

The Americanization of the Child Soldier Narrative

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Abstract

*In less than a decade, the child soldier narrative has changed form and audience, relocating from post-colonial African fiction to North American autobiographical memoir, a change I will refer to as “Americanization.”¹ The shift reveals much about the modern social construct of “childhood,” the requirements of translation and genre blending, and the reading horizons of audience. This essay tracks the change, using as pivotal texts Ken Saro-Wiwa’s *Sozaboy* (1985), Amadou Kourouma’s *Allah n’est pas obligé* (2000) (*Allah is not Obligated*, 2006), China Keitetsi’s *Child Soldier: Fighting for my Life* (2002) and Uzodinma Iweala’s *Beasts of No Nation* (2005), arriving finally at Ishmael Beah’s sensational best-seller *A Long Way Gone* (2007).*

The Child Soldier Narrative as Fable

The foundation of this genre is Ken Saro-Wiwa’s *Sozaboy*, published in 1985. He treated a war already 15 years in the past, the Biafran conflict of 1967 – 70. He had not been a child soldier, but a 26-to- 30-year-old supporter of the government cause. He had earlier written a

¹ “Americanization is a term for the influence the U.S. has on the culture of other countries, such as their popular culture, cuisine, technology, business practices, or political techniques. The term has been used since at least 1907. In the early 1900's within the U.S., the term Americanization referred to the process of acculturation by immigrants to American customs,” according to Wikipedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Americanization>. See also my definition of Americanization at *Encyclopedia of Sociology Online*, Blackwell. http://www.sociologyencyclopedia.com/fragr_image/media/news3

personal account of the war, *On a Darkling Plain*, the publication of which he delayed so as not to disrupt the post-war reconciliation.² He was already the author of 20-some books, as well as the producer/director of a weekly television satire. Scholar William Boyd pointed out that Saro-Wiwa's language "beautifully captures the essence of [personalities and situations] with imagery drawn from the oral tradition" (Horton, 9).³ Boyd wrote that Mene, the child narrator, is an "African Candide... [and] like Voltaire's Candide, Sozaboy is also an archetype and a victim."⁴ When Actes-Sud brought out the novel in French in 1998, French reviewers understood the similarity immediately: Catharine Bedarida remarked in *Le Monde* that Mene was "un villageois naïf ... un idiot s'en va-t-en guerre" ['a village clown, an idiot who takes himself off to war'].⁵ The book, in short, was read as fiction modeled on *Candide*, spiced by its use of pidgin English, and enlivened by post-colonial inventions.

When Amadou Kourouma, an Ivorian, published *Allah n'est pas obligé* (2000), he followed the path of Saro-Wiwa. He wrote from the point of view of a 12-year-old "p'tit nègre" named Birahima, whose "blablabla," as he called his narrative, advanced in "très, très mauvais" French that was heavily figured by folk sayings and folkloric counterpoints between traditional magic and bloody political realities (1). Kourouma lampooned magic through the figure of Yacouba, a gris-gris maker and "money multiplier," who punctuates Birahima's picaresque travels as Pangloss did those of Candide. In the French original, the charm of this approach was considerable. The

² Saro-Wiwa's war diaries are mentioned at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ken_Saro-Wiwa, but they do not appear to be in print.

³ Nnolim and Corcoran in 1992 remarked that the novel was a bildungsroman. See Charles Nnolim, 'Saro-Wiwa's World and His Craft in *Sozaboy*' in C. Nnolim (Ed.), *Critical Essays in Ken Saro-Wiwa's Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English* (Port Harcourt: Saros International Publishers, 1992), p. 78. 'Child' soldiers in Ken Saro-Wiwa's "Sozaboy" and Ahmadou Kourouma's "Allah n'est pas obligé" *Mots Pluriel*, no 22. September 2002. <http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/MotsPluriels/MP2202pc.html>

⁴ William Boyd, introduction, Ken Saro-Wiwa, *Sozaboy*.

⁵ Catharine Bedarida, "Un idiote s'en va-t-en guerre," *Le Monde*, 17 Jul 1998. 43.

rationality of Voltaire peeks out between the lines, but Kourouma's love of his culture is clear. The book was a success but fame came in a politicized context. Kourouma had published a more serious and incisive book on African politics, *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* [Awaiting the Vote of the Wild Animals] (1998) that was unfairly overlooked. When his new book was nominated for the Renaudot and Goncourt des Lyceens prizes in 2000, it smacked of compensation. He became the celebrated "guerrier-griot" [warrior-wiseman] (*Le Monde*, 01/11/2000), who had written "La danse macabre" (*L'Express*, 21/09/2000), and a "classique modern" (*Liberation*, 09/21/2000).

Kourouma was 73 when the novel appeared, had never been a child soldier, and his country was then at peace. But he had seen enough of African dictators and civil wars from exile in Algeria, Cameroon, and Togo, not to mention events in Liberia and Sierra Leone, to foresee what might happen in his native Cote d'Ivoire. It did happen in 2002, and he understandably held himself as an elder statesman of African literature. During the critical early days of the novel's reception, Kourouma recognized that most attention was paid to his narrator's style, and he sought in interviews to frame his work in the French literary tradition: he averred that "depuis Rabelais, personne n'a travaillé la langue comme lui. It a fait du français du petit people, des marges, le français essential" [since Rabelais, no one has worked the language like he did. He made the French of the little people, the marginalized, into essential French'] (*Le Monde*, 11/1/2000, 8). No surprise that French reviewer Catharine Bedarida saw him combining "Balzac, Proust et, surtout, Céline." Kourouma and Saro-Wiwa provided the genre with a continental, rationalist orientation, using child narrators to satirize corrupt government and tribalism.

The Changed Status of children

The elevation of child soldiering to a topos, as Scott Gates and Simon Reich note, has "coincided with a dramatic change in the perception of childhood, at least in the industrialized West, where early years are seen as a sacred time reserved for innocence, learning, and play. The West's view of children as needing nurture is an outlier in much of the rest of the world, where children are also an economic resource -- on

farms and in households, markets, and factories” (1). Children have long been involved in war: in the ancient world, they served as aides, drivers, armor bearers, powder monkeys, scouts, and ‘squires’ to adult warriors, a practice narrated by the Bible (David's service to King Saul) and Greek mythology (Hercules and [Hylas](#)). In 1212 the Children's Crusade enlisted children as young as eight. Children fought at the Battle of Waterloo, in the American Civil War, in World War I, in the Spanish Civil War, and in the Vietnam and Cambodian wars. Most scholars date the differing view of children in the West, and particularly in North America, to the post-W.W. II “trauma” studies of Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham-Tiffany. There was also an increased “medicalization” of the field between 1960 and 1990, according to critics like Boyden and de Berry, who provide a skeptical summary:⁶

Medical investigations tend to yield an almost unitary representation of conflict ... In this way children and adolescents are portrayed as the passive recipients of adult agency, the victims of wars waged by others and of brutality that is alien and imposed. Even when the young are researched in their roles as combatants they are thought of as being divorced from the conditions and ideologies that produce and reproduce political violence. Personal volition is denied and emphasis given to their vulnerability and helplessness, to their abduction and forced conscription by brainwashing, treachery and deceit. (xv)

This medical re-contextualization of “the child” had implications for narrative. If the child was not ‘passive’ but exercised some ‘volition’ in killing, then another narrative fabula would be needed to recruit a

⁶ There arose a call to action, mostly in Great Britain and the United States, typified by the work of Garbarino, Kostelny, and Dubrow's *No Place to Be a Child* (1991). They had a dialectic relation to Boyden and de Berry (2004) and Honwana (2006), seeking to balance the objective and subjective approaches. .

sympathetic audience, for the killer child was not the child in *Candide*.⁷

Translation

One would think that the foundational texts would translate well. They did not. In French, Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* lost the charm, the hybridity, and the creativity that were possible in 'rotten English.' The Burkinabian team of translators brought the narrator closer to *Candide*. In the original, Mene (called "Pétit Minitaire" in French) is a naïf whose innocence is carefully staged and punctured by his adult puppeteer. Ironic sympathy for the narrator turns out to be one of the initially undefined characteristics of the founding African texts. The narrator must also be separated from family, only to find a substitute family on the road. All of this was already there in *Sozaboy*, if somewhat obscured by the pyrotechnics of language and style, but it did not translate. In French the novel seemed a simple picaresque adventure. As Catharine Bedarida wrote in her review, "l'intrigue du roman est toute simple. Cet éloge de la fuite – 'courir, courir, courir' – conclut la série d'aventures vécues par Pétit Minitaire, nouvelle incarnation de l'idiot" ["the plot of the story is very simple. This elegy to flight – run, run, run – concludes the series of adventures lived by Little Minitaire, the new incarnation of the idiot"] (43). That final "courir" line of French is nicely parallel in its verbs, but not quite the same as "I will just run and run and run and run and run. Believe me yours sincerely," with which Mene had originally signed off (181). The original novel had been a bildungsroman with stylistic bravo, and a nod to the ending of *Huckleberry Finn*, but in French translation it became a picaresque and political satire – it used genres already understood by French readers.

Translation was also problematic for *Allah is not Obligated*. The creative patois of this novel involves a send-up of *Larousse*, *Pétit Robert*, and *Harrap's*, which is fun for the Francophone who read those books in school. When the novel appeared in English (2005),

⁷ Fabula is a term originating in Russian Formalism and employed in Narratology. It refers to a chronological order in retold events that is basically the same in similarly themed narratives.

translator Frank Wynne had his hands full. Birahima often omits the first person pronoun in French.⁸ The English translation struggles with this voice and often seems to be channeling Holden Caulfield:

I'm maybe ten, maybe twelve years old (two years ago, grandmother said I was eight, maman said I was ten) and I talk too much. Polite kids are supposed to listen, they don't sit under that talking tree and they don't chatter like a mynah bird in a fig tree. Talking is for old men with big white beards. There's a proverb that says, 'For as long as there's a head on your shoulders, you don't put your headdress on your knee.' That's village customs for you. But I don't give two fucks about village customs anymore, 'cos I've been in Liberia and killed lots of guys with an AK-47 (we called it a 'kalash') and got fucked-up on kanif and lots of hard drugs. (3)

The English translation uses words such as “prestidigitation” (41) and “fuckwit” (51), alien to the tone of the original, but does not translate “soutane” and “mitre” (52). Reviewers found the English book to resemble not Rabelais (to whom Kourouma compared himself) or even Salinger, but Orwell and Golding (*The Guardian*). There are also such locutions as “Phrygian bonnets” (177) and “young lycaeons of the revolution” (173) placed in the mouth of the 10-year-old narrator, not to mention the translation of words from Spanish and Portuguese that would be obvious to Anglophone readers (“number one” for “numero uno”). Aminatta Forna in *The Guardian* found the novel

⁸ Kourouma gives Birahima this voice: “Suis dix ou douze ans (il y a deux ans grand-mère disait huit et maman dix) et je parle beaucoup. Un enfant poli écoute, ne grade pas la palabre ... Il ne cause pas comme un oiseau gendarme dans les branches de figuier. Ça, c'est pour les vieux aux barbes abondante et blanches, c'est ce que dit le proverb: le genou ne porte le chapeau quand la tête est sur le cou. C'est ça les coutumes au village. Mais moi depuis longtemps je 'en fous des coutumes du village, entendu que j'ai été au Liberia, que j'ai tué beaucoup de gens avec kalachnikov (ou kalach) et me suis bien camé avec kanif et les autres drogues dures. “ (10-11)

similar to Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, a disappointment since she had expected a "magic realist novel."

A Changing Target Audience

The growing international market for "world literature," like the changed conception of the 'child,' muddied the question of the intended audience. Was Kourouma writing for Africans, for the French, or for an international English audience? Take away his style, and you were left with a fabula derivative of Voltaire, and the political references. The original bona fides of post-colonial African fiction were undercut on other bases as well. African writers were acquiring agents, who were thinking about translation rights, even films. Or they were engaged in polemics about writing in English, like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. By 2000 the United States was becoming a lucrative audience for 'world literature,' as universities rolled out diversity requirements. The African author could be a 'platform' for multiple narrative sales, if s/he were efficiently corporatized on the Anglo-American model. Someone had to consider the efficient sale of other foreign rights, subsidiary rights to film, and tax advantages. The U.S. edition of a Nigerian novel, for example, would likely be the basis of its translation into Spanish and Chinese.

The reading interests of the target audience were also of great importance. Who was concerned about the fate of childhood, about the rise of child soldiers? Mostly white, middle class, and liberal readers. This audience seemed to want violence that was both 'true' but also redemptive. The fables of Saro-Wiwa and Kourouma were dated, in the face of news reports about thousands of child soldiers in West Africa brandishing AK-47s and using drugs. And fiction masquerading as reality was under attack after James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* (2003) and Margaret Seltzer's *Love and Consequences* (2008).

China Keitetsi: Realism or Melodrama?

China Keitetsi's *Child Soldier: Fighting for My Life* (2002), one of the first narratives written by an actual child soldier, illustrates the first new direction possible to the child soldier novel -- fidelity to experience. As a child Keitetsi dislikes her parents, shirks work,

tortures pets, and resents her care-givers and old people – she is realistic, but she is not sympathetic. She loses her biological family, in accord with the fabula requirements, but when she is reunited with them, she complains that “Over the next few days my mother was completely impossible, giving me too much unwanted attention” (137). Perhaps it happened this way, but Keitetsi did not take readers on any known or compelling narrative path.

Instead her narrative overflowed with unsorted and unfocused incident – all events seem equal, as they probably were. Conscripted as the consort of an officer, she circles back and forth between living quarters in town and battles at road blocks. She is most invested in scenes like this one:

I ran to my room where I remained until the next morning. After breakfast we drove to the office. Later Kashilingi came out and told me to call his lover, a woman who worked as secretary to Rwigyema, now a major general and the Minister for Defense. When I got there I met with Rwigyema’s bodyguards. One of the boys, named Happy, was my best friend, so I began gossiping, forgetting what I had come for. (150)

The foci are sex, jealousy, confusing parentage, and philandering fathers. Keitetsi’s soldiering effectively ends when she has a baby, and while she leaves no doubt that she killed people, the violence occurs in a kind of erasure: “When it was over we had to move on because the enemy who was better equipped than us didn’t leave us alone for long.... After the terror had ended and we felt safe enough we stood up in panic, feeling our bodies to see if we were hit” (101-2).

Four years later, after drifting and working as a barmaid in a sex shop, Keitetsi meets Danes who smuggle her to Johannesburg, where she checks herself into a hospital for “an operation.” Then she goes to the Home Affairs Office and “that was how I ended up at the UN with Burt Leenschool” (208). Her story ends on a particular moral note

that, while defying genre expectations, rings true: “In Denmark life is treated so carefully that even an animal has rights” (214).⁹

Genre Blending

The other direction in which the child soldier narrative could turn – toward Americanization -- became clear with Uzodinma Iweala’s *Beasts of No Nation* (2005). Providing a link for world music cognoscenti, the title comes from Nigerian pop star Fela Kuti’s 1989 album of the same name. The narrator is Agu, who after child soldiering comes to redemption through a mission school and loving teacher. Unlike Keitetsi, Agu describes murder. As he kills a woman, he thinks:

You are not my mother, I am saying to the girl’s mother and then I am raising my knife high above my head. I am liking the sound of the knife chopping KPWUDA KPWUDA on her head and how the blood is just splashing on my hand and my face and my feet. I am chopping and chopping and chopping until I am looking up and it is dark.

.....

I am not bad boy," he tells himself afterward. "I am not bad boy. I am soldier and soldier is not bad if he is killing. I am telling this to myself because soldier is supposed to be killing, killing, killing. So if I am killing, then I am only doing what is right" (51).

From his musical references to his descriptions of murder to his methodical implementation of a Nigerian pidgin, Iweala was calculating. His ‘pidgin’ actually makes the text more accessible; a concordance shows that “saying” is the most common word, followed by “looking, making, having,” and “seeing.” This fictive world is thus a present progressive verb blur. The book scores an 8.8 on the Fog Index and a 76.2% on the Fleish Index, meaning that only 19% and

⁹ Marc Lacey, “A Former Child Soldier Fights Her Memories,” Saturday Profile, *The New York Times*, August 30, 2003. <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/08/30/world/the-saturday-profile-a-former-child-soldier-fights-her-memories.html>

8% respectively of all books on Amazon.com are easier to read (statistics at Amazon.com). This book had considerable popular success in the United States.

As it turned out, Iweala was well versed in American literature. As Janet Maslin recognized in *The New York Times*, he had hit a formula: “Throughout the novel, the reader is invited to congratulate himself for grasping the paradoxes of such statements [as the two passages above].”¹⁰ Iweala understood that the American captivity genre serves also as a way of knowing the other, the “heathen scourges” as Mary Rowlandson called them. This cultural specificity in target audience is made evident in the luke-warm reviews outside the U.S. Ali Smith, reviewing in *The Observer*, found *Beasts of No Nation* unbearably dark. For her it was not as ‘uplifting in this genre’ as Delia Jarrett-Macauley’s *Moses, Citizen and Me* (2005), which had won the George Orwell Prize that year.¹¹

Iweala also ran afoul of scholars who thought that he, a Harvard-educated student of Jamaica Kincaid, was slumming on the territory of Saro-Wiwa. As we now know, thanks to several investigators, Iweala was born in 1982 in Washington, D.C., to wealthy Nigerian diplomats.¹² His mother was a banker, his father a diplomat. He had attended St. Albans private school, graduated from Harvard University, where he was a Mellon Mays Scholar, and had received a number of prizes for his writing. He had been well positioned to grasp the possible overlap of the child soldier and U.S. captivity narratives and to merge them. Iweala quickly distanced himself from claims of verisimilitude: “in my junior year at university I was co-president of the Harvard African Students Association and we invited a former child soldier from Uganda to come and speak to us. It's one thing to read about it but it's

¹⁰ Janet Maslin, “A Conscripted Soldier’s Tale from the Heart of Darkness,” *New York Times*, November 17, 2005. <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/17/books/17masl.html?>

¹¹ <http://blogcritics.org/books/article/something-beautiful-and-strong-interview-with/page-2/>. Jarrett-McCauley was an English academic and feminist writing a novel, albeit based on the experience of relatives in Sierra Leone. She “conducted most of the research from London.”

¹² <http://www.africansuccess.org/visuFiche.php?id=626&lang=en>

another to hear somebody speak: to see the face, to understand this as a person, not just an abstract situation.”¹³ That speaker had been Keitetsi.

The Perfect Blend, at Starbucks

By 2007, the child soldier novel was being described as a “trope” by the California-based blogger Leoaffricanus, who wrote of *Beasts of No Nation* that “literature on child soldiers in West Africa’s civil (and resource) wars has grown into a genre of its own.”¹⁴ Into this market came Ishmael Beah in 2007 with *A Long Way Gone*. Better written than the narratives of Keitetsi or Iweala, his tale combined features of both the traditional African and North American captivity plots, while also tapping into public concerns about childhood and rap music. The first half of this narrative harks back to *Candide*. War sets Beah and his friends on the road after they attend a rap contest; they have a series of picaresque misadventures, leaving them with a deepening sense of futility. Echoes of Saro-Wiwa and Kourouma are unmistakable. The boys cannot find their families and grow inured to death. Then the government needs to defend the bush village where they find refuge, and Lt. Jabati explains that they can take up arms or walk into rebel gunfire. Once they are “trained” into this new family, the boys listen to rap, watch movies, and consume “white pills” that allow them to fight for days without sleeping or eating. Beah too has narrative amnesia when killing: “I can feel the warmth of my AK-47’s barrel on my back. I don’t remember when I last fired it. It feels as if needles have been hammered into my brain, and it is hard to be sure if it is day or night” (17-18). That his parents and brother were killed makes his deadly tasks “as easy as drinking water.” Then one day in 1996 a truck rolls into town and three UNICEF workers jump down: Lt. Jabati gives them the youngest of his soldiers, among whom is Beah. He is 16 and has been fighting for three years (though this and other facts are in dispute).¹⁵

¹³ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/3646783/A-writers-life-Uzodinma-Iweala.html>

¹⁴ <http://theleoaffricanus.com/2007/12/page/2/>

¹⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ishmael_Beah

Re-settled with other child soldiers in Freetown, Beah fights frequently and distrusts everyone. He credits one person, Nurse Esther, with bringing him to normalcy, in part through supplying him the rap music that linked him to his childhood. In 1997, he attends a UN conference on child soldiers as a kind of poster boy, but soon after he returns, Sierra Leone again plunges into civil war, and he flees to neighbouring Guinea. From there he goes to live in New York City with Laura Simms, whom he had met at the conference a year earlier and who became his foster mother. He attended the United Nations International School, and then Oberlin College, from which he graduated in 2004 with a degree in political science. He has repeatedly said that returning to civilized society was more difficult than becoming a child soldier. On the Jon Stewart Show he focused almost exclusively on the redemptive “opportunity” he had been given to begin a “second life.”¹⁶

That theme is not to be found in Saro-Wiwa or Kourouma, or even in Keitetsi. Beah’s ‘rehabilitation’ rather reminds one of Mary Rowlandson’s professed difficulties in reassimilation into Puritan society. Rowlandson, and most North American slave captives (notably those of Oladah Equiano and Frederick Douglass) also describe a better world from which they are taken (in Douglass’ case, the house of Mrs. Auld). Like the Africa of Oladah Equiano, Beah’s childhood in Sierra Leone was pastoral and prelapsarian. His father “sat in a hammock in the shade of the mango, guava, and orange trees, and turned his radio to the BBC news” (7). Nature is everywhere and benign. Beah’s time in the army, like Mrs. Rowlandson’s captivity among the Indians, is both a horrible testament of death and a chance to experience the Other. Throughout the experience, however, the protagonist must never lose faith. Like Mrs. Rowlandson, who was given a Bible by an Indian, Beah is blessed by a Providence that links him to the “good” Lt. Jabati, who spends his free moments reading *Julius Caesar*. “I wasn’t sure when or where it was going to end,” Beah writes. “I didn’t know what I was going to do with my life. I felt that I was starting over and over again” (69). Beah’s narrative is sign-

¹⁶ Ishmael Beah on Jon Stewart Show, 2/14/07 <http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/wed-february-14-2007/ishmael-beah>

posted with genre features that are sedimented in the reading experience of educated North Americans.

Beah also appealed to North American concerns about childhood, and for a 10-year-old African, his influences are unusually recognizable to American readers – *Rambo* films, the rap group Sugarhill Gang Run DMZ, LL Cool J, and Heavy D and the Boyz (7) . He tapped into a growing apprehension about the influence of those rappers, who were being lionized in films such as *Boyz in the Hood*, *Menace 2 Society*, and *8 Mile*, not to mention the Academy Award winning film *Tsotsi* (2005) with its Kwaito music. The cultural specificity of *Long Way Gone* is also made clear by its mediocre foreign reception. Published in France as *Le Chemin Parcouru* (trans Jacques Martinache), *A Long Way Gone* was taken up by the Catholic *la Croix* before it was even on sale (2/6/07). Like *Le Nouvel Observateur* later (1/25/08), that journal fit the story into the “voyage au bout de l’enfer” (Celine) antecedent. *La Croix* was not at all interested in the rap details but rather “son long séjour en enfer, sa lente remontée à la vie” [the long journey to hell and the slow re-ascent to life] (11). *Le Nouvel Observateur*’s Grégoire Leménager found Beah’s rescue and success “incroyable,” words repeated several times in his conclusion: “L’incroyable est qu’il puisse ... il s’est arraché à ce cauchemar” [It was incredible that he was able to pull himself out of that nightmare] (1/24/08, 102).

Perhaps inevitably, Beah’s narrative also received factual scrutiny. A Sierra Leone journalist, Muctaru Wurie, wrote a lengthy report for *SierraEye* that focused mostly on dates and locations and drew on interviews with government officials. In 2008 *The Australian* took up the chase, finding Beah’s story to suffer, at a minimum, from narrative compression. Beah complicated matters by claiming to have a “photographic memory” (*Gone*, 51) which drew the attention of New York’s *Village Voice* and Columbia University professor Neil Boothby, an expert on children and war: "It's very unlikely that all of that bad stuff would happen to one kid. Any story [with that kind of] blank-

slate horror has to be called into question." ¹⁷ But it now appears that rather than being a bad reporter, Beah had created a new genre.

Sidonie Smith, a scholar of autobiography, notes that “emphasizing the survival of their protagonists by re-locating them in new social and cultural settings far away from their homes” is typical of many recent personal narratives, a genre that she terms “ethnic suffering.” ¹⁸ Expanding on Smith, Jopi Nyman comments on a reader’s sense of implied doubling in Beah’s narrative. The story, he comments, “resembles some other narrative [re]telling of a child’s experience in extreme conditions of fear, violence and war” (216). Nyman also points out that the textual use of hip-hop music, which some critics think is a “sign of oppositional counter-hegemonic identity politics,” in fact is “not neutral in any way” but rather “a particular version of Americanness” (222). ¹⁹

The child soldier novel was so positioned that blending with North American personal memoir, a publishing boom after 2000, was highly logical. That step was aided by the post-WWII valorization of childhood, which weighed against the fable-like quality of *Sozaboy*. The fabula based on *Candide* seems, in retrospect, never to have been fully explored. Its satiric power promised a great future in *Allah is not Obligated*, but that force did not ‘translate’ into the genre expectations of readers in the world’s largest market for books. The signposting of a world intelligible to those readers is increasingly done through transnational signifiers such as rap music, logos, consumer items, and such technologies as television, radio, cell phones, and computers. It is not

¹⁷ Graham Rayman, “Boy Soldier of Fortune: A celebrated memoir threatens to blow into a million little pieces,” *Village Voice*, March 18th 2008, 32.

¹⁸ Sidonie Smith, “Narrated Lives and the Contemporary Regime of Human Rights,” 154.

¹⁹ Nyman cites the work of Janell Hobson and R. Dianne Bartlow, who in *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* argue that the music industry has been at least indirectly involved in African violence by inspiring “the racialized killing of civilians overseas in cross strategies that have partnered the music industry with the military ... so that they can be appropriately pumped up on the battlefield” (7).

just the physical presence of these objects in narratives that connotes an intelligible, if not shared, world; the media look for an attitude that mediatization matters. That's why Starbucks began to sell *A Long Way Gone* right beside the cash register in 2007, and why Beah spoke at 10 Starbucks' stores in the U.S. Within a year, his "memoir" sold 500,000 copies.

More is at stake here than the cooption of yet one more important genre of post-colonial experience by language markets and market forces. If Africans must write in English, as Ngugi wa Thiong'o feared, that is one big problem, but possibly surmounted by creative translation, the sort urged by Lawrence Venuti. If they must also write to Anglo-American fabulae, they lose self-determination. And if they must write through the consumer sign system that forms their selfhood in such terms as 'black,' 'rapper,' and 'child soldier,' they have merely reinscribed themselves as subjects in a much older colonial system.

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