006, the documentary “Invisible Children” was released and then in 2009, “Children of War” was released (*IMDb*). Clearly, this issue has exposed while individuals and organizations have found ways to show appalling data that draws attention and urgency to the issue. Sites like www.child-soldiers.org, created by the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, have become more frequent and are dedicated to showing the existence of the problem, the numbers, and the ways that people can support the Coalition's mission and their work. According to their site, “The problem is most critical in Africa, where children as young as nine have been involved in armed conflicts” (“Child Soldiers”). The interest in the subject of child soldiers may lie in its image: a child with a gun, new life holding something that could easily take life away. The visual oxymoron is a phenomenon that Western citizens find horrifying and at the same time intriguing.

Child soldiers have made their way onto the U.S. agenda and many Americans have expressed concern about youth carrying guns in war. Not only have news articles covered the issue and the wars that have been fought by these children, but a significant number books that concentrate on the lives of child soldiers have been published in America by Westerners and Africans. As the disturbing and compelling subject finds popularity among media, humanitarian organizations, and government agendas, the book genre has also found marketability; perhaps as child soldiers have become a human rights concern, literature based on the reality and suffering of child soldiers has been encouraged. I suggest that the growing presence of the child soldier narrative is a result of the growing Western interest in the human rights issues of children and the

publishing of these narratives commodifies a specific set of human rights that have recently come under great scrutiny in the West. The commodification of such narratives requires these stories and experiences be marketable and desirable by the public. And since the books I will analyze were published in the United States, I am looking at the marketability to an American group of readers.

The African child soldier narrative can take on the form and the purpose of the “Bildungsroman,” defined most basically as “a novel that has as its main theme the formative years or spiritual education of one person” (*Oxford English Dictionary Online*). More popularly referred to as a coming of age novel, the child soldier narrative fits the story of a youthful main character in Africa into a plot structure that is familiar to a Western audience. The stories in this genre of literature follow the progress and development of their marginalized protagonists (children of developing countries, children with guns) as they experience the horrors of war and change as a result, prematurely progressing towards adulthood. In the narratives that I analyze, the protagonists find a happy ending in the care of American aid workers.

In *Human Rights, Inc.*, Joseph Slaughter suggests that some contemporary novels by African writers make use of the social function of the Bildungsroman to make a rights claim: the young boys and girls who are forced to fight are the focus of this “benign humanitarian interventionist posture” of books (307). In the ideal world, each of these works would have an audience take on a non-progressive “humanitarian interventionist” attitude toward the silenced protagonist, pushing for the character to claim their “right to have rights” (307). If we take the Bildungsroman as a commodity, a respondent to the supply and demand of consumers as I suggested, then the human rights centered Bildungsroman is more inclined to respond to the consumer demand of “humanitarian readers based largely in the northern hemisphere”; Slaughter

also calls the demand of consumers buying into the “business of human rights” a “soft imperialist force” (276).

Heightened interest in the issue, strengthened by readers who are led to consider the human rights violations, commodifies this genre of literature. Novels like *Beasts of No Nation* by Iweala Uzodinma have been “framed as a human rights literature,” a genre that can sell (Coundouriotis 23). In the way that Slaughter has analyzed examples of the Bildungsroman where the protagonist “responds to...a social imperative to develop the human personality and to narrate an account of that development according to socially acceptable conventions,” I believe that child soldier narratives present a narrative of a protagonist responding to Western stereotypes of African warfare in its exploitation of children and their rights (307).

Representations of African warfare in which children are soldiers reflect the “popular demand” of Americans who have expectations that children as soldiers are unacceptable in terms of what the U.S. believes are human rights; It is Article 3 of the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, signed by the United States, that states, “Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person” (Slaughter 307; United Nations).

The child soldier narrative is a blatant call to recognize human rights violations. The books I will cover in my case study are in the context of the “dissensual Bildungsroman” that explores the growth of a character who is not successful in integrating himself into society, his right to “personality development” is not claimed (Slaughter 315). The children portrayed who have been rescued from soldierhood are never fully integrated back into society, at least within the text of the book. The child is changed through their experience, as the protagonists of the Bildungsroman usually are, but in this case, their childhood has been unnaturally compressed and pushed ahead too soon to adulthood. They have not clearly developed in the way the

traditional Bildungsroman character would, but the books contain some efforts to rehabilitate these characters who have undergone such psychic harm. In his memoir *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*, Ishmael Beah describes his experiences as a child soldier in Sierra Leone, rehabilitated in a UNICEF camp, who then flees the country, and relies on his social integration within the United States for asylum. Similar to the “idealist human rights form of the contemporary Bildungsroman” that Slaughter suggests, these two examples of child soldier narratives have the ultimate goal of the child finding a home again, citizenship within the United States, after being separated from their family and entering a life that required them to exponentially grow mentally (315).

Beasts of No Nation: Sentimentalized Protagonist as Human Rights Icon

Published in 2005, Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation*, a product of his undergraduate thesis directed by Jamaica Kincaid at Harvard, made a ripple in America's African literature scene. He was only one of two novelists of African origin to receive the Discover Great New Writers award by Barnes and Noble between 2000 and 2007. The gold sticker that was placed on his book as a result was sure to bring some attention to the short novel by a very young writer. Iweala claims a double identity: that of a Nigerian and an American, living in Washington, D.C., and Lagos, Nigeria. With two identities, he has the advantage of occupying the Nigerian cultural space and therefore the ability to become a literary voice from Africa. As a voice from the continent, his novel is more marketable to readers who are keen to hear the voice of the oppressed. Readers are also, as a result of his identity as an African-borne author, likely to make more assumptions on the historical reality of his work although it is fiction.

Written from the perspective of a child, this novel leaves the problem of child soldiers lingering timelessly in the past, present, and future of African countries, in general. On the dust jacket of the novel, the summary states that the story follows “Agu, a young boy in an unnamed West African nation [who is] recruited into a unit of guerrilla fighters as civil war engulfs his country” (BNN). There is no exact location and no set time for this fictional account of war in Africa. In her essay on child soldier narratives, Eleni Coundouriotis writes, “the fighting is never explained in terms other than basic survival. You fight to live; war is a total condition, a way of life, not a cause in the name of something” (8). The fighting stands alone, the culture of war has taken over the unnamed country, and because no cause is demonstrated, it seems as though war in Africa is a constant, possible threat at any moment. However, Iweala’s novel does have a context similar to historical events of Nigeria and nearby states. There are news stories and

movies that relate information to readers about the presence child soldiers in several African wars and therefore readers are inclined to assume possible truths within the novel's narrative. The vagueness of the story and the setting may have been put in place in order to capture "Agu's youth and confusion," but the "world" created in *Beasts of No Nation* leaves the reader unable to place this world in a determined space and time (BNN Dust jacket).

Agu is stripped of some complexity in his setting, "an unnamed West African nation" (BNN Dust jacket). The ambiguity of Agu, his culture, location, and language, begins my analysis of this protagonist and the novel as a multi-layered commodity. Agu has a pidgin English voice. The dialect in this case may be employed to reinforce the youth of the speaker; when recounting the past he led before the war, Agu states that he "[is] liking to read so much that my mother is calling me professor" (BNN 24). Even though he started school at a very young age, he "was already reading when the other children are just trying to learn. I was the smartest person in my class" (27). The protagonist is formally educated, therefore his fluency in his own native language should be reflected in a fluent narrating voice, his native tongue. I suggest that the dialect undermines Agu, contrary to a *New York Times* review that states that Iweala "allows Agu to speak in a simple, authentic way, which can produce startlingly original expressions" ("A Boy Soldier's Heart of Darkness").

Furthermore, the consistent present tense with which the story is told reinforces the aforementioned feeling of ever on-going warfare in Africa. More specifically, this presents a problem for the Bildungsroman plot of development and redemption. There is no reconciliation of rights for Agu or Africans because the war prevents them from claiming their rights; there is no opportunity for complete rehabilitation in a continent always ravaged by warfare. The present tense of Iweala's speaker gives a larger impression that this story is not only his own but one that

is comparable to the stories of other child soldiers; it is also the voice of child soldiers who are fighting just at this moment, right as the foreign reader is consuming the story of Agu. Agu's story is consistently a narrative of the present, not one of a specific time period, but rather a story of events that is always at risk of occurring on the continent.

Agu's character is progressed but there remains an unresolved coherency in his development. He describes instances of life before the war, instances when he was with his mother in town and "seeing men walking with brand-new uniform...shouting left right, left right, behind trumpet and drum, like how they are doing on parade and so I am nodding my head yes" (BNN 11). He also discusses how his mother would recount stories of and was always reading to him from the Bible. He remembers his school life, his best friend Dike, playing football with his friends, attending Sunday school, and the relaxing lifestyle that consumed Sundays in the village. This reminiscing demonstrates the difference in his life as a soldier. His longing, at times, for life before the war broke out, before becoming a child soldier who rapes, slaughters, and sniffs drugs is clear. The continuation of memory helps him in claiming his personhood; his mind is not entirely lost in war and he is not completely bestialized as the novel's title suggests. The novel ends with Agu in the company and under the care of a teary, sympathetic American aid worker (Amy) who represents the sympathetic reaction that the reader, too, should have in response to Agu's story.

The chapter in which Agu describes his life before the war begins: "I am not bad boy" (BNN 23). He uses the habits of his past life to show how he was a boy who did not kill and confirms that he was not "bad," as the childlike phrase declares; in trying to achieve self-determination after soldierhood, the American rehabilitation clinic proves the location for his attempt to reclaim his rights, using his memory to reclaim his childhood innocence (an idea very

important to Westerners). Agu as a soldier says, “All we are knowing is that, before the war we are children and now we are not” (BNN 36). He supports Laura Suski's notion of the child soldier as a type of child who also “carries with him or her the 'end of childhood'” which is “deeply troubling to the adult witness” (204). The American aid worker plays the role of the “adult witness,” who finds a need to intervene, and watches over Agu and provides him with a listening ear. Iweala does not have an aid worker from his own country, but an American, which supports Suski's argument that “the emphasis on the plight of children in the Global South rejuvenates a colonial campaign that suggests that Western institutions and organizations are better able to provide for the needs of children than their own parents” (Suski 205). Iweala confirms the idea that there is a need for this Western savior figure. Agu describes his life in what seems like a rehabilitative home for children who have been involved with the war and compares his life there to being “in heaven” (BNN 137). The third chapter is dedicated to proving that he is “not a bad boy” can be tied to the last chapter in which he speaks to the aid worker about his experiences in war and says “if I am telling this to you it will be making you to think that I am some sort of beast or devil. Amy is never saying anything when I am saying this, but the water is just shining in her eye. And I am saying to her, fine. I am all of this thing. I am all of this thing, but I am also having mother once, and she is loving me” (BNN 141-2). The dissensual Bildungsroman plot of development does not allow Agu to claim his right to his own personality development: he distances himself from the character development of the “bad boy” that the war has caused. That development is not his own but induced by external forces of war.

But the question still remains, what kind of boy was he? And how has he changed by being a soldier? Though Iweala relates the thoughts, concerns and hopes of Agu, it is still possible for the reader to feel distanced from Agu and disconnected from him as a result of the

limited character development. The reader sees little growth in the character; the author tells the reader of change. When Agu and some of his fellow rebel soldiers attack a house, they find a mother with her daughter inside. Agu asks “Are you my mother...Are you my sister?” (BNN 48). When all they do is scream in response, Agu says just a couple lines down “I am not Devil” and proceeds to help his comrades in the rape of their victims. When the mother starts to pray as they rape her, Agu says, “I am laughing laughing because God is forgetting everybody in this country” (BNN 48). Here, he is a different person from the character that reminisced about his mother's Bible stories just pages before. The effects of drugs, war, and death make him easily switch between personalities. As a result of these influences, he is a boy developing in an unnatural manner, his innocence stolen, and he accelerates toward adulthood. As a Bildungsromane, his development has not been entirely logical but he as a person has progressed.

The lack of full character development, as a youth consumed by the violent stasis of war, leaves Agu to become an isolated figure against the dark canvas of African war. His lack of logical development may suggest that Agu's story is only told to expose the problem of child soldiers in western Africa, where the novel takes place, or even Africa in general. He becomes a form of the “un-child-like child” that Laura Suski identifies as the children who have experienced adulthood, “a site of 'pollution',” in some way and are not necessarily innocent (204). According to Suski, the child soldier “cannot be fully contained by the label of child. They blur the line between innocence and guilt” (204). By becoming an object that is so far from the Western notion of a “child,” Agu becomes a product of the dark, African wars from which Western life and culture are estranged. The reader may come to pity the boy who describes being beaten and forced to fight for a rebel army, then remembers “my mother and how she is so good

to me that each time she is hugging me that is all I am needing to see the dark skin of her arm holding me close to her and I am knowing that the life I am living is so good” and he will claim “We are not wanting to fight. We are tired of fighting” (BNN 106, 37). Only a couple pages later he describes an encounter with a woman at a whore house who would not let him, a boy so young, into the prostitute compound: “Stupid woman, I am starting to abuse her” (109). This chain of events leaves a discrepancy in development, contributed to the experiences of wartime, though there is a progress towards a beast-like manhood. His abrupt change in character challenges the Bildungsroman character development; War has prevented a logical progression in his development from boyhood to manhood.

The “un-child-like child” is further emphasized by the inability of the reader to foresee Agu's actions, which range from boyish naiveté to victim of rape to practitioner of domestic violence. Coundouriotis suggests that:

“...although the victim’s act of narration is presumed to be empowering, the insistent rehearsal of Agu’s powerlessness, his complete loss of control over his body, underscores his childishness and subordination. When Agu kills, therefore, he is unambiguously a victim in the reader’s eyes, a channel through which his commander’s violence passes. In a sense, Iweala argues that there are no victims’ victims; the subjects killed by Agu are the victims of his commander.” (10)

In her analysis of Agu as a mediating object without agency he becomes an object for someone else's use; the youth of Africa are unable to act for themselves. In telling his story as a dislocated and undermined character, he assumes a position analogous to how the Commandant uses him. Brainwashed and drugged, Agu is used as an object, stripped of agency and self-determination, by the Commandant who tells him what to think and do; he is literally objectified through

multiple instances of rape by the Commandant. When Agu stands guard over the Commandant as he sleeps, Rambo (the lieutenant of the rebel army) approaches with the intention of killing the commander. However, Agu has lost his agency and at first keeps his guard, protecting the Commandant against the pending danger, even though he longs for a life in which he does not fight. He has been objectified in a world where he has no control and he has become a product of war, left dependent on an army family and at times disillusioned.

Though the *New York Times* review states that Iweala has the “ability to maintain not only our sympathy but our affection for his central character,” the review does not recognize the feeling of stasis in the sense of pity with which many Westerners would react to un-child-like child’s story, just as Amy did (“A Boy Soldier’s Heart of Darkness”). The present tense of the novel leaves Agu and the aid worker hung in a stagnated location and action; the reader maintains “sympathy” for Agu just like Amy who cries throughout the scene as she listens intently to Agu’s story and the detrimental experiences he has suffered at such a young age. His story, as told by Iweala, does not complicate the issue of child soldiers. This novel illustrates a general human rights issue and the overall need to end the utilization of children in war efforts. However, the novel does not delve into the root of the problem. He does not talk about the reasons for which children are recruited and the motives for rebel armies to fight against the government. Iweala presents the problem of children as soldiers and then draws on the implications of the problem: a boy that is mentally distraught, forever changed, but saved from death by the selfless aid worker. Without describing the context for the problem of child soldiers, the reasons for their existence, how they came to be, and their place in certain instances of warfare, the problem remains unclear and ambiguous in the ways it can be solved. Many African war novels have taken on the technique of writing through the eyes of African children, perhaps

because it is more effective in dramatizing the war⁷. However, this technique gives a child-like outlook on the development of African states and children become the interpreters of African hardship and poverty for American readers. A young voice of the confused and abused is easy to pity, but pity does not necessarily bring effective enlightenment of a problem to readers.

The last chapter of the novel is concentrated on Agu under the care of Amy and his assumed safety, but no acknowledgment of the status of the war. There is no clear conclusion to the war, leaving it hung in timeless space with no concrete beginning, middle, or end; there is no clear hope for such “African” conflicts. The second to last chapter, following the troop’s freedom after the Commandant’s death, reveals a wandering Agu, an African boy with no direction, no home, no destination. He says that he is “...following Rambo. So are all the other, just following even if Rambo is not having map like Commandant” (BNN 124). He simply follows a superior in what was his rebel regiment, and as he does so “Person is running away from us like we are sickness, like we are the most evil thing to be on this earth” (130). It seems as though no help can come from the civilians of the war torn area who are unable to trust even children because of the role they have played in the war. Agu, writes about the hope he has lost for his part of the world: “...I am wanting to ask [the sun] why it is even thinking to shine on this world. If I am sun, I will be finding another place to be shining where people are not using my light to be doing terrible terrible thing” (BNN 133). However, the final chapter takes place in a rehabilitation clinic, which Agu metaphorically refers to as “heaven” (137). When it seems like all hope has been lost and the youth will continue to march on aimlessly suffering, a Western figure enters to take on a “savior” role. The reader observes an American organization that enters to save the African

⁷ In regards to the emerging genre of human rights literature, Coundouriotis points to James Dawes' suggestion of a versatile “global human rights culture.” This culture has led to human right literature to create “a self-contained set of texts sharing key formal properties, an emerging global subgenre that can help structure high-school and college teaching and research, and that can illuminate urgent questions about the relationships among representation, beauty, ethics, and politics” (Dawes 190).

future because without their intercession, the young generation of Africans is still directionless and parentless. It is the American institution that helps rehabilitate Agu and attempt to help him recognize his right to personality development. A foreigner facilitates his re-entrance into society, the ultimate goal for the traditionally Western Bildungsroman.

In Agu's appeal to Amy, the American aid worker, that he is not a "bad boy," Iweala references Agu's questioned innocence and reinforces the dehumanization of war, something that he does throughout the novel. The title of the novel, *Beasts of No Nation*, borrowed from Wole Soyinka's *Season of Anomy*, where the phrase was used "to condemn the condition in which a war ravaged population ends up in and to point out in Arendtian terms, that without nation, without a sense of belonging, man loses his humanity" (Coundouriotis 7-8). Appropriately titled, this novel describes how even the most new and naïve inhabitants of the world can be dehumanized by war. There is a danger of a never-ending cycle that even the youth, the hope and future of the country, will continue in the traditions of those who run the wars. The youth, too, have become involved and have shown how they can also be at the focus of its dehumanizing force.

Iweala, in an effort to present a human rights violation has presented a narrative of individualized suffering and the commodification of Agu, an agency-less object of warfare within the novel. Coundouriotis brings to the light the effects of a sentimentalized, commodified, and uncontextualized protagonist; she explains, that the absence of "complexity of the historical, political, cultural, as well as individual circumstances" of the child soldier push for an image of the child as an "abstracted figure," who as a result becomes the "authenticity out of Africa" (23). This child soldier narrative becomes a commodity as a marketed novel in bookstores. The story of Agu becomes a commodity that is exchanged for money; Agu becomes understood as an

object within the American economy and further an item on the U.S. agenda that receives aid and sympathy.

Ishmael Beah and the Stakes of a Memoir

Ishmael Beah's memoir, *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*, follows his life as he wanders homeless for several months, fleeing the civil war in Sierra Leone until becoming a soldier in the government army at the age of thirteen with no other choice but death. Three years later, he was removed from the fighting by UNICEF and was put into a rehabilitation center for ex-child soldiers. From here, UNICEF workers were able to find his uncle living in Freetown, and Beah moved in with his family. He was sponsored to go to a conference at the United Nations in New York City, where he spoke about his experiences fighting in Sierra Leone. After the conference, he returned to Sierra Leone and quickly made plans to flee the country and seek a new home with an American woman whom he met during his time at the UN conference. His story was published by the American publisher Farrar, Straus and Giroux in 2007 when he was 26-years-old. Before the first page of the narrative, there is a map of Sierra Leone tracing the route he traveled while fleeing the war and then while fighting. In the back of the book is a timeline that describes a brief history of Sierra Leone from 1462 up until 2006, predominantly focusing on independence and violence post-independence during the later 1900s and early 2000s. These appendices allows readers to be more knowledgeable about the subject matter and better able to contextualize the plot, but they also emphasize the readers' foreignness.

Beah chose to write his memoir from his perspective as a child so that the limited scope with which he viewed the world as a child parallels the confusion and displacement of the Western reader. While attending a United Nations conference designated for children involved with war around the world to share their experiences, Beah decided to be in the workshop conducted by Laura Simms, the story teller: "She said she would teach us how to tell our stories in a more compelling way" (ALWG 196). Telling his own story, Beah begins the first chapter of

his memoir speaking about the civil war that has been ongoing but not yet affected his life. All he knows is what he “read about in books or seen in movies such as *Rambo: First Blood*, and the one in neighboring Liberia that I had heard about on the BBC news” (5-6). However, the circumstances of, motives for, and exact location of the violence remain unclear. The seemingly unwarranted attack by the rebels on civilians, men, women, and children comes out of nowhere, according to young Beah: “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” (5). The disoriented speaker pushes the reader also to feel disoriented and helpless in a time of confusion and ever-pending violent attacks.

Soon after the short introduction about the civil war, Ishmael writes that he, his brother, and a friend decided that they would go to Mattru Jong, a town only sixteen miles away from home and the location of the talent show that they had hopes of entering. After sleeping at their friend Khalilou's house in Mattru Jong, it was not long before their friends returned from school, which had been “canceled until further notice” (ALWG 9). The rebels, Beah was told, “had attacked Mogbwemo,” his home (9). The rebels had attacked mining areas and townspeople had dispersed in every direction, families losing each other while fleeing gunfire. One of Beah's friends, Gibrilla, said that his teachers predicted that “This town will be next” (9). But this is where the knowledge concerning the location of rebel attacks stops. By page twelve, the reader and Beah are flung into a world of abandoned villages and innocent deaths: “In the back of the van were three more dead bodies, two girls and a boy, and their blood was all over the seats and the ceiling of the van...Later we learned that the man had tried to escape with his family and the rebels had shot at his vehicle, killing all his family” (ALWG 12-3). As a citizen living within

Sierra Leone during the time of war, Beah would not have been fully aware of the plans of the rebel army. And as a young boy, it is unlikely that he would have been aware of the political and social tensions within the country which would have caused the rebellion. However, Beah, by choosing to write from the perspective of himself as a child who is bewildered by his lack of knowledge about the government and potentiality for coups, immerses his audience in confusion as well.

During an interview on “The Daily Show,” Jon Stewart, echoing the thoughts of many American readers, comments that after reading Beah's memoir, “I still don't know what the fight was about, I don't know what the rebels were trying to do with the government and I'm not sure what the government was trying to do with the rebels” (Beah Interview). Beah responded that he wrote from the point of view of a boy:

“From the perspective of a...boy I was not versed in politics ... I was not interested in anything but my life got touched by decisions that were made from a top level that affected me. But the war started because of corrupt government. The APC that was in power for several years, abused power a lot, caused a lot of poverty and things like that. So the focus of the war started for good reasons...it was usually started around good reasons and then they end up going a completely opposite direction.” (Beah Interview)

He is able to explain more about the grounds for revolt against the government here and acknowledges the originally good intentions that were not spoken about in his memoir. Though this technique of writing from Beah's point of view at the time of experience and as an older child or adult reflecting on the past is effective in placing the reader in the mind of the narrator, it also leaves the reader with a feeling of lingering chaos and displacement. The reader has no idea

why such a country would spontaneously rupture into the bloody violence, since Beah remembers from his childhood being unaware of the reality of the civil war. War never seemed a relevant concept to him; there were only stories about it as if it were in a faraway land.

Because Beah writes from his own memory and experience, he switches between applying what he knows and recognizes as an adult to his past before being affected by the war as well as writing in the action of the moment. The narrating “I” is Beah the present Beah as he writes the memoir, placing himself in the mindset of his younger self as he goes through the child soldier experiences of his past. Sometimes this narrating “I” reflects on his past before he became involved with the war. He remembers his father describing the political events post-independence and the All People's Congress party which declared itself the only legal party. This, his grandfather said, was the “beginning of 'rotten politics’” (ALWG 14). And though the adults called the war against the government (the war in which Beah fights) a “revolutionary war,” Beah (from the perspective of himself as a child before soldierhood) does not find the slaughter of innocent civilians a “liberation movement” (14). There is no rationality for killing children and “that little girl,” and for this reason, Beah becomes “afraid of the road, the mountains in the distance, and the bushes on either side” (14). Everything that had been so familiar to him before war has become frightening and he cannot make sense of the killings. The reason for the barbaric form the war has taken on remains unexplained. Similar to the unnamed west African country described in Iweala's novel, there is no telling when a town or country can turn into the setting for years of bloodshed. In addition to this, the victims in both books are depicted as innocent people. The government, and the rebels in Beah's experience, attacked civilians without any stated cause, putting civilians everywhere in imminent danger.

Beah dotes on memories of his grandmother telling him he “should strive to be like the

moon” and then ties this memory of himself before the war watching the moon to himself as an adult, near the time of writing the memoir: “Whenever I get a chance to observe the moon now, I still see those same images I saw when I was six, and it pleases me to know that that part of my childhood is still embedded in me” (ALWG 17). He confirms some sort of reclaiming of the past in order to support his reincorporation into society and reclaiming personal rights; he supports Joseph Slaughter's suggestion that the human rights Bildungsroman demonstrates “the circularity of human personality development” (269). While he has integrated his post-child soldier self into his pre-child soldier self so that he is not estranged from his origins. He has personally reconciled his experiences through the therapy he received in the UNICEF camp, forgiving himself for a prematurely adult-like period of life where he took barbaric, violent actions. As illustrated in Beah's experience in the UNICEF camp and the aid workers' goals for the children, the Bildungsroman has been absorbed into human rights laws and organizations so that the “responsibility for development” makes “development itself an obligation of...the individual” (Slaughter 212-3).

Using a memoir to reincorporate himself, Beah must demonstrate repentance or “unbecome” a child soldier because he has his life story and reputation at stake. Iweala, the fiction writer, on the other hand, will be himself no matter what happens to his protagonist, Agu. Beah, the elder narrator, or in this case the narrating “I,” serves as the “guarantor of the younger protagonist's incorporation, and this narratorial agency bends teleological linear development into a reflexive structure of narrative self-sponsorship that formally repairs the diegetic split between narrator and protagonist” (Slaughter 214). Meaning, Beah, as he is able to write the memoir, makes it clear from the beginning that he will survive his story and that he will be reincorporated into a society, specifically by being published in America. The publication of his

memoir fulfills the traditional Bildungsroman's "idealistic vision of social reconciliation" (269). However, his social reconciliation is not demonstrated within the text. The page before chapter one begins, Beah replicates a dialogue he had in high school with some friends, in which they inquired about his life during war in Sierra Leone. The reader knows from the beginning that Beah lives through the violence of war, but his social reconciliation remains unfulfilled. In child soldier narratives, the individual's social integration is never fully completed as in a Bildungsroman, but rather it is "sustained" (leading to the inconclusive ending) and reinforces "a hierarchical disparity between 'developed' and 'underdeveloped'" narrating "I" (213).

Though the classic Bildungsroman usually "affirm[s] the modern emancipatory lesson that the 'Bildungsheld'⁸...is free to sponsor himself," Slaughter complicates this notion (214). He suggests that there is a "diegetic split that inaugurates the retrospective, autobiographical form of narrative," which reflects "the still-uncertain sovereignty of the human personality" (Slaughter 214-5). Beah was more coerced to join the government army because of the alternative of death than by a self-determined decision. Through a self-sponsored narrative, the narrator-protagonist within the split narrative is able to attain self-determination, in reincorporating the Beah-post-child-soldier with the Beah-as-child-soldier. Ishmael Beah, as the narrating "I," the former child soldier, uses the "first-person retrospective Bildungsromane...[to] plot the acquisition of self-narrative agency in stories that circle back to where they began after bringing the past into conjunction with the present and an earlier protagonist self into correspondence with the later narrator self" (214). Beah, as the former child soldier, claims his agency in writing a self-sponsored memoir. He demonstrates "the promised reconciliation of the citizen" of the Bildungsroman by reflecting upon an pre-war self that has carried through to his post-child soldier self, reflecting on a development that has be sometimes agency-less from pre-war to post-

⁸ The protagonist of the Bildungsroman.

war Beah (227).

Beah employs a strategy of writing that allows the reader to piece together parts of the story and turn of events as the narrated “I” Beah put them together during his journey as a child soldier and afterwards. Beah, through his memoir, pushes for the recognition of these orphaned children who have become known as predators during war, exploited by armies and therefore feared by civilians. When the child soldiers are put into the UNICEF rehabilitation camp, they consistently act out violently and bestially; aid workers constantly remind them “It’s not your fault” when they injure rehabilitation staff and guards, vandalize the clinic, and destroy items given to them (ALWG 140). What is made clear in these sections is the act of bringing the child soldier back into the life of a child, one that is spoken to gently and learns lessons from actions for which they are reprimanded. Furthermore, Eleni Coundouriotis observes that

“...narratives such as Beah’s, which are marketed as authentic, are mediated through the process of therapy provided by international organizations ... while a victim identity seems important to reclaiming childhood and some measure of innocence for the child narrator, victimhood also becomes by extension the condition of possibility for telling a story of perpetration which would otherwise be silenced.” (4-5)

The “plot” of Beah's life post-soldierhood is imposed from the outside; the UN aid workers come in to mediate the rehabilitation of boys like Beah, and with their intervention, he was able to recognize himself as victim instead of aggressor. As a result, he was able to tell his story that would have “otherwise [been] silenced” by his savage, murderer side or death (5). The consumer is intrigued by the story of a victim/murderer who would otherwise be hushed. Ishmael Beah's book, therefore, has attracted attention for being the voice of the oppressed, an identity and

experience that is important for his message and the book's marketability. His many appearances on media outlets, including NPR's "Fresh Air" and Comedy Central's "The Daily Show with Jon Stewart," allow him to become a speaker for the oppressed, to whom the American public is keen to listen and absorb the reality he has witnessed. However, he is able to speak because he was rehabilitated by the UN and so he speaks in terms that have come from elsewhere. Coundouriotis cites a study by Alcinda Honwana (2006) that points to the limited number of child soldiers that undergo "narration...[as] part of therapy," as most perform "rituals of purification" when they return to their communities (4). The rituals are essential to their reintegration into society. Readers imagine Beah's reintegration through the form of literature as authentic when in reality it was facilitated by non-African organizations. The source for reintegration, an American-published memoir, the Western format of the Bildungsroman, is not transparently "African."

As I have mentioned before, both Agu and Beah have an American at the end of their narratives who saves them from the terrors of war and aids in their reintegration into society, the goal of the Bildungsroman. This evidence again supports Laura Suski's notion that the focus on Africa's distressed children encourages the thought that Africa's children must be provided for by Western or international institutions, who are assumed better caretakers than the children's own parents, a partially neo-imperialistic view (Suski 205). Agu confronts a white American about his mental problems as a result of being a soldier, while Beah escapes Sierra Leone to reach his adoptive, American mother in New York. Both end with new guardians who are American. Beah further complicates Suski's theory because he spent time in a UNICEF camp, an international institution, which was under the charge of Sierra Leonean, not European, aid workers. In Beah's experience, Africa can take care of her own children to an extent in the form of aid workers, but under the guidance of a Western initiative. And then, even when he moves to Freetown to live

with his uncle, he continues to endure the horrors of unpredictable and sporadic violence, and therefore looks to America as a country for escape and survival.

I have discussed the content of Beah's memoir in a more theoretical light, but now I will focus on his work in relation to its position as a part of the Starbucks book program. On February 15, 2007, Beah's memoir was not only published but also reached an ultimate form of accessibility for many casual, American readers: Starbucks decided that his work would take a place in their book program in which the book sits nestled next to the cash register in U.S. company-operated locations (“Riveting True Story of Hope and Redemption”). The president of Starbucks Entertainment, Ken Lombard, in a press release about the selection of Beah's book, said that his approach in their book program is to stimulate “community and conversation” and build “on the trust [their] customers already feel” about the coffee-chain's recommendations (“Riveting...”). The story, the press release says, “demonstrates the power of the human spirit to overcome unimaginable odds” (“Riveting...”). The book program also set the author up on a “10-city Starbucks book tour” starting the same month, where he would “speak with customers about his writing and his life” and further the discussion on a “Book Breaks” tour across the U.S. starting March 7, 2007. These discussion group based “Book Breaks” were planned in order to create a space for customers to “focus on the compelling themes presented in Beah’s memoir” (“Riveting...”). However, the only themes that the Starbucks press release promotes are “inspiration,” “community,” and “the power of the human spirit” (“Riveting...”).

Comparably, Eva Illouz suggests in her essay on self-help protocols of the Oprah Winfrey Show that on the show, “imaginative compassion and empathy with the plight of others are the main vectors to 'encounter' distant others” (223). In speaking about Illouz's argument and her own work for Oprah's Book Club, Rita Barnard explains that the pity with which readers use to

“encounter” others “does not promote any adequate awareness of ‘the world as whole,’” (17). Oprah's Book Club set out to “blur the distinction between fiction and lived experience” and blur the distinction among Oprah, her guests, and the book club pick (Barnard 15). In the same way, Starbucks' effort to have people approach Beah's memoir as an inspiring story encourages a reading that calls for reader identification with Beah. Furthermore, Barnard suggests that as a result “nations will come to signify in a new way, as mediascapes, occasions for certain kinds of stories, and ... certain kinds of touristic experiences” (15). The Starbucks lens for the child soldier narrative, applying Barnard's theory, may encourage the reader to pity the protagonist as well as be touched and inspired by a story very different from their own. This also emphasizes, again, Coundouriotis' argument that Beah, as the narrator of the human rights framed child soldier narrative, is “sentimentalized” and “co-opted by ideas of the self that serve its accommodation with a largely first world, distant reader” (23). Barnard's theory could further be used to suggest that *A Long Way Gone* is a commodity that has come out of the occasion of the war in Sierra Leone. Beah's story allows for a touristic experience of the both sickening and intriguing life of the child soldier.

The subject matter of his whole book is discussed on the surface during these Starbucks “Book Breaks,” but the real problem of child soldiers, the history of the problem, the underlying reason for their recruitment, and the deeper problems that have resulted in the recruitment of children for armies are left unexamined. His identity as a Sierra Leonean, ex-child soldier allows Beah to be a spokesman for Sierra Leone, and so Americans look to such a memoir for the truth of violence abroad as well as the personal experience behind it. One day, while he is living with his uncle after his time in rehabilitation, he learns he has been chosen to go to the United Nations in New York as a representative at a conference where he would “talk about the lives of children

in Sierra Leone and what can be done about it” (ALWG 185). When he arrives at the conference in New York, there are “fifty-seven children from twenty-three countries” and they “learned about each other's lives for hours. Some of the children had risked their life to attend the conference. Others had walked hundreds of miles to neighboring countries to be able to get on a plane” (195-6). Just as he was a young teenager who went to this conference to speak to the violence in Sierra Leone, his memoir has made him a spokesperson to the greater American public about the truth of Sierra Leone's war.

In efforts to find a connection with Beah's narrated “I,” as encouraged by the Starbucks protocol, the reader may find the distance between the narrated “I” and themselves too large spatially and experientially for a bond to form. In this case, the reader may find Beah's experience inspiring, but also a book that reinforces the reader's appreciation for their comfortable middle-class homes in America. One reader posted on Starbucks' online book forum, “I think [Beah's memoir] would give our jaded and spoiled society a good jolt of reality and hopefully wake them up to all the suffering, death, and tragedy happening beyond the glossy fiction of our escapist movies and literature” (Mario A., “A Long Way Gone, Chapter One” online forum). Reader Alexis C. also emphasizes her new-found solace in her own life based on reading the accounts of Beah's life: “It is a sad thing, what war is doing to this world, perhaps your surviving story will give a better idea of war, to the rest of us in our safe homes” (“A Long Way Gone, Chapter One” online forum).

Audiences may be proud of what Beah has accomplished but know his experiences are remote; they themselves would not be confronted with his experiences within their own comfortable lives. Beah's experience, as advertised through Starbucks, is a product that can also be purchased as a side to your double-shot, skinny latte. The commodification of his experience

further distances an audience. The coffee company donated \$2 for every copy sold to the U.S. fund for UNICEF, a foundation that “played a key role in the rehabilitation of Beah, lifting him from the front lines and reintegrating him into civilian life in Sierra Leone as a teenager” (“Riveting...”). This type of marketing is somewhat of a ploy. The purchaser feels they are aiding a cause; their donation gets them close enough to the cause that it makes them feel that they helped, but removes them far enough from the disaster so they do not have to move out of their comfort level of the Starbucks store. The donation is easy and convenient and gives a sense of self-deceiving satisfaction. Though this money may be an action a Western world citizen can take from the convenience of their first world lifestyle, the action also emphasizes the difference between a life which allows one to buy a four-dollar cup of coffee and the lives that need sponsoring by UNICEF. The comparatively luxurious lifestyle of the one who can afford the coffee and book is reinforced; the schism between the have and the have-nots is strengthened.

To conclude my study of Beah's memoir, I will bring his story into the context of the the reality of the present. The Sierra Leonian civil war is not a present issue that can be placed on the American agenda to be addressed or fixed; the war has been over officially since 2002, which some readers may not have known unless they read the timeline of Sierra Leone in the back of the book. The issue of child soldiers in Sierra Leone's civil war is not pertinent and tangible, something that could be brought before Congress. The book focuses on the plight of children in times of war and seeks to inform the Western world about the individual stories, putting a face and a name to the bloated-bellied child with a gun, that are generally not covered in first person accounts by the press. The multitude of boys in the rehabilitation center, both from the government's and the rebel's army, makes the practice of using children for military purposes seem frequent. Though this memoir could be defined as human rights literature, the issue of child

soldiers is an elusive problem; one cannot simply stop people from forcing children to fight during war. To examine the issue of using children as soldiers in a civil war, one must also look at the war itself; rebels take up arms against a government because they are poor, jobless, and want hope for a better way of life. Or they can be driven by religious fanaticism like the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda. In times of desperation, armies will recruit anyone who is easy to brainwash into fighting for them. Unfortunately, this makes children an easy target. Poverty and unemployment, which can lead to the need for an army's abduction of children to fight, are not at the basis of the memoir. Instead, it is a story of a traumatizing past in Sierra Leone and an image or mirage of opportunity in America.

The self-sponsored narrative allows the protagonist-narrator to integrate himself into society when he has not attained sovereignty within the plot, therefore reclaiming an agency that was lost as a child soldier. Eleni Coundouriotis suggests that the “tendency of child soldier narratives to individualize suffering tends to obscure the political context” (10). Beah and Agu, as child narrators, lack the knowledge of the entire political context of their country and so their individual suffering forefronts their narrative. Human rights literature complicates the image of Beah who writes about himself as the predator/victim child soldier from a safe and happy home in the United States, faraway from the histories of war in Sierra Leone. The provoked emotional response from the readers of human rights literature who sympathize with the “infantalized” child soldier narrator and hope that the soldier reclaims his childhood do not address “political

liberation or empowerment where the demand for adult, active citizenship with rights is more pressing"; this empowerment would lead them to more beneficial claiming of citizenship that is part of the Bildungsroman formula (Coundouriotis 9).

Chapter 2

Short Stories, Oprah's Africa, and Human Suffering

This chapter will focus on two books that have comparable formats: compilations of short stories. My case study will look at the works of Uwem Akpan and Chimamanda Adichie. While the former focuses on stories of suffering within Africa, the latter illustrates the experiences of Nigerians in Nigeria and those who have emigrated to the United States. Akpan's book is an especially intriguing subject because it was chosen in 2009 for Oprah's Book Club. As a result, many American readers of this book will read it with a certain Oprah-gear protocol. I discuss the implications of such a reading, primarily in its ability, as the first Oprah's Book Club pick from a black Africa author, to affect readers' image of Africa. Adichie steps away from the theme of tragedy that Akpan's stories are invested in in order to explore the complexity of human relationships and problems of the Nigerian middle class, a class more comparable and identifiable for foreign readers.

Oprah's "Africa": Uwem Akpan and Oprah's Book Club

Say You're One of Them, by Uwem Akpan, comprises three short stories and two novellas: the stories of five children and their experiences in western and eastern Africa, narratives of children struck by severe misfortune. The first story is narrated by a Kenyan boy who witnesses his young sister live a life of prostitution; in the second story, a Beninese boy escapes from the grasps of human trafficking, leaving his sister behind; in the third story, a Christian Ethiopian girl, age six, is prevented from seeing her Muslim friend when the town is consumed by riots; in the fourth story, a Nigerian boy, is killed by Christians for being a Muslim in disguise; in the fifth story, a Rwandan girl, witnesses her father being goaded into killing her mother because of ethnic differences.

In September 2009, Oprah Winfrey chose *Say You're One of Them* for her book club. This choice is very different from her usual choice of novels that "propagate unexamined platitudes about the American way of life, patriotism, democracy, the free world, and...literacy" (Hall 114). Her choices usually guarantee book sales of over one million and top slots on best-seller lists; one million readers interact with Oprah's visions of what and how America should read (Wyatt). By choosing *Say You're One of Them*, her first pick by a black African author, Winfrey suggests that Americans read this rendition of what is going on in Africa. As Oprah's goal is to "get America reading again," she implies that most of her audience is not made up of avid academic readers (Farr 75). Graham Huggan, in his essay on reader interpretation of African literature, would suggest that taking up such a book of short stories from another continent puts the author at risk for being seen as a "cultural spokesperson or interpreter" (34). Due to limited exposure to novels by African authors or other kinds of representation of Africa, some readers may read *Say You're One of Them* for the "anthropological exotic," which implies "a mode of both perception

and consumption; it invokes the familiar aura of other, incommensurably 'foreign' cultures while appearing to provide a modicum of information that gives the uninitiated reader access to the text and, by extension, the 'foreign culture' itself" (Huggan 37). It is this kind of exoticness that appeals to readers, but it is possible that readers do not recognize their limited understanding of "African" problems after reading this book. The stories delve into the lives of children in several countries with a broad range of problems. If readers take the piece of literature as a window into reality, they may feel as if their knowledge of Africa and the reality of the situation "over there" has expanded. By exploring the personal stories of the children from all over the continent affected by religious warfare, prostitution, etc., the collection implies that the entire continent is infested by misery, that children throughout the continent are all suffering. As Akpan identifies himself as one African who can describe the cultures and problems of several African countries in one book, it is possible that readers will also see this book as a way to homogenize the continent or unite the continent under the theme of suffering⁹. This generalized outlook, maintaining an image of inevitable and continual helplessness, invites Western pity.

Another protocol of reading is set out by Oprah for her book club picks. Kathleen Rooney writes that in many of Oprah's television episodes, Winfrey has "instructed her audience to experience the books in terms of how they personally related to the main characters, focusing less on the novels themselves and more on how their own life stories could be understood and improved in the process" (24). Through instructing her audience in such a way, "neither Winfrey nor her readers seemed permitted to remark critically on the selections, or to advance beyond any but the most immature, advertisement-like, unconditionally loving responses to every single novel they encountered," Rooney writes (25). Even with the acknowledgement that "critical"

⁹ In an interview with Cressida Leyshon of *The New Yorker*, Akpan stated, "I feel that the situation of Africa is very urgent and we need more people to help us see the complexity of our lives" (Akpan "Reading Group Guide" 4). He, himself, generalizes Africans and the complexity of all countries.

reading does not require an “academic” reading practice, as suggested by Michael Warner, Oprah's reader is encouraged to respond emotionally to the character's actions and relationships as if they are psychological reality and experiences the reader can build upon, or vicariously experience the plot, to better oneself. Warner suggests that assuming “that critical reading is just a name for any self-conscious practice of reading...creates several kinds of fallout at once...it blocks from view the existence of other cultures of textualism” (16). In other words, academic reading is not the only way to be critical. The therapeutic framework of identification with literature leads to an emotional response that can, itself, be critical. A reader is supported in acting within their own reality with the help of a book's guidance and lessons; therefore, readers are encouraged to make this connection between the book and a reader's reality. When Oprah asks, “How did this book make you feel?” she proposes that the readers look into the text as a “self-help narrative”: the book becomes a tool for reflection for the reader's own life.

Because of the framework in which Oprah readers have been asked to read in the past, they are more than likely to apply the same framework to *Say You're One of Them*. The Book Club's website supports the Book Club's therapeutic objective, as it facilitates readers' identification with the novel and sharing of their own stories, while at the same time this interaction with the thoughts of oneself and others offers readers a chance to come to terms with problems in their own lives and relationships; readers look for characters and character issues that are similar to their own (Illouz 163). If readers bring this approach to Akpan's short stories, they argue that the reader can be made uncomfortable by the gruesome content of the stories and is unable to find a therapeutic process of reconciliation to apply to his/her own life. Alternatively, readers can use these stories to transplant themselves into the reality of “the victim” in order to feel the character's pain. A reader's identification with and exotification of the book collide when

readers are incapable of finding the reconciling relationships to apply to their own life and therefore look to project the book away from themselves; readers respond with a feeling of strong difference from the culture or lifestyle represented. Through the text's sensationalism, the book alienates the reader that refuses to recognize a story ending that is so different from experiences of their own, relentlessly tragic, and they cannot understand why a situation must be so horrible. Because of the lack of connection with the text and the extremity of its descriptions, Africa is ethnographically exoticized by the reader as the place very unlike the home of the reader. Readers could possibly become emotionally invested in the novel, but because it is so different from their own life, there is a push to exotify it. Readers will more likely feel sympathy toward and appalled by these characters whose problems are so removed from his/her own. Also, Rita Barnard notes that some readers assume that "...fiction and reality are seamlessly connected: an approach that is encouraged by Oprah Winfrey's own practice of discovering biographical resonances amongst readers, authors, and characters" (8).

Both the self-help and ethnographic readings assume a relationship between reality and literature: the first reads the literature for identification with the reader's own reality while the second reads the literature for difference between the reader's own reality and the lives of the characters. However, both assume the text gives access to "reality." Responses amongst Book Club readers illustrate a tendency to assume that literature's representation of Africa is the reality, enabling them to make judgments and generalizations about the continent. I will examine the response of readers who use Akpan's book to make generalizations about Africa, noting that these responses by no means account for the reactions of all readers. Some readers react emotionally to the characters without applying these feelings to Africa and others react analytically to the form and techniques of Akpan's text.

Oprah fosters a sentimental reading practice that can have an important political response, since an emotional connection can cause a change in interest or ideology. This connection and heightened interest can push a reader to act in response to the problems that they have read about in hopes of creating change. As one of Oprah's Book Club members writes, “(1) Is there any good in Africa???...It seems hopeless! Not just the book - the news stories and so much of what we hear is negative. We need some hope!...(2) So.... NOW WHAT??? You've enlightened us - now help us to turn that energy and emotion to good. ... What can we do when the problems are so big???” (trout90214, “Are you reading 'Say You're One of Them' by Uwem Akpan?” online forum). This reader has been moved and internally stirred to the extent that he would like to know what he should do to help confront the problems he has just read about. However, sometimes an emotional, critical reading causes readers to have strong feelings, which are quickly satiated with the first-world comforts in their own surroundings. “trout90214” is an example of a reader who has become an invested and involved reader, not one that is cathartic with a temporary sense of compassion and sympathy. However, Akpan does not offer him solutions for how problems he addresses can be approached. The reader, like “trout90214,” may benefit from stories that also look into the background and sources of problems that have struck Akpan's protagonists and forced them into the lives that they describe. Though literature can assume the role of projecting the voice and desperations of the oppressed, in the case of African literature readers know little outside this voice; there are few publicized versions of Africa's reality that are more explanatory of the complexity of Africa's conditions or different from the dominant ideology of suffering and could be used to supplement Akpan's fictional stories¹⁰.

Kimberly Chabot Davis makes a strong point about Oprah's African-American author

¹⁰ Important questions like why are people poor and what causes ethnic violence are not considered even though they are at the basis and drama of several stories.

picks that is appropriate to recognize for *Say You're One of Them* as well: “Oprah's Book Club selections do not provide solutions to social problems concerning race and gender, but they do offer intense emotional engagement that is an essential ingredient of political engagement...and can also disrupt ideologies of racial hierarchy” (157). When a reader engages with the text in such a way their ideology is disrupted, books have the ability to influence the general outlook of its reader. Akpan has taken some worldly problems that have made their way into activists' agenda but has focused the impact of these issues on children, symbols of the future. In accordance with Davis' theory, Akpan's stories do not offer “solutions” to social problems. Children as symbols of the future is key to Akpan's message, but the hope that is usually associated with children is skewed: some children die, others are left wandering parentless and homeless, others lose family to prostitution.

I have discussed the protocol for reading in Oprah's Book Club, now I will turn to analyzing the stories of Uwem Akpan, integrating Oprah's protocol. “Fattening for Gabon” is about a brother and sister who are sent to live with their uncle because their own parents are dying from AIDS. However, it soon becomes clear that the uncle has made plans to make money by selling his niece and nephew into slavery, specifically to two people posing as aid workers. The story begins, “Selling your child or nephew could be more difficult than selling other kids. You had to keep a calm head or be as ruthless as the Badagry-Seme immigration people. If not, it could bring trouble to the family” (SYOT 39). The text here normalizes child-trafficking in its allusions to knowing the ins and outs of what it means to traffic humans. The startling use of second person at first implicates the Western reader, but then alienates the reader in presenting a normalcy that would be appalling in most cultures. The desperation and almost normalcy of characters participating in such an activity for the sake of money is demonstrated because of

their lack of emotion: "...I just dey do my job" (145). The idea of selling one's child is inconceivable for many Western readers and so the contradictory normalcy in the story presents Africa as "the antithesis of...civilization" (Achebe 3). Though the reader is made aware at the beginning the fate of the child protagonist, the child only very gradually comes to understand what is happening to him. He has a false hope that he will be saved by an NGO and live a life of travel. The hope of a Western savior is reminiscent of the endings of the child soldier narratives discussed in chapter one. In this story, the desire of Kotchikpa, the protagonist, and his sister for a life outside of their home as the son or daughter of foreign aid workers supports Laura Suski's argument about a neo-imperialist sentiments of the Western world that international aid organizations and individuals can take better care of the children of the "Global South" than their own parents (205). "[“Mama”] was my first contact with an NGO. Her presence confirmed for me what [Uncle] Fofu had said: they were a group of smiling, caring people going around the world helping children like us," narrates Kotchikpa (SYOT 77). The children quickly adapt to the relationship with "Mama" and "Papa," the "aid workers," because of the food that they bring and the promises of travel and luxury: "I want Mama" says Yewa, Kotchikpa's sister, only days after meeting the "aid worker" (124). The false pretenses that cover the purchase of children exposes a corrupted desire of children who are taught that foreigners can provide a better life for them.

Oprah looks for ways in which characters come to "self-understanding and the liberation of one's own guilt" and find identifiable therapeutic resonance in their own lives (Illouz 166). Reader discomfort seem to be a pattern of response with this collection of stories; readers found it difficult to enter the brutal world of child-trafficking. One reader wrote, "...I started the second story, and I felt so uncomfortable, I didn't know if I really wanted to know the story. Let alone

read it, but I had to” (swastew, “Fattening for Gabon- Say You're One of Them- 2nd Story” online forum). Another reader had similar thoughts: “Akpan is writing about families who have crossed that horrific line, the unimaginable, the unthinkable... This book requires us to reach beyond more than just a comfort zone” (read'n4fun, “Fattening for Gabon - Say You're One of Them - 2nd Story” online forum). This uneasiness signifies an emotionally intrigued reader. However, this intrigue may only manifest itself in fleeting, personal feelings even though this story calls on the greater issue of violated human rights according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Fofu Kpee, Kotchikpa's uncle, prepares his niece and nephew for the instances they may find themselves in the realm of human trafficking. He strips naked and says that when they go to Gabon with their new “Mama” and “Papa,” “You go see white people, colored people, tourists who support de work of your godparents. Do whatever dem want- go beach wid dem, go hotel wid dem” (SYOT 117). Though he does not want to sell his nephew and niece, the extent Uncle Fofu goes to prepare them for the pending life in trafficking demonstrates some level of acceptance and normalcy with selling his relatives and how he thinks about the best way to introduce his niece and nephew to the sexual acts they may encounter¹¹. While Oprah encourages readers to “fit books into the lives they already live,” this scene and others in the stories are so unbelievable to some readers that they will find it hard to accept the events they read (Hall 115). Unable to fit this story into the life they lead, some readers feel estranged from the story and hopeless about the entire situation. One reader writes,

“I cry for my beloved Africa because there is a lot of [abuse]... Poor innocent children...

Sometimes one feels that for every brick of restoration that is placed another ten crumble

¹¹ He does, however, go crazy towards the end of the novella and tries to back out of the deal he made with the human traffickers.

right before you. Where does the healing begin? I am left wondering, where is Kotchipka and poor Yawe...But boy the stories are so real, you cry, life and laugh out loud at the same time” (bettykips, “Fattening for Gabon- Say You're One of Them- 2nd Story” online forum).

Bettykips' emphasizes the psychological reality of the story that she felt, especially in regards to the future of the character. However, in the same posting about her psychological reality, she expresses some of her own generalizations about the whole continent that seem to have been supported by “Fattening for Gabon.” She takes this story as an unmediated window into the situation in parts of Africa and she feels that nothing can be done, that the efforts made towards progress within the continent just “crumble.” Her feeling of lack of control in regards to problems in Africa is evident; this feeling feeds her view that Kotchikpa's story supports an image of African reality and progress in Africa is headed backwards.

At the very end of the novella, Kotchikpa runs away from the traffickers, leaving his sister behind: “I ran into the bush, blades of elephant grass slashing my body, thorns and rough earth piercing my feet. I took the key and padlock from my pocket and flung them into the bush. I ran and I ran, though I knew I would never outrun my sister's wailing” (172). Kotchikpa expresses a sense of loss as he runs from his captors at the end of the story, fleeing also the chaos of the traffickers and his screaming sister. Oprah approaches her Book Club with an agenda: “If participants identify affinities with the characters, and can articulate how their identity mirrors or contradicts their interpretations of the novel, then...participants may achieve individual reformation” (Lofton 61). The discomfort readers feel in the disconnection from the character they long to connect with leaves them grasping for the therapeutic effects of reading. Without having a character who can shed some light on the life of the reader, the reader is further

distanced and lost in the chaos and confusion that is human trafficking.

The hope readers usually find in Oprah Book Club picks is a false hope in this story, just as Kotchikpa had a false hope of living with aid workers in a life more luxurious than his own. His sister, we can only assume, was trafficked and most likely endured sexual abuse. While Kotchikpa narrowly and luckily escaped, there is no telling the life he would lead as a young boy with no family, no property, and no money. One reader, “bookread,” pronounces his or her “hope [that] others hear this sad plea and find a positive way to respond to it. I hope [Akpan] and others like him keep writing for the sake of the children. This book has led my heart through despair but I am left with hope for the future to come” (bookread, “Fattening for Gabon- Say You're One of Them- 2nd Story” online forum). It is encouraging that such readers have “hope for the future to come,” but that may come with the protocol pushed on an Oprah book. The “sad plea” the reader hears in the novel may well be the character's desire for a desperate need of some greater power outside Benin. One reader begins the forum on this second story, “Right now, I have a similar feeling as I had with the first story, that of uncontrollable chaos... I don't feel there is any way for anyone to step in and stop the disaster from happening. It's a sense of madness...I wonder if our physical distance from these children contributes to this feeling I am having as I read these stories” (read'n4fun, “Fattening for Gabon- Say You're One of Them- 2nd Story” online forum). This post refers to the story's characters as if they are real children, blurring the fictional character and real child divide. The reader's interpretation of helplessness is applicable to the reader's interpretation of the real situation in Benin or Africa in general.

In “Luxurious Hearses,” a sixteen-year-old Muslim named Jabril is on a bus fleeing the religious warfare of northern Nigeria. He hopes to make it to safety in the land of his father in the south, but he is killed by the Christian-filled bus when they discover that he is Muslim. His

Christian murderers can tell he is Muslim because of his hand that was amputated for stealing, in accordance with the Koran. A soldier does not support the passengers' slaughter of this boy, so when he stands up in the boy's defense, he, too, is killed. The soldier's dog is left outside as the bus drives away, with “the two corpses and barked repeatedly into the heavens. The dog mistook the still-twitching, protesting stump as a sign of life” (SYOT 322). Though there are details about when the story is set, these details may not entirely be made sense of by the reader or the reader may not be interested. “Luxurious Hearses” is clearly about a political crisis, most likely based on the Sharia Massacre, though it is not identified in historical terms. However, the lack of a clear beginning, middle, or end leaves an uninformed reader envisioning a country suspended in violence. The grotesque ending is entirely hopeless: even children will become the victims of unsubstantiated warfare. The slaughter of youth leaves no hope for future change, implying that Africa will continue to be caught in inhumane warfare; African youth will be unable to survive their elders in order to break the cycle of violence. One reader responded to this novella, “The characters in it bring to life all we read about political, economic and religious strife in Africa” (cart56, “Luxurious Hearses- Say You're One of Them- 4th Story” online forum). One danger in this reader's interpretation is that he or she uses this story to confirm their previously set notions about life (and violations) in Africa (usually created by the press). This reader, for example, not only homogenizes the continent through the lens of Akpan's book, but looks at the religious conflict in this story in Nigeria to be representative of all the war and political problems throughout Africa.

Both “Luxurious Hearses” and “Fattening for Gabon” are much longer compared to the three short stories in the compilation. The progress within the stories is delayed, especially when Jubril is on the overfilled bus docked at the bus station, waiting for the bus driver to return with

oil; the reader also feels that the bus will never start moving and then that the bus will never get to their destination. These two stories deeply analyze relationships between family and strangers. The length builds tension within the reader even though the ultimate intentions of Kotchikpa's uncle, Fofu Kpee, are clear for the reader, unlike the protagonist, from the beginning. For Jubril's story, the drawn out time is reflective of his mind, fearing his uncertain future as a Muslim in disguise. For Fofu Kpee, the feeling of elongated time emphasizes his anxiety and worry over the outcome that his decision holds for the future of his niece and nephew.

Akpan's story about the Rwandan genocide, entitled "My Parents' Bedroom," prompted a strong response from readers with images of child rape and the slaughter of a wife by her husband in front of their children. Monique, the narrator, describes her experience being molested by a man whom she does not know: "Pressing me down on the floor, the naked man grabs my two wrists with his left hand. He pushes up my nightie with the right and tears my underpants. I shout at the top of my voice. I call out to Tonton Andre, who is pacing in the corridor. He doesn't come" (SYOT 332-3). The inhumanity of her uncle Andre, shows through, so consumed by the ethnic conflicts that his familial ties and obligations to protect no longer have significance, even when the victim is a child. After Monique's father is forced to kill his wife under pressure from his Hutu family, the people on Monique's mother's side of the family (Tutsi) "drag Maman out by the legs and set fire to the house. By the time their fellow Tutsis in the ceiling begin to shout, the fire is unstoppable. They run on. They run after Papa's people" (354). Monique's parents had been protecting Tutsi friends by keeping them hidden in the ceiling. However, Monique's mother's vengeful family does not take any precautions and kills their fellow Tutsis. Though many readers will have some familiarity with the historical event this story dramatizes, the portrayal of inadvertent and retaliatory slaughter promotes a feeling that

Africa is lost in irreconcilable despair: Rwandans kill brothers and sisters without knowing.

Some readers do not recognize that media have been the access point for Americans' imagined Africa: "The western world that we live in has an amazing ability to ignore Africa and all the tragedies that are happening there...from civil wars, to drought+starvation, to countless deaths from preventable+treatable diseases...Do you ever hear about these things on the news?????????? NO" (brooke118, "My Parents' Bedroom- Say You're One of Them- 5th Story" online forum). Though this reader does not find that her "reality of Africa" is covered by the press, she does not acknowledge the absence of non-suffering stories about Africa in media. Another reader writes, "Have you ever read a story with a more gruesome, hopeless ending? I Have not. Imagine the reality. I cannot" ("My Parents' Bedroom- Say You're One of Them- 5th Story," ms. mame, Oct 23, 2009, 10:16am). Her comment is reminiscent of the Oprah protocol for readers to look to literature for solutions; the reader ties the story's narrative to an equally dreadful and "gruesome" reality of the 1994 genocide. She finds the story's hopelessness also leaves her solutionless and further estranged from the "reality" she cannot "imagine."

Appearances of Nigerian media in "Luxurious Hearses" demonstrate the relationship between media and reality. When one of the bus riders believes he has seen his cousin on the cable television screen before it was turned off by the police, they refuse to turn it back on: "Listen, dis foreign TV channels dey spoil de image of our country. Dese white stations dey make billions of dollars to sell your war and blood to de world...We no bad like dis. OK, why dem no dey show corpses of deir white people during crisis for TV? Abi, people no dey kill for American or Europe?" (SYOT 246). The bus riders continue to protest, yelling at the police in an effort to get the cable TV images back on the screen. The scene presents questions about representation and who becomes the designator of "reality," the very question my thesis asks.

The police recognize the government's ability to censor images and information they feel are harmful to the reputation of the government, so that the (whole) truth is not necessarily related by the news. In this story, the corrupted government officials and law-enforcement in Nigeria demonstrate the need to be wary about the representations presented by the news, recognizing that the viewer might not be getting a full story but a skewed one. Published literature could also be analyzed as a source that caters to specific agendas. Edward Said defines his term "Orientalism" as a "dynamic exchange between individual authors and the large political concerns shaped by the three great empires- British, French, American- in whose intellectual and imaginative territory the writing was produced" (2001). He suggests a relationship between the peripheral country and the more powerful country in forming the representation of the developing commonwealth state. Furthermore, he suggests that the structure of Orientalism is "more than a structure of lies or of myths ... [but] is more particularly valuable as a sign of European-Atlantic power over the Orient than it is a veridic discourse about the Orient" (Said 1995). The literary expression from Africa, America's Orient, reflects not on the truth, necessarily, of the country which it was written about, but more importantly the beliefs of America in regards to the developing, authoring country. In this sense, it is ironic that the bus passengers prefer the European and American news that could also be manipulating information to aid in their pertinent oil interests in southern Nigeria; Americans also look to their national news in order to know more about international conflicts. The complex representations of Africa within my literature case studies are many times not seen as solely "representations" but of truth.

All of Akpan's protagonists are children. In an interview, he said that he wanted those he wrote about to have "their voices heard, their faces seen" (Akpan Interview). Laura Suski argues that the existence of the not-child-like child, like the street children Akpan describes in his first

story “Ex-mas Feast,” draws from observers a sadness about the loss of innocence. At the same time, the “suffering of children is problematic...[because] children are so firmly grounded in the future” and they represent a “loss of hope about the larger future of the society” (Suski 203). In other words, the representations of these stories, solely through the eyes of children, can heighten the feeling that Africa is helpless. The Western vision of innocence as being key to childhood makes children of the South “deprived” and in some cases depraved “versions of children of the North” (206). This sort of reading of the text endorses the Western view that more powerful countries, like the United States, must intervene on behalf of the children and suggests “that Western institutions and organizations are better able to provide for the needs of children than are their own parents” (205). Suski's observations further suggest Akpan's book encourages the belief that Africa cannot survive on its own: its future, its children, are inevitably lost. The guardian of Kotchikpa and Yewa sells them to human traffickers for money, Jubril's mother is unable to protect him from anti-Christian sentiments that linger because he was baptized, and Monique's parents are slaughtered by each other's families. Akpan said he set out to write a book to bring “attention to the plight of African children” in distress, but at the same time he said that “it's not about what will I do for the Africans...but what I can do for friends and family” (Akpan Conversation/Lecture). He suggests relationships, values, and experiences about friends and family are at the forefront of his book, concepts that the reader could apply to his/her own life. However, this statement demeans the large social problems he develops within his book by focusing on the importance of general relationships over the progress of Africans.

Now that I have analyzed parts of the text and readers' responses, I will next look at the characteristics and effects of the OBC book layout and website. The 2009 Back Bay Books version of *Say You're One of Them*, reprinted for Oprah's Book Club, is in a format the supports a

book club usage. Following the “About the Author” is “A Reading Group Guide: Say You're One of Them, Stories by Uwem Akpan.” This section includes “A conversation with the author of *Say You're One Them*: Uwem Akpan talks with Cressida Leyshon of *The New Yorker*.” As a part of the 2009 republication of the book, this interview, conducted after *The New Yorker* publication of “Ex-mas Feast,” offers readers an interpretive framework for the stories. Before publishing the book of short stories, Uwem Akpan said that he “would like to see a book about how children are faring in these endless conflicts in Africa” (Akpan 3). He, himself, emphasizes the image of the helpless African continent that is caught up in “endless” war that continue to take place. He says his “continent is in distress...leadership is a big problem” and again, he is generalizing about whole continent without giving any sort of political or historical setting that would give clarity to this assumption held by many Americans (5). If he becomes the “cultural spokesperson” for many readers, as Graham Huggan may suggest, then his interviews are important in providing an important reality outside of his literary fiction. He says, “I feel that the situation of Africa is very urgent and we need more people to help us see the complexity of our lives” (Akpan 4). He recognizes the need for a “self-help” within Africa: African writers writing for Africans to inform them of the intricacies of their culture and their situation. His book dramatizes the despair on the continent but he does not complicate the conflicts or “African” problems, as he had hoped.

Also, social/political problems and the plight of impoverished children are the more strongly supported messages since Oprah’s Book Club has teamed up with CNN, “Oprah's Book Club on CNN – Behind the Scenes,” so that they work together to present news stories related to those in the collection of stories (“Complete Coverage”). These articles about real lives in Africa push readers to recognize the reality behind Akpan's stories, reaffirming the representation of the actual Africa in the stories, and at the same time supporting readers in learning more about the

subject. Each of Akpan's stories is paired with a CNN article with pictures that illustrate and further describe a true story similar to the fictional one (which may elicit more compassion for the protagonist versus a more impersonal feature story). The presentation of CNN reports with Akpan's text encourages a non-literary, transparent reading of Akpan's stories. Another side of the truth, Africans living happily under stable governments in peace, is not covered in the articles and so is left out of the scope of what Oprah readers see as the reality of the continent's condition. CNN's "Behind the Scenes" allows a kind of backwards confirmation of ideas; for those who do not read media reports about Africa but find that CNN confirms what they read in Akpan's stories, then CNN gives these readers reason to confirm that *Say You're One of Them* is something that can be used to construct an image of Africa. On the other hand, the CNN-Oprah team presents some news features that are hopeful, like the story of a young, Liberian human rights activist or that of a Malawian boy who is making efforts to electrify his village with wind power.

The dominant images on the CNN site are those of the suffering, as illustrated in "Sex Tourists Eye Kenya," a CNN video documenting the facts of child prostitution in Kenya or the article, "The mission to reclaim Sudan's lost child soldiers." Children without responsible parents is a predominant, though not the entire, theme of Uwem Akpan's stories. Some children are left parentless, others with parents who cannot provide for them, and others with parents who die or encourage ethnic segregation. The extra book club materials (i.e. online forums, webcasts, the CNN liaison, a reading guide) have enhanced the reading experience and emotional involvement for Americans reading Akpan's stories. However, the set up of Oprah's Book Club for *Say You're One of Them* has pushed for certain readings that may or may not have been the intention of Akpan.

Chimamanda Adichie: Bridging the Gap Between America and Nigeria

Chimamanda Adichie received critical acclaim for her 2007 novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, and won prizes including the MacArthur Foundation fellowship (2008) and the Orange prize. The book was also named one of the *New York Times* 100 Most Notable Books of the Year. In addition to this, she has received praise from well-known African writers like Chinua Achebe and Binyavanga Wainaina. She has achieved a new-found reputation in America and drawn a large audience for her novels. Though she and Akpan have been repeatedly published in *The New Yorker*, Adichie's audiences may not necessarily go by suggestions of Oprah and Starbucks and read with protocols that have been associated with their book club picks. Adichie's short stories are glimpses into the lives of Nigerians living in Nigeria and those living in America. The protagonists of each story encounter problems, whether Nigeria specific, America specific, or universal stories of the trials of humankind. She describes the lives of Nigerians who move and change, whether by traveling to the United States, returning to Nigeria, or those who remain in Nigeria. She depicts the lives of African people who are not stuck in helplessness. Adichie tells stories of Nigerians making decisions, coming to terms with reality, reacting to injustice, and dealing with their own emotions.

In her last story, "The Headstrong Historian," Adichie writes a rendition of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. She recounts the story of three generations of a family, leading up to the present. The story begins with a woman (the grandmother of the protagonist) who sends her son (the father of the protagonist) to a missionary school in the hopes that his knowledge of English and the "white man's ways" will help her reclaim land that has been stolen by her late husband's family. However, she ends up spiritually removed from her son, who believes his mother a heathen and wishes to cleanse her of her daily traditions and spirituality. He starts to

wear pants and shirts. He suggests that she move her wrapper (a cloth wrap) up from her hips so that it covers her breasts. Chinue Achebe's novel can be read ethnographically, particularly its "avoidance of authorial intrusion; the contextualisation of indigenous concepts; and the emphasis on daily events that represent the reality of a particular way of life" (Huggan 42). Both *Things Fall Apart* and "The Headstrong Historian" illustrate local celebrations like the "New Yam Festival" and "ima mmuo ceremony" and recount the habits of seeking the advice of an oracle. They both describe every day events like getting water from the river and making food particular to the region. In "An Image of Africa," Achebe describes the response to *Things Fall Apart* from a high school student in Yonkers who believes he has had an anthropological experience, even though the "experience" is set in 1890. This boy has not read the book for the author's intended desire to convey the limitedness of the Western reader's understanding or ironic attempted anthropological exploits of the District Commissioner towards the end of the novel, as Graham Huggan suggests that it should be interpreted (Huggan 42-3). He has easily slipped into reading this as a true, timeless account of the exotic foreign land of Africa, complete with romantic images of a naked tribesman.

Adichie, too, offers a depiction of a time when tribes were the prominent form of community in "The Headstrong Historian." However, she unseats the reader's expectations of this static, exotic culture in this story that covers a time period beginning with when missionaries were first heard of by rural tribes until the present day. All of her stories concern contemporary Nigerians, especially those of the upper middle class who wear Western clothing and have attended university. "The Headstrong Historian" further demonstrates what it means to be Nigerian over time. We see the protagonist's grandmother before her son (the protagonist's father) is born, through her death, to the story of her granddaughter's life until she is in her 30s or

40s. The story's action over generations gives the author the opportunity to show the complexity in the social and political settings of Nigeria. The beginning of the story imitates experiences similar to those of Okonkwo, the protagonist of *Things Fall Apart*. However, lives are then complicated as the story develops; two generations later, young people witness the outcomes of a European-controlled history in their education, as their textbooks reflect the beliefs and history according to the former colonial power. It is this generation that moves to rebel against the European-identified Africa in order to re-establish a Nigerian identity and culture.

Adichie's story encourages the reader to identify with the problems and life choices of the protagonist despite being very different. The story is also about intrusive white foreigners whose lessons the son learns too well. As he takes on the ideals of the white man, he sets himself against his mother and her beliefs. Adichie emphasizes the relationship of a mother and her son and her desire for him to make her proud. She describes the grandmother's (the first protagonist of the story) desire for some of the values of the white man's culture as well as her resistance towards the limits of her own. She wants the English judicial system to win back her land stolen by her husband's cousins, but at the same time, she does not want to be banned from her tribal worship in favor of Catholicism. Adichie's style emphasizes the inner conflicts of human desires and so draws the reader close rather than keeping the reader at a voyeuristic distance. For example, the grandmother so earnestly wants her son to learn English that she enrolled him in a Catholic mission school where she becomes "alarmed by how indiscriminately the missionaries flogged students—for being late, for being lazy, for being slow, for being idle...Father Litz [said] that native parents pampered their children too much" (TAYN 209). Her motherly worries for her son's safety are evident but her anger about the beatings do not hinder her desire for him to continue at the school where solely English is used; after her son has started assuming the culture

of the white man, she is caught between his best interests and wanting him to remain close to her culturally and emotionally. Some readers may feel like *Things Fall Apart*, on the other hand, puts them in the position of the distant outsider getting the insider information on a culture. As the humanity of the characters is drawn to the forefront of the story Nigeria does not seem so foreign.

In *Things Fall Apart*, the District Commissioner plans to describe his experiences in an anthropological book entitled, *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*. Through this character, Achebe conveys the inaccuracy of the accounts of white foreigners who believed they knew everything about the Igbo culture. In “The Headstrong Historian,” the granddaughter of the protagonist, as a teenage student, carries a book with a chapter called “The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of Southern Nigeria” in her book bag. The granddaughter's experiences take place after colonization, where as Achebe's story left off in the midst of colonization. She is the audience for the books written by Europeans about Nigerian culture and history. She also demonstrates the ultimate reaction to this literature from the later generations of Nigerians experiencing the effects of post-colonialism. Adichie is not only critical of the foreigner's misinterpretation of Nigeria, as this chapter in the granddaughter's book was written by “an administrator from Worcestershire who had lived among them for seven years,” but she is also critical of Nigerian children being taught by descriptions written by ex-patriots rather than Nigerians (TAYN 215). Adichie supports the messages of Achebe's novel (that the Igbo are a not a primitive and savage society and the missionaries did not bring governance that was absent before their arrival) and furthers the problems and implications of political and social intervention by missionaries. Adichie places the book (in the story) in the bags of Nigerian youth. At one point, the granddaughter sits at the bedside of her grandmother in what the book

would consider the house of a “primitive.” She is just as much an outsider to this “primitive tribe” as the American reader of the collection of short stories is. In a changing society after colonization, she must read and learn the history of her family's tribe through textbooks written by foreigners. In a flash forward, the granddaughter succeeds her grandmother as the protagonist and the reader learns that she goes on to be a socially active figure who learns to question what she is told. In her later years, she begins to “rethink her own schooling,” wrote a book entitled *Pacifying with Bullets: A Reclaimed History of Southern Nigeria*, and changed her name from her Christian one, Grace, to Afamefuna, the one originally given by her grandmother (TAYN 216-18). Chimamanda Adichie makes it her point to recognize that although things have in the past “fallen apart,” there are those Nigerians who will make strides towards changing the European and African mindset towards Africa. Adichie depends on many of her readers being familiar with Achebe's novel in order to expand his critique of how images of Africa are constructed. Her own writing suggests a shift in post-independence Nigerian culture that portrays a country not fallen apart but able to reinvent itself and write its own history to replace that which was written by the English. This effort to decolonize culture supports the African Writers Series' goal of exposing African culture through the African rather than the lens of a European observer.

Adichie and Akpan's stories explore the lives of different Africans. Adichie takes on a similar plot line of religious violence in her story, “A Private Experience,” focusing not on the violence itself, but rather the situation two women find themselves in when they take refuge together during an episode of religious-based upheaval. Like Akpan's “Luxurious Hearses,” this story was inspired by an outbreak of religious attacks but takes place away from the violence itself. In “A Private Experience,” Adichie sweetly expresses the humanity of two adult females.

Though one is a Christian and the other a Muslim, they take shelter in an abandoned shop for mutual protection while their brethren fight in the streets outside. The two come together as women, as the narrator tells the Muslim woman who has “nipple...burning like pepper” the importance of moisturizing with lotion, while the Muslim woman lays out her wrapper cloth so that they may both sit on it (TAYN 49). During this time together, they share a make-shift toilet, a piece of cloth, knowledge of family, and intimate details about their own condition. In the roles of mother and sister, they depend on one another at the same time as they are victims of the other's religion; their short relationship, interacting a strangers and women, is at the center of the story versus Akpan's concentration on suffering situation of the protagonist. Adichie brings the reader closer in identifying with the women who are dealing with problems and worries that the reader may also be troubled by; a connection between the reader and protagonist enables the reader to recognize an “other” that is perhaps not as foreign or different as he or she once thought. The readers of “Luxurious Hearses” may feel just as irritated as the bus riders by the long wait for a bus driver, the cramped quarters on the immobile bus or simply the repetitive events that take place within the bus. However, the American reader is less likely to be able to connect with the boy fleeing religious persecution or any of the other riders heading towards the safety of their families in the Christian-dominated south. Uwem Akpan encourages the reader to recognize the distance between the reader's life and that of the story's protagonist. For example, Akpan details Jubril's reaction to the women and television on the bus: “He would have preferred to trek a thousand miles on foot rather than sit in the same vehicle as a woman” and “It was no longer about whether Allah would punish him for watching TV. It was just that his conservatism stiffened his neck, and he kept his back to the screen” (SYOT 194, 229). Jubril's character is foreign to the American readers who may spend hours watching television in a country where

women are theoretically treated as equals. Conversely, Chimamanda Adichie looks for ways to bring the reader into relationships with her protagonists. Though her two female subjects may be in the midst of religious violence, her subjects remain women who suffer not just the problems associated with her country, as all women do, but also the universal concerns of family safety and physical comfort. Gender here draws out connections between the reader and the subject that are beyond cultural differences but rely on international concerns of women that bind them across the world. The foreign woman is not so exotic and distant, then, for the Western reader.

Written from the perspective of a female writer, "Jumping Monkey Hill" is a direct critique of how African literature is chosen by Western publishers and disseminated to American and European audiences. A British man, named Edward, has put together a workshop for eight new, promising African writers at which they are each supposed to write and then present their work to the entire group. After the Zimbabwean reads his story, Edward responds that "[t]here was something terribly passé about it when one considered all the other things happening in Zimbabwe under the horrible Mugabe" (TAYN 107). The other Africans remained silent, in an almost inferior, tail-between-the-legs fashion. In response to the Senegalese woman's writing about revealing her homosexuality to her parents, Edward states that "homosexual stories of this sort weren't reflective of Africa" and "he wasn't speaking as an Oxford-trained Africanist, but as one keen on the real Africa and not the imposing of Western ideas on African venues" (108). The reader is made to feel critical of this English man who ironically decides whether or not something is "African" enough and whether this autobiographical story by the Senegalese woman is actually realistic. He also homogenizes the continent, so that what is a problem in one African country is a problem in all of them. Just as Edward objectifies the protagonist, Ujunwa, by often "star[ing] at her body...his eyes were never on her face but always lower," he also

objectifies African literature's authenticity as a commodity (106). Reality becomes a construction that is bought in a bookstore. However, this situation is twisted in the end when the Nigerian protagonist shares her writing based on her own life and Edward calls it “implausible” because “women are never victims in that crude sort of way” which she describes (113-4). He becomes the granter of consecration, granter of what it means to be an African woman, though he is a man. He supports Huggan’s notion of consecration that “[l]iterary prizes” have become “signs of the dominant role played by international industry as a legitimizing agent for literature” (105). Adichie recognizes the West's desire for “sexy,” foreign problems like ethnic warfare and starving children. However, when she presents the problem of the objectification and disrespect for women, a problem that occurs everywhere, including the West, she is denied publication in Edward's journal, ironically titled *Oratory*. Adichie suggest it is the Western gate keeper, the publisher, the consecrator, who thwarts the publication of certain African writing while perpetuating a certain kind of hopelessness within the African literature that will make it into the hands of Western readers. Adichie introduces the editors/publishers/reviewers in addition to readers and authors that are part and parcel of the problem. These agents, the consecrators, allow authors access to bookshelves and readers access to perspectives and images of Africa.

Adichie’s attack on the European definition of Africa is clear; Edward, as the antagonist, tells some of the African writers what “African” topics they should or should not be writing about. Adichie argues against writing what “the West wants to hear,” although she was ironically criticized for doing so in her book of short stories by a *New York Times* review that said her short stories are about “pitiful victims, incorrigible villains, inspirational survivors” (Row). In the same way, American readers and publishers, too, have encouraged the writing that Edward praises (“killings in the Congo, from the point of view of a militiaman” written by the

Tanzanian), and the interest in hearing about this version of Africa has encouraged further publication of this violent and pathetic image; in this case, the author and editor agents reinforce each other (TAYN 109). Chimamanda Adichie provides evidence for the neo-imperialist tendencies of literary production, as the former colonial governments now control the global progress of authors, the cultural expressionists. Graham Huggan further proposes that the disparity between the West and Africa has “led to metropolitan publishers and other related patrons [from the post-industrial First World]...being granted a virtual stranglehold, not only over the distribution, but also to some extent the definition, of African literature as a cultural field” (35). Ujunwa chastizes her fellow writers who do not speak up against Edward because he can be the key to their literary success: “This kind of attitude is why they could kill you and herd you into townships and require passes from you before you could walk on your own land!” (TAYN 112). The protagonist makes a link between political subjugation and cultural submission.

In “Jumping Hill Monkey” and “The Headstrong Historian,” Adichie pushes her readers to reflect on literature as a representation that is shaped by those in power; in “The Headstrong Historian,” the history of Nigeria is written by the English, and in “Jumping Monkey Hill,” Edward, the Englishman, consecrates or controls what African literature will be put into his publication. Adichie connects similar oppressions of Africans during colonialism and after: even though Africans now write their own history, their literary presence and image abroad is still determined by Western publishers that control who and which stories gain access to American bookshelves. She suggests a new protocol for those readers who identify with characters enduring the suffering a new protocol, giving them reason to be hesitant of associating characters

with reality; one must question the sponsorship of plot and the intentions of publishers and consecrators.

Uwem Akpan's short stories suggest a transparency, as if his characters provide a window on the "reality," especially when read as part and in accordance with the reading protocol of Oprah's Book Club and Oprah Book Club's accompaniment media. Even in the beginning of his book is a map of Africa, pointing to the specific countries in which the stories take place. However, the reader's desire, as part of Oprah's protocol, to read literature in connection to reality is questioned by Adichie. Chimamanda Adichie's work offers justification for looking critically at the fiction that is published in the West, reasons for why one should question its content and the implications of stories on the reader's image of reality.

Conclusion

African Literature's Second Coming

“While I do feel strongly about literature being the best way to combat stereotypes, I am wary of the idea of literature as anthropology.”

-Chimamanda Adichie (2)

Literature has long been a source for readers' exploration of other cultures around the world, in their own country, in their own city. During the period of imperialism, many authors, like Joseph Conrad, built fantasies of the newly explored African world. They capitalized on Western interest and unfamiliarity with the “dark” continent to create stories and narratives that would cater to public curiosity. Today, a similar interest in the mysterious, poor continent is still prevalent and a Western audience is keen to hear from the silenced voice: “the African” who can tell “the Westerner” what their life in a developing country is really like. African literature published in the United States can be risky territory when readers take the fiction as reality and a memoir as an average or normal experience. The trend for readers to take fiction as reality, especially when it is historical fiction, is encouraged by the confirmation of such plot lines and stories by media. African literature in the 20th century has become a new import and in several ways has catered to the “sexy” issues on the American agenda vis a vis Africa. Child prostitution, sex trafficking, religious warfare, barbarous civil wars, and corrupted leaders are also on the list of concerns of American non-governmental organizations and brought to the attention of American lawmakers.

I chose to look at four well-publicized African books. African literature and information about African countries both occupy a limited presence in the cluttered media landscape of the

U.S. As Africa is many times mistaken for a homogeneous landmass, it is also possible for readers to form a perception of the entire continent based on a book set in one country. African literature has an opportunity to explore lives that do not only “bleed,” to use the journalism aphorism, but also the context in which they live. If the American selection of African literature perpetuates the Western image of an Africa that is foreign, starving, parent-less, corrupt, and hopeless, then literature represents an *African* voice that confirms these images outside of the Western media. Less so are these images labeled Western stereotypes of the continent but they become African confirmed realities.

The first chapter of this thesis looked at child soldier narratives and the differences between one that is fiction and one that is a memoir. They present different versions of the story of the child soldier and the processes they undergo during and after their experiences in war. I made the comparison between the child soldier narrative and the Bildungsroman. The international commodity of the Bildungsroman caters to the supply and demand of human rights claims amongst Western readers. The child soldier narrative also challenges the traditional ending of the protagonist’s reintegration in society. Uzodinma Iweala's fictional protagonist Agu ends as a child who has not fully recovered from being forced into premature adulthood. He ends his story as a stoic figure speaking to an American aid worker and insisting that he is not a “bad boy” for what he's done. Ishmael Beah explains his transition in and out of rehabilitation and the time and patience it takes, something that is undervalued by Western media when contemplating the horrendous image of a child with a gun. Both the novel and the memoir contain the image of a Western savior figure who saves the child who has experienced so many horrors in his own country, perpetuating the stereotype that Africa is helpless without the aid and assistance of Western nations. The child soldier narrative has brought to readers a stronger awareness of the

plight child soldiers throughout the world.

The second chapter compared two collections of short stories, one by Uwem Akpan and the other by Chimamanda Adichie. Akpan sets each of his stories in a different African country, telling the story of a child (sometimes from a child's perspective) in a life crisis, whether the child be a victim of religious violence or human trafficking. Featured on Oprah, a large portion of Americans who read his work did so through Oprah's lens of self-help and character identification. Through “inspirational” characters, a reader explores issues that trouble the continent, and apply lessons learned about family and friendship to their own lives. Akpan’s focus on tragedy encourages the stereotypes that all of Africa is suffering, that all African children are in some sort of extreme circumstance. Adichie, on the other hand, looks at the experiences of both Nigerians in Nigeria and America to analyze changes in the country and its culture and the progress of political thought through the generations. Adichie even confronts the problem of Western publishers as gatekeepers to African writers, especially the tendency of publishers to want only stories about Africa that fulfill the violent and poor stereotypes, filtering the facts that make it to a Western audience.

Binyavanga Wainaina, author of the satirical “How to Write About Africa” mentioned in my introduction, points to subjects that should be avoided if you are to have a successful piece of literature on Africa: ordinary domestic scenes, relationships between lovers that originated from the continent, references to African writers or intellectuals, mention of school-going children who are not suffering from wars or Ebola fever or female genital mutilation. Chimamanda Adichie brings up such “taboo” subjects in her short stories as well as the problems associated with war. She has made great strides in bridging the divide between America and Africa, closing the gap of the foreignness with the experiences of Nigerian immigrants in the U.S. as well as

illustrating the experiences and emotions of the Nigerians that are also familiar to the lives of Westerners.

I argue that if American attitudes towards Africa continue to be pitying and demeaning, then dysfunctional systems of foreign development and aid will persist and sustainability of basic services in African countries will not be attained. African literature is an important part of humanizing Africa outside of American newspapers and magazines. African authors can be looked to give accounts of their countries that are not necessarily seen from a news perspective; the realm of literature allows for more room in defying social norms and political agendas. It would be more effective if there was a wider range of African literature on American bookshelves. All too often, the book-shops I frequented in Lusaka, Zambia, had large varieties of “African literature” sections with novels I had never come across on Amazon.com. These novels chronicling the brilliant, controversial, and unexpected are still unavailable to American readers.

As Chinua Achebe drew the title *Things Fall Apart*, his story of the dissolution of an Igbo tribe devastated by colonialism, from William Yeats' “The Second Coming,” I also draw on Yeats' poem for the title to my conclusion. In the second half of the poem, the poet suggests a “revelation is at hand.” There is a need for a new beginning in the area of African literature as it is published and circulated in the United States. At the same time, there needs to be a re-envisioning among Americans' outlooks on the abilities, accomplishments, and potential of African states. These two needs, by informing one another in the beginning of a new century, may give birth to new understandings through new literature from an old continent. After all, Africa is not a country, and not all of the continent is suffering.

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