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Childhood 2011 18: 434 originally published online 11 August 2011

DOI: 10.1177/0907568211400102

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Childhood
18(4) 434–446
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DOI: 10.1177/0907568211400102
chd.sagepub.com


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Abstract

Focusing on the paradox between innocence and responsibility generated by the term child-soldiers, which is treated differently in literary and cinematographic works from the North and the South, this article uses postcolonial theory in order to deconstruct ‘the single story’ that may be erasing these children’s many stories. Accordingly, the analysis brings to the fore both the supposed universality of a hegemonic notion of childhood, revealing it as a regulatory discourse which produces diverse subalternities, and the articulation of this notion within an Africanist discourse that legitimizes neocolonial practices in varied domains.

Keywords

Africa, African film, African novel, childhood, child-soldiers, postcolonialism

The issue of children’s participation in armed conflict has gained increasing attention worldwide in the last decade. Both media and art seem to be mobilized in this common effort for international awareness. The market and the internet are flooded with autobiographical testimonies, journalistic reports, documentaries and even novels and films. Interestingly, the great majority of these narratives deal with the African context. This seems to reveal a political agenda behind this trend and calls for a reflection about how African child-soldiers are becoming visible, and about what is rendered invisible in that process.

The very notion of child-soldier is revealing. This designation can hardly be more misleading, in the sense that it obliterates heterogeneities: *child* refers to a number of varied realities, namely of age (between 5 and 18 years old), sex (child is a sexless neutral), geography and culture. The same can be said about *soldier*, which covers everything from regular armies to rebel groups and conscripted minors to forced or voluntary recruits, with distinct motivations and subjectivities, again within varied geographies,

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cultures and ideological horizons. Clearly, what is at stake here is the political agenda that is created by interlinking both terms: one that underlines vulnerability and the need for protection with another that connotes extreme violence. As Honwana (2005: 33) points out: 'The binary *child-soldier* produces an oxymoron. How can an innocent child become a soldier?' Innocence as one of the main synonyms of childhood becomes paradoxical when children are integrated into armies, holding a gun and a licence to kill.

Yet, as Rosen (2005) extensively demonstrates, the different way the involvement of children in military warfare is perceived in diverse cultures and historical moments proves that this oxymoron is not only a western creation but also very recent. He provides a large number of illustrations of this fact, including examples from non-western societies that demonstrate that 'there is no single rule for determining when the young are fit to be warriors, although in most cultures they are in some stage of adolescence' (Rosen, 2005: 4), and examples from western history (military education to the present day, the American Civil War and the First and Second World Wars) that present the involvement of boys in war as an ennobling 'heroic' experience, concluding that: 'Clearly, the child soldier as an abused and exploited victim of war is a radically new concept' (p. 6).

Rosen expressly underlines the fact that humanitarian discourse is aware neither of the historical contingency of childhood concepts (p. 6), nor of the specificities of 'cultural norms and practices in peacetime and the circumstances of war, which may render children's participation in war meaningful rather than barbaric' (Lee, 2009: 14). The depiction of these specificities does not intend to lessen the extreme violence endured by child-soldiers. On the contrary: it is motivated by the fact that an undifferentiated humanitarian approach in actual fieldwork has often led to unexpected negative results, such as the abandonment of rehabilitation programmes by child-soldiers for different reasons.

This situation demands a close examination of the representations of child-soldiers as an attempt to clarify the extent to which they correspond to a socially and culturally determined construction and to an ideological production of the concept of 'childhood'. If this is the case, these representations – the 'single story' – may actually be silencing children through dominant models of perception and discourse and according to varied political agendas.

Child-soldiers

The aim of David M Rosen's book *Armies of the Young: Child Soldiers in War and Terrorism* (2005) is to unveil 'the complexities of the child-soldier problem' that are rendered invisible by dominant humanitarian accounts. These accounts may be fair, but 'provide a limited story' (p. 159). According to Rosen, the humanitarian narrative is built upon three main discursive pillars, which he deconstructs: first, the western contemporary 'Straight 18 position' that 'defines the child soldier as any person under eighteen years of age who is recruited or used by an army or armed group' (p. 3). The contradiction between this position and the anthropological and sociological view that the question of who is a child cannot be resolved without taking cultural and historical contexts into account, is explained by Rosen through the play of 'international politics in which childhood serves as a proxy for other political interests' (p. 2). Needless to say, the 'Straight 18 position' is closely associated with a conception of all under-18s as specially vulnerable, innocent and

easy to manipulate (pp. 16–17). Second, he refers to the tendency to mythologize the past in order to construct an opposition between old, traditional wars and new, postcolonial conflicts, in the line of Robert Kaplan's concept of 'new barbarism' (p. 10). According to this discursive tendency, the former had clear political objectives and were fought according to commonly accepted rules, while the latter are:

... demonized as purposeless modes of destruction in which 'there are no victors, only victims'. New wars are sometimes described as a 'way of life', with no purpose other than their own continuity, and as a kind of perversion of culture. Sometimes they are described with metaphors of disease, such as 'epidemic' or 'plague'. Elsewhere they are called large-scale deviant criminal enterprises, in which bandits and gangsters merely pose as rebels. . . . Description of new wars also conflate modern warfare with terrorism, particularly the targeting of civilian populations. (Rosen, 2005: 11)

As Rosen demonstrates, this distinction can be applied neither to military conflicts of the past, nor to contemporary wars (pp. 11–12). What I believe is at stake here is the neocolonial politics of essentializing a hierarchically superior northern Self and a civilizationally inferior South for the purpose of legitimizing political and military intervention, as well as economic exploitation. Rosen (2005) does not give adequate weight in his argument to the imperialist stance of the fact that war in postcolonial contexts is inscribed in a construed 'nature' of non-western cultures and that this 'inherently' violent and criminal 'nature' (from which the South cannot extricate itself) is valued according to a standard of culture that is western.² This cultural judgement is rooted in the discourse of colonial racism and bears similar *topoi*, like the discrediting of a culture as perverted or deeply pathological, or the epithet 'barbaric' itself.

As I see it, the third pillar of humanitarian discourse on child-soldiering identified and deconstructed by Rosen (2005: pp. 14–15) – the proliferation of light arms that can easily be used by children – is inextricably linked with the rhetorical need to underline the savagery of postcolonial wars, rendering the political discourse and practice that rely on the new barbarism thesis impermeable to counter-argumentation. Indeed, when children are at risk, speaking against this kind of rhetoric – as Rosen courageously does – is excluded as a taboo or blasphemy.

In fact, we witness here the use of the western idea of the child for the reinforcement of the abyssal line (Santos, 2007) drawn by the colonial system between the North and the South. Indeed, when the North 'globalizes childhood' (Boyden, 2004), imposing criteria of legality concerning the child that can hardly be applied to other cultural and social realities, the South is necessarily produced as an outlaw territory – a territory of child abuse, which carries more emotional weight than other situations of illegality. In turn, the status of a 'territory without law' (Santos, 2007: 6), of 'untamed nature' or 'savagery' confirms northern superiority and legitimates all kinds of intervention, namely appropriation and violence (for instance, through the notion of just wars) (Santos, 2007: 9). Both gain a particular sort of legitimacy due to the high symbolical dimension and the deep affective investment of the idea of the child: indeed, intervention in the name of children in the South gives the neocolonial civilizing mission and neocolonial occupation the contours of an unquestionable moral mission of redemption. The failure of African states and societies to guarantee a 'universal right' of children is presented in

such a way that it reinforces the need for paternalist action by the North, which will save the South from itself. As the North restates its hegemony as sole centre of reference, the South is forever fixed to the non-contemporariness of an atavistic, primitive, barbaric past.

Yet, if we agree with Comaroff and Comaroff (2005: 19), that the 'globalization of childhood' reveals the imperial logic inherent to modernity, and if we analyse humanitarian child-soldier discourse from the point of view of postcolonial theory, there are other elements besides the three pillars synthesized by Rosen that must be deconstructed. The authors denounce this discourse's roots in a hegemonic northern point of view.

A brief analysis of the numerous European and American humanitarian websites on child-soldiering reveals that the portrait of the child-soldier has formed a pattern that repeats itself.³ This pattern includes: (1) the use of quotes by child-soldiers, expressing a plea for protection in the name of 'all children', or describe some of the endured atrocities; and (2) a general characterization, which mentions: forced recruitment or abduction; being forced to kill or slaughter, most often a member of the family; being witness to extreme acts of violence, especially against other children; being the object of humiliation, brutal beatings, rape or sexual slavery, slave labour and hunger; and unprepared involvement in combat, with all the risks attached to it, including severe injury and death. Generally, the characterization ends with the statement that all these children want is peace and the chance to go back to school or to a 'lost childhood'.

The construed features of this patterned characterization are obvious. First, it is deeply rooted in a concept of childhood as a state of passivity and vulnerability, which demands protection and is connected to the sheltering functions of family and formal schooling. This explains why 'childhood', though biologically defined through a rigid age-threshold, can be considered 'lost' when the standards of protection and education defined by the North are violated. Second, these descriptions aim at creating a status of unquestionable victimhood and innocence, regardless of the particularities of age, context and culture. There is never room for the possibility of agency, even of a limited or tactical sort. When children are authors of war crimes, these are either omitted from the global portrait (harassing, looting and raping defenceless civilians are never mentioned) or said to have been committed under the effect of drugs, under death threats or as a result of brain washing. Recruitment is never really accepted by the humanitarian discourse as voluntary: when children admit to having chosen to enlist, a number of social explanations present this choice as forceful. Again there is no room for agency: the child (who may actually be a young adult) is denied freedom and capacity of choice (Lee, 2009: 9).

Furthermore, the enumeration of situations of extreme violence to which these children are exposed aims at ensuring an amount of indignation that can only be expressed through adjectives such as 'abhorrent' and 'barbaric'. Although the characterization of child-soldiers is most often taken out of context, these adjectives especially concern the so-called postcolonial wars in Africa. Here, other ingredients such as the magical ritualistic framework, torture and mutilations, and cannibalism contribute to the representation of a horrific environment most adequately described as outright savagery.

To be more accurate: the oxymoron we are dealing with in this context is not actually between innocence and soldiery. Seen from a western perspective, the contradiction that arises from the use of children in postcolonial 'new wars' opposes innocence

and savagery. Focusing mainly on the African context (though this is also true of other postcolonial regions), the oxymoron between innocence and savagery present in the western notion of child-soldiering confronts, on the one hand, a value whose preservation became a criterion for measuring the degree of civilization, as defined by the West/North; and, on the other hand, the ultimate 'heart of darkness', the last frontier of the mission of civilization that confirms the identities of the two poles of colonial power relations within the discourse of imperialism: Africa as the intrinsically irrational, primitive *black* hole, where violence is an inextricable part of nature, and which will eternally be dependent on intervention from the North.⁴ This new civilizing mission acquires an accrued ethical legitimacy, by assuming the violation of purity as the very definition of evil, from which children have to be protected as a universal good that belongs not so much to their context of origin but to Humanity as a whole and to the West/North as its paladin. Thus, the exercise of imperial power – be it through military, humanitarian or development aid intervention – is legitimated. This is the main message that results from northern representations of African child-soldiers.

Representations of African child-soldiers in the North

European documentary films on the child-soldier issue generally show an identical strategy: the presentation of ex-child-soldiers, found mostly in rehabilitation centres in countries like Liberia, Sierra Leone and Uganda, as they tell their stories to someone behind a camera. This is the case of *Lost Children*, directed by Ali Samadi Ahadi and Oliver Stoltz, which accompanies the trajectory of four ex-child-soldiers, three boys and a girl, aged between 8 and 14, from their admission in a rehabilitation centre in northern Uganda, throughout the rehabilitation process and until the reintegration into their families.

The film's official presentation describes its context as 'the most cruel form of war',⁵ qualified as such because of the use of children as soldiers, and because these are 'kidnapped, armed and forced to murder their own families'. The background information about the conflict in Uganda is summary and submitted to keywords such as 'unimaginable terror' and 'religious fanaticism', clearly indicating that this is one of the new, postcolonial barbaric wars.

The directors claim to film coherently from 'the children's perspective', letting the viewer witness the children speak without mediation. Yet, the unconstrained behaviour and speech of the children are an unsustainable fiction, not only because of the filming crew of white foreigners, but because many of the sequences have been staged, as the position of the camera often reveals. The constructed nature of the film is particularly evident when subtitled direct speech is replaced by 'voiceover' speeches by foreign voices in German, notably children's voices with a 'little angel' pitch.

The film reveals three strategies of presenting child-soldiers and Africa. The first of them is the typical use of the paradox between the nature of children as inherently innocent and good, and their role as perpetrators of the most atrocious crimes, such as murdering their own families, killing mothers in front of their children and cutting people to small pieces with machetes. Yet, the climax of the paradox between children and horror is reached when Opio (8 years old) describes laughingly how he exploded a man's brain and gave it to his recruits to eat. The fact that cannibalism – upgraded into sheer horror

because the protagonists are children – persists in the 21st century portrays Africa as preserving a status of savagery.

The same idea comes up in a second strategy typical of this kind of documentaries: the contradictory representation of the cultural context. On the one hand, there is an apparent concern with depicting the particularities of African culture. Yet this is tinged by an Africanist underlying text that leads the directors to show those elements that their northern public will associate with a stereotypical Africa. One of them is magic: the film's longest sequence, for example, is dedicated to the purifying ritual of Kilama, 13 years old. The exaggerated attention devoted to the ritual corresponds to a kind of sensationalist voyeurism of the exotic that represents Africa as a continent of witchcraft. This way the Dark Continent is situated in an atavistic irrational past. On the other hand, there is no real contextual understanding of the fact that Kilama's family refuses to welcome the boy home on the grounds that the community would not feel safe around him (*Lost Children*, 12' 39"). Reintegration is presented as a natural obligation of families without further questioning of the fact that the violent acts of child-soldiers are often committed against their own family members, who furthermore did not possess the same concept of the child as inherently innocent from the start. This is due to the western set of concepts concerning not only childhood, but also the role of the family in child protection and care, which excludes other notions of family, community and even of the child that, as in this case, include the idea of responsibility and accountability.

Furthermore, the lengthy attention devoted to a constructed stereotypical Africa contrasts with the extensive omission of the actual contexts in which the children evolve and that point to the cultural heterogeneity in the experience of childhood. The documentary's presentation text mentions the child-soldiers' wish to 'be a child again and live'. However, it does not further reflect on what being a child meant for each of the children involved. Significantly, children's experiences and living conditions prior to joining the rebel army are omitted. For instance, there isn't any questioning of the fact that Jennifer, a 14-year old girl, states that she would rather return to the rebel army in which she was used as a sexual slave than to go back to her father's house. Jennifer's life after rehabilitation is seen as a return to a 'lost childhood'. Yet, in fact, the girl becomes a working minor and an adolescent mother living with a man twice her age. The fact that the directors are unaware that neither of these ways of living is comparable to the idea of infancy as 'home, play and school' is revealing of a frame of thought anchored in the western hegemonic conception of the child.

Finally, though *Lost Children* shows children as cruel murderers and cannibals, it leaves out rape crimes they might have committed. As in the humanitarian discourse, they are not even mentioned in the documentary. More than violence, an active sexuality is the feature that most contradicts the idea of the child as innocent. This is probably one of the reasons why the choice of the protagonists singled out three pre-pubescent boys and a girl, allowing for sexuality to appear as passive and rape exclusively in the perspective of the victim.

Lost Children tells as much about neocolonial power relations and the rewriting of the discourse of imperialism as about child-soldiers. Their portrait serves – even if maybe unconsciously – the hegemony of the North over Africa, which is relegated anew to the same place of subalternity with different though emotionally and ethically unbeatable

arguments. As Di Caprio's character puts it in *Blood Diamond*, in a clearly essentializing stance: 'TIA, This is Africa': the red African soil testifies of bloodshed as the eternal dark history of the continent.

In Edward Zwick's film, the child-soldier issue is secondary and used as a kind of stage-setting that documents the dimension of African evilness, an evilness that arises from an exotic mixture of devilish beauty and incomprehensible violence. Children suffer and die in rebel camps, portrayed as orgiastic chaos, mixing dance, alcohol, drugs, sex and weapons. However, all ends well when the white hero and a providential American journalist save one particular boy soldier and the West calls him to its bosom – even if all the other children get bombed in the process. The script links war in Sierra Leone to diamond traffic and this to market demands in Europe and the United States. Nevertheless, Africa is still pictured as the ultimate irretrievable 'heart of darkness', where white people are always good (even mercenaries), and 'good blacks' are always no more than heroic exceptions. The film goes as far as to make the 'good African' utter a longing for colonialism, which seems particularly justified by the extreme portrait of the destruction Africans are bringing upon themselves. The crossing of the last frontier – that of childhood's innocence and promise – is presented as the definite impossibility of a future, the ultimate denial of an independent History for Africans and the reassuring confirmation of western paternalism and supremacy.

Representation of African child-soldiers in the South

Although tracing a divide between the North and Africa is certainly simplistic, fact remains that literature and film by African authors present a significantly more varied spectrum of approaches to the child-soldier issue. Remarkable is the engagement of important African authors of high literature in a role of resistance to the single story coming from the North. This role is also chosen by African film directors.

Such is the case of the film *Ezra* (2007) by the Nigerian director Newton I Aduaka, who presents his film as a reaction to the patterned northern representations of child-soldiers:

It was really my intention to speak not just what I saw in those news reports from the children, you know, with the western camera man with his camera and asking 'did you lose a lot because of the war?'. Of course they lost a lot. 'What do you want to do with your life now? / I want to go to school?'. Of course they want to go to school. . . . I wanted Ezra as a character to say his own anger. Yes, I killed people, but I'm angry. And it is difficult to take that stand. It's almost like you are not entitled to it. (*Ezra*, 1'15" – 1'59")

In order to create this space of resistance, where child-soldiers are allowed to express their anger and betrayal, Aduaka portrays his main character as an adolescent ex-soldier who testifies before a Truth and Reconciliation Committee. Though maybe unrealistic, this perspective foregrounds the responsibility and voice of the young soldier who claims the right to be treated as an adult and according to his military rank. Indeed, conscious agency by adolescent soldiers is underlined in the film, for example through the love story between Ezra and Mariam, a remarkably mature girl-soldier with strong cultural

and ideological formation, who volunteers to fight for the cause of democracy and social justice, though she is lucid about the corruption of the political ideal by greedy leaders and diamond traffic. Even if the film preserves a portrait of extreme violence inflicted upon child-soldiers (being kidnapped, slave work, vulnerability in combat, death, drugs), it also includes raids in which violence is exercised upon the community by the same child-soldiers (under the effect of drugs). In one of these, Ezra murders his own parents.

Furthermore, the typical rhetoric of innocence used by the humanitarian discourse is criticized as an inadequate solution for a both individual and collective problem. First of all, an accent is set on the need to appease the community. The community is entitled the right to claim amends from the ex-soldier, who is considered a common murderer according to a notion of childhood and youth which does not comprise innocence as a norm. In the film, both the appeasement of the community and the overcoming of trauma by the ex-soldier can only be achieved by expiation of guilt. This is sought by Ezra's sister, Onitcha: even if she supports and helps her brother, Onitcha nonetheless demands that he avows his crimes, so that he can purify himself and the family and build a future. Though voiceless (she had her tongue cut out by child-soldiers), she functions as a kind of Greek tragedy chorus, who thrusts Ezra deep into his own dilemmas.

It is true that Aduaka fails to solve the main issues his film raises. One of its weaknesses is the final indecision between responsibility and innocence for Ezra, for though he claims agency as a soldier he does not acknowledge the murder of his parents. The final speeches by the judges of the TRC ambiguously echo the innocent child's *topos* and a 'short-circuited' Ezra ends up caught in the redemptive humanitarian bosom, in which even a black Santa Claus is at call – one that does not bring presents to forgotten African children. Still, Aduaka's film puts up a number of problems that the representations from the North ignore or camouflage, such as the inner perplexities of the ex-combatant (there are none in the northern innocent child), including his dignity as a young adult, and the responsibility and the role that he should play within the community as an equal social subject. Moreover, when the film accords both the community and the ex-soldier the position of war victims, they are never presented as passive objects of compassion, unable to take their future in their own hands and forever dependent on outside intervention.

In Anglophone and Francophone African literature, child-soldier representations are much more differentiated. Yet, there are aesthetic strategies that find a common root in *Sozaboy. A Novel in Rotten English* (1985), by the Nigerian Ken Saro-Wiwa (1941–95). These strategies are: (1) a first person narrator; (2) the portrait of the protagonist as a picaresque anti-hero; (3) the use of humour and irony (unthinkable in the dramatic northern narratives); and (4) the creation of a particular language by the child – the 'rotten English' mentioned in the title – which can be claimed for a postcolonial reading as a language of resistance. *Sozaboy* tells the story of a boy soldier in the Biafran war, prior to the emergence of today's northern child-soldier notion. The positive portrait of the young soldier, who is not seen as a 'child', derives not so much from his heroism, but from the capacity of survival in a context that bears all the wrong: civil war. *Sozaboy's* youth and lower class status, both present in the word 'boy', make him occupy a marginal position that allows him an apparently naive, but very lucid, paradoxical perspective on war. It also allows him to traverse different contending camps and territories, denouncing the absurdity of military conflict.

Similar aesthetic strategies are adopted in *Allah n'est pas obligé* (2000) by Ahmadou Kourouma (1927–2003), from the Ivory Coast, whose story bears similarities to Saro-Wiwa's tale. The narrator is again a boy soldier, Birahima, who presents a detailed account of his early childhood and of the motives that made him fight. As other child-soldiers die, it is also Birahima that sings their funeral sermons, according to an African tradition. These sermons describe not so much children's experiences as fighters, but mostly how soldiery became their inevitable and tragic life path (thus inverting the northern perspective that cuts children from their past). More importantly they include the war crimes the children perpetrated: murders, looting, drugs, raping and cannibalism. Kourouma is very far from the western notion of childhood: nowhere do we find a word about purity or innocence, or about youngsters as passive objects of protection. The accent is on the diversity of life stories and on violence and suffering, including arms and rape, previously to becoming a soldier, and on the extreme cruelty children and youngsters are capable of. Furthermore, Birahima's funeral sermons underline how war became an inevitable and tragic path for children in states, societies and families that are fractured and impregnated with violence.

It is important to note that the child-soldier issue does not build the centre of the narrative.⁶ In fact, Kourouma's text spends most of its pages presenting an extensive historical account of how conflicts in a vast region of West Africa (Guinea, Ivory Coast, Liberia and Sierra Leone) evolved, including political, social, religious, cultural and ethnic causes. Thus, it becomes clear that the choice of a boy soldier as a narrator is instrumental in a much broader story: indeed, like Sozaboy, Birahima is a picaresque hero that crosses borders, conflicting camps, social geographies, discourses and languages with an easiness that results from his marginal condition as a youth and an orphan in a disrupted social context. Birahima's narrative is that of a fragmented post-colonial reality, in which there are no longer socially predetermined roles, not even for children. On the contrary, youngsters are the first to reveal societal fractures and to move for survival in the interstices of a chaotic reality. These interstices are presented as spaces of resistance created by the child. One of them is built by language: first by speaking 'petit nègre' (Kourouma, 2000: 9), a kind of incorrect French specific to the colonized black speaker, which states the refusal of assimilation by a neocolonial order; second, through the use of four dictionaries that allow Birahima to implicate in his story as much the 'français, toubab, colon, colonialiste et raciste', as the 'négres noirs africains indigènes sauvages' (Kourouma, 2000: 233, 174).

This approach is the radical opposite of the out-of-context representations from the North, because it rejects not only the western idea of childhood but also the neocolonial discourse which typifies Africa, though at the same time ferociously attacking political regimes and West African societies. Kourouma also makes clear that war and the use of children are both products of major social disruption and that soldiering may be understood as an expression of agency by children who attempt to find a place and an identity in a world where they have never enjoyed either the havens the North conceived for their protection, or a social understanding as innocent, 'chic et mignon'. The extent to which the historical political and social context is depicted in the novel is manifest of where the author finds the solution for the child-soldier problem, namely in the political resolution of conflicts.

A similar statement about the political resolution of conflicts is made by Emmanuel Dongala, from the Congo, in his novel *Johnny Chien Méchant* (2002). This novel presents the two-fold strategy of, on the one hand, corrosively criticizing politics in Africa and, on the other hand, underlining the promise of a future present in African societies.

Dongala's novel has two protagonists who live and read from opposite perspectives the occupation of a non-identified capital of Central Africa during a coup d'état. The first is Johnny Chien Méchant, a 15-year-old soldier of the rebel militias who commands a brigade of child-soldiers. Again, this character is an anti-hero, whose picaresque traits are his constantly fantasizing perception both of the situations he goes through and of himself. In spite of the military leadership, of the evilness and brutality he imagines himself capable of, Johnny proves to be a coward and inept leader: his most violent orders, including random shootings of civil populations, are panic reactions to situations that overwhelm him. In spite of the intellectual skills he repeatedly boasts of, what comes to the fore is his ignorance and the naivety of his (mis)understanding of reality. This caricature underlines the tragic dimension that comes from the fact that this adolescent, unskilled for facing life, bears the power of arms and commits collective rapes, summary executions (including of children) and looting without any kind of moral scruples. The only solid side of Johnny's personality is, rather, the decided way he incarnates the culture and discourse of the type of masculinity associated with militarism and violence.

The other protagonist is a woman. Laokolé, a 16-year old, represents the perspective of the civilians persecuted by the militias in the occupation of the city. Laokolé is an exceptional, morally superior adolescent with mature emotions and an unshakeable pragmatic rationality. She takes in her own hands the survival of her younger brother and handicapped mother. From the start she assumes her role not only as an adult, but as a mother who has the duty and the responsibility of protecting the younger and the older generations (Dongala, 2002: 76). Also, she refuses to be seen as a defenceless victim, maintaining an outstanding dignity and a constant ability to recognize kindness when it irrupts unexpectedly within a context of extreme violence. At the same time, she possesses notable intellectual skills and a fascination for science and abstract thought. In the novel it is Laokolé who personifies courage and it is also she who defeats and kills Chien Méchant and steps forward into the future with an orphan little girl she adopted.

And yet Laokolé is as much a child of her continent as Johnny, which annuls the possibility of a barbaric society being summarily made responsible for the corruption of their younger ones. Laokolé's lucidity and dignity stand out as a symbolical rise of Africans against northern paternalism. This is not equivalent to rising against western values. Indeed, though deeply rooted in African culture, Laokolé makes her own a kind of thought that is that of western Enlightenment, underlining the enormous relevance of education not only in science and rationality, but also in ethics, responsibility and emancipation. The active and lucid incorporation of western thought by this very African girl is clearly not the result of colonialism's mission of civilization, which would be one of tutelage, but the opposite: an act of choice and freedom, a powerful claim for equality by someone who is in three ways a subaltern – an African, a woman and a child. By displacing the arbitrary lines that oppose child and adult in the West, the author refuses the oxymoron child-soldier and the link between immaturity and innocence, asserting that cruelty is a part of human nature in all ages, geographies and cultures, but that it is

exacerbated by poverty, inequality, ignorance, patriarchy and militarism. And that both voice and responsibility as a subject and social actor (for better and worse) are not and cannot be exclusive to adults.⁷

Dongala's novel was converted into a film entitled *Johnny Mad Dog* by Jean-Stéphane Sauvaire (director) and Mathieu Kassowitz (producer) in 2008. In my view, this film converts an excellent novel into a very noisy and extremely violent chaos. Indeed, the balance achieved by the double narrative point of view in the novel is lost in the film, for Laokolé's part is reduced to incomprehensible bits and pieces. The accent is displaced onto Johnny and his militia, played by juvenile actors who were soldiers in Liberia. The fact that these actors were given freedom to play out their real experiences as child-soldiers is in itself socially and aesthetically interesting. Yet what strikes one is that though Sauvaire shows child-soldiers as capable of enormous cruelty, including murder, looting and rape, this happens along the lines of the 'innocent perpetrator paradox', for he includes typical motives of the northern representations that were absent in the novel: child-soldiers being kidnapped and forced to kill family members, battle chants and brainwashing, cannibalism, cocaine rubbed into cuts opened in the boys' foreheads, or the motive of the nostalgia of the child-soldier for a family and a lost childhood. Sauvaire's film not only contradicts Dongala's perspective on young soldiers and African realities, but he also confirms both the barbarism thesis in the presentation of Africa and the construction of childhood along the lines of the hegemonic western ideas. Indeed, it does worse: it neutralizes Dongala's resistant discourse and representations by incorporating them into the main narrative of the North.

The differences between child-soldier representations from the North and the South clearly show how a northern construction of Africa has replaced Africa and the Africans and made them non-existent on the other side of an invisible abyssal line. The moral and affective value invested in a portrait of the child-soldier built upon a western notion of childhood as fragility and innocence are instrumental in reinforcing this discourse and, in turn, legitimizing imperial domination by the North over the South. The representations from the South are more ambiguous and leave many questions unsolved. However, in their wider variety and in their questioning of the neocolonial stance of western stereotyped constructions, they are proof of the existence of a counter-hegemonic discourse that must be taken into account. It gives voice to different conceptions of children and their involvement in armed conflict, as well as of African societies and politics that have to be acknowledged as an important part of a resistant anti-colonialist African culture.

Furthermore, the existence of a southern counter-discourse solidly recommends that we add a critical reflection to how public awareness of the child-soldier issue is raised in the North. Indeed, what this visibility process, which is relevant and whose good intentions are possibly unquestionable, may be undertaking is the actual invisibility of African children, of their specific life paths and social roles, as well as of the contexts they evolve in – an invisibility that will render the social and political handling of the issue all the more complicated, if not impossible.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Notes

1. This title was inspired by a conference held by Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie that can be seen at: www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.html.
2. Indeed, this argument is not emphasized in *Armies of the Young* (2005). A more assertive declaration in this sense can be found in his essay 'The child soldier in literature' (Rosen, 2009).
3. One example might be the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child-Soldiers' website. Available at: www.child-soldiers.org/childsoldiers/child-soldiers.
4. Rosen (2009: 125) states: 'But despite attempts to lend the situation of child soldiers a universal "everyman" quality, humanitarian and literary portraits of child soldiers do so by drawing upon an earlier discourse about Africa that served to dehumanize Africans. In the end, we are still writing Africa's script, and with it the larger story of child soldiers, in much the same way that Conrad did so many years ago.' Though Rosen is correct concerning western representations, I cannot agree with his generalization of this fact to representations from the South, which react to this Africanist neocolonial discourse. This is my central argument in this article.
5. All translations are mine.
6. I cannot agree with Rosen (2009) when he states that Kourouma's novel merely 'contain[s] episodes in which child soldiers appear' (p. 127, note 28). A child-soldier is the narrator of the novel and child-soldiering its motivation. *Allah n'est pas obligé*, as much as *Sozaboy*, has also played the role of modelling other literary child-soldier representations, such as Uzodinma Iweala's in *Beasts of No Nation* (2005) Indeed, the boy-soldier Agu's language in this novel is inspired by Birahima's. However, Iweala neutralizes the latter's potential of postcolonial resistance as his boy-soldier is swallowed by the western idea of the child: broken language becomes a sign of immaturity and lack of schooling, or of a vulnerable 'lost childhood'. Rosen does not recognize this revealing fact that documents the difference between southern and northern representations. I had to exclude *Beasts of No Nation* from my analysis mostly for space reasons, but also because Iweala, a young writer of Nigerian descent educated in the USA, reproduces in fiction the main *topoi* of humanitarian western and Africanist neocolonial discourse. I therefore include him in the northern set of representations. To be true, the fact that Iweala is presented as a Nigerian (as one who knows, being an African himself) can be very dangerous from the point of view of the incorporation of dissonant discourses by the main western narrative and of the annihilation of their dimension of resistance.
7. I totally disagree with Rosen's (2009) interpretation of *Johnny Chien Méchant*, which, in spite of his extremely valuable deconstruction of hegemonic northern discourses, is still based on a US-centred perspective that allows for such statements as 'In the literature, folklore, and song about war, the very common name "Johnny" has been used to mean very anonymous soldier' (p. 123) and indeed for the argument contained in the very title of his article. As the author's examples demonstrate, this can only be true of the North. Rosen overlooks Dongala's attitude of reaction to hegemonic representations of the child-soldier in Africa that is present, among many other things, in the contrast between the names of the two protagonists – Johnny, influenced by globalized culture of American origin, and Laokolé, who bears an African name and represents an emancipated African culture (as I have shown). To be true, it is mostly by undervaluing the double structure of the novel and Laokolé's role that Rosen can take it as an easy prey to his reading of child-soldier representations as universally homogeneous.

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