

## The Amalek Factor: Child Soldiers and the Impossibility of Representation<sup>1</sup>

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. . . it happens, it happens that night bright as day, but I cannot name it, those things that happened while I watched and I cannot speak something that was never in words, speak of things I cannot imagine, could never have seen even as I saw it, and I hide

—Chris Abani, *Song for Night*

**Exodus 17: 13** And Joshua discomfited Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword.

**14** And the Lord said unto Moses: “Write this for a memorial in the book, and rehearse it in the ears of Joshua: for I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven.”

**Deuteronomy 25: 17** Remember what Amalek did unto thee by the way as ye came forth out of Egypt;

**18** how he met thee by the way, and smote the hindmost of thee, all that were enfeebled in thy rear, when thou wast faint and weary; and he feared not God.

**19** Therefore it shall be, when the Lord thy God hath given thee rest from all thine enemies round about, in the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee for an inheritance to possess it, that thou shalt blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; thou shalt not forget.

We are not only constituted by our relations but dispossessed by them as well.

—Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*

In a chapter that falls in the middle of *Song for Night* (2007), Chris Abani places My Luck, his child soldier protagonist, on an island in the middle of a river. There My Luck remembers his earlier years when he spent time on the river in a pirogue with his grandfather. In this crucial chapter all the major issues involved in the representation of, and the impossibility of representing, child soldiers in literature and film are evoked. We can call this the dilemma of Amalek: how to represent something that we can identify, and in identifying mark it as something that cannot be represented. Why is representation impossible, and what does Amalek have to do with the dilemma?

The commandment to remember to blot out the memory of Amalek is unique in the Torah. Of course it can be explained, as with all biblical anomalies, by relating it to other ancient practices, such as the obliteration of memorials of rulers by their successors. But to be told, twice, to blot out the memory of Amalek, and then to remember to forget, frames the

injunction in a more complexly contradictory manner. To remember after the fact, after the event, and after the annihilation of the enemy—not to commemorate the victory but to insure the effacement of the Other—is to make remembering the supplement to forgetting, that is, to fill the void created by forgetting with the supplement of its opposite. In order to know what to forget, the memory must be recalled.

“Remember to forget Amalek” implies that the story about Amalek is a reconstruction of what happened *after* it had been forgotten, otherwise the commandment wouldn’t have been made or carried out. Thus it is like a traumatic after-shock account, an example of *nachträglichkeit*—an aftereffect—i.e. a narrative constructed under the aftereffects of the shock. It is a narrative that compresses and expands, i.e., functions like dreamwork of condensation and displacement, especially the shifting of the subject of trauma onto other acceptable identities. Child soldier accounts are of this nature. Ishmael Beah’s story of being lost in the woods for a month, like much of the rest of the description of his three-year experience as a child soldier, was subject to the distortions of time (under the sign of castration) and of trauma whose violence is transferred, reconstituted, reimagined as it should have been, in order that he could work through the trauma and its afterwork of forgetting.

To forget Amalek requires work, but it is a perverse form of dreamwork—nightmare work, i.e. dreams in which the repressed return to take over the subject. This is not what happens when the subject positively identifies with the position of the Other as a means of coming to occupy the location of its source of domination, of the one through whom power is exerted and commands are issued, but the position of the one subjected to the violence of commandment. This is to be the victim of bioviolence, to the extent that the subject feels itself to be a child, guilty, and in denial of the guilt—split between desiring and punishment. For the child soldier, committing murder and rape, the narrative of these events usually takes the form of “they made me do it.” This we can take as the definition of the figure of the child-soldier: the one who was made to do it. The logic of the Child-Soldier Narrative<sup>2</sup> is often pushed to the point where the child’s identification with the Other, with the Law of the Father, becomes literally accomplished: “they made me” occupy the position/role of the commander, to kill him to assume his position (or to kill another child in order not to be shot),<sup>3</sup> but without becoming the Big Man,<sup>4</sup> without assuming the place of commandment (Mbembe). To be a child-soldier is to remain little, a small child, while still exercising the violence of the commander.

In *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997) Judith Butler defines subjectivity as being formed between two exigencies: submission and revolt. The submission is made to the very figure that imposes its authority by its violence and threats, the one we normally associate with the master (as in Hegel), or the father (as in Freud)—or more broadly with the Law of the Father (as in Lacan). That Father, the Other who is internalized after the crushing, devastating impact of its threat is experienced, becomes that part

of one's psyche that is responsible for the bad conscience of those who fail to execute its commands. It is the part that is linked to Hegelian and Nietzschean bad conscience.<sup>5</sup>

In Nietzsche's version, the guilty conscience is creatively turned into culture, into narrative—which in the child-soldier's version is the nightmare of power (as in Fanta Régina Nacro's *Nuit de la Vérité* [2004]) where the child who was castrated can return through the figure of his phallic mother (Edna in *Nuit*), generating another nightmare figure for the child soldier. In extremis, the perverse version is manifested as the girl soldier (as in Emmanuel Dongala's *Johnny Mad Dog* [2002], and Newton Aduaka's *Ezra* [2007] where girl combatants kill, or seek to kill, the Father-Commandant and take his place). The child soldier is the obverse side of the Commandant: it is the figure whose path to subjectivity requires identifying with the one whose crushing rule is experienced as annihilating, whose position is feared, but also desired, and is ultimately expected to be assumed (Butler, *Psychic Life of Power* 1997).

Amalek echoed the double face of submission and resistance in the Israelites' own experiences as they found themselves harassed and denied passage forward through the lands of the Amorites (as in the story of Balaam, and in the Amalek account in Exodus). Those who denied passage to the Israelites and attacked them were both the dangerous ones and the vulnerable ones, as sometimes they prevailed (as when Moses's arms tired), and sometimes they were defeated, and even annihilated:

**Exodus 17:10** So Joshua did as Moses had said to him, and fought with Amalek; and Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill.

**11** And it came to pass, when Moses held up his hand, that Israel prevailed; and when he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed.

**13** And Joshua discomfited Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword.

The biblical account of Amalek resembles the child soldier narrative as a *nachträglich* account, a reconstruction after the fact, after the trauma and its subsequent repression and forgetting. The remembrance of the forgetting takes on the form of a guilty excuse: "I couldn't help it," or they made me forget, I was commanded to forget (amnesia becomes central in the child soldier Ezra's inability to provide testimony over what he had done [*Ezra* 2007]). In *Ezra* or the film version of *Johnny Mad Dog* (2008), as in the many accounts in the novels, the spectators or readers see what the narrator forgot, as in the night Ezra killed his family (he issued the order that his family house be blown up with his ailing father inside). His sister bears the mark of the repression (her tongue is cut out) and the after-return of the repressed (she testifies at the trial against Ezra).

The reverse journey in time of Abani's *My Luck* is also a return to the origin of the repressed (the account given at the end of *Song of Night* brings us to *My Luck*'s witnessing at the outset the traumatic rape of the mother, his hiding and seeing what he should not have seen, should not have desired or remembered—the barred memory under the prohibition already handed down by the original Commandant/Commandment).

Amalek appears after the 10 commandments have already been handed down at Sinai, after the demonstration of force (the killing of the first-born Egyptian male children) had been given. The commandments were given, but the tablets on which they had been written had to be broken, and then given again, as in the secondary acts of *nachträglichkeit*. The commandment to forget Amalek becomes the commandment to reconstruct the narrative of Amalek, which is like the work involved in reconstructing the child-soldier story. This is what Beah and Abani have done, despite the evident difference between Beah's ostensible memoir and Abani's highly fanciful account. However, where Beah disguises the movement of *nachträglichkeit* by giving us a linear movement forward, as if the construction of time in reality, and therefore in narrative temporality of realism, could proceed as if not under the bar, Abani reverses this movement and deconstructs the sense of being in reality or moving forward in time. The two narratives are mirror opposites—the one purporting to present a faithful account of Beah's actual experiences, and the other making no attempt to convince the reader of the novel's verisimilitude—but both work under the bar of trauma's prohibition. Both turn on the central question of representing identity.

The condition of possibility for representing identity crosses the boundaries of what is presented as fiction or memoir. It is as though the former were free from the constraints of reality, free to indulge in imagination or the contours of Realism, whereas the latter presents itself as though constrained by actual events, temporality, and people's lives. We might well argue that the opposite is true, that the pressures on the fictional account, measured against the yardsticks of verisimilitude, frame and delimit the responses of readers and the inventiveness of authors, especially when the account in question positions itself within some well-defined historical moment. And the memoir, as well, once established as faithfully recounting what memory and historical experience provide, might take this establishment as license with which to construct credible, if invented, dialogues and actions. In this sense, the cross-over between Beah's "memoir" and Abani's "novel" can meet at the critical point where the creation of character or individual identity is intended to serve the purpose of conveying to the reader an event whose excessiveness defies the language of representation. When language attempts to enter directly into the orbit of trauma's effects, and to portray those effects by recounting the truth, where would truth seek its basis in order to be established? Neither memoir nor fiction have any foundational claim on language so that the unrepresentable could be accommodated by them. Challenges to Beah's truthfulness become secondary to this limitation of language, even as issues of generic differences between the two accounts would seek some extrinsic foundation by which to evaluate the strength of the two works in conveying the impossible. This is the "challenge to representation" that Butler says reality poses (1997, 146).

Butler takes Levinas's point that the condition of possibility for identity is difference, and that in reaction to this impossibility of a

mapping of identity without difference, one compensates with the claims of identification. She calls this the “triumphalist image,” in contrast to the “critical image” which shows its own impossibility of “capturing its referent” (1997, 146). Here is the first difference between Beah and Abani. Whereas Beah’s account spawned a polemic over whether he was telling the truth or not, Abani’s fabrications were clearly surrealistic, and in Butler’s sense, they were more appropriately fashioned for a critical image. Butler says: “But it would be a mistake to think that we only need to find the right and true images, and that a certain reality will then be conveyed. The reality is not conveyed by what is represented within the image, but through the challenge to representation that reality delivers” (1997, 146).

But can we express the failure to represent an image in itself without resorting to representation? And how can representation convey what comes as close as possible to Rancière’s naked image, the image of a truth that cannot be glossed, without falling into the trap of triumphalism? How can the deployment of such images as would correspond to the child-soldier’s plea, “They made me do it,” do justice to the need to represent the face of the child at that moment? Butler points out that: “For Levinas, then, the human is not *represented* by the face. Rather, the human is indirectly affirmed in that very disjunction that makes representation impossible, and this disjunction is conveyed in the impossible representation” (1997, 144). The limit of this unrepresentable face is Amalek, just as the limit to the commandment to forget this is to remember to do so. The commandment of the contradiction is what conveys this feature of the impossible representation: it is the only way in which the human can be conveyed. Butler: “For representation to convey the human, then, representation must not only fail, but it must *show* its failure. There is something unrepresentable that we nevertheless seek to represent, and that paradox must be retained in the representation we give” (1997, 144).

What the *child*-soldier narrative seeks to convey is the human face of the inhumanity of the *soldier*-child—the one who kills and victimizes those who should normally be seen as occupying the place Camus and Dostoyevsky, and all those of the humanist, existential tradition identified as that of the one most unjustifiably victimized: children. To victimize a child when one is, oneself, a child, is to put oneself in the position of a mirrored figure, the subject of “*méconnaissance*”—misrecognition. How could the Israelites, for instance, recognize themselves in the face of Amalek when it was his very humanity—as echoing, mirroring their own—that was denied by his acts, and by the commandment to remember to forget him. The face of Amalek, then, is what Butler is seeking when she states:

The levinasian face is not precisely or exclusively a human face, although it communicates what is human, what is precarious, what is injurable. The media representations of the faces of the ‘enemy’ efface what is most human about the ‘face’

for Levinas. Through a cultural transposition of his philosophy, it is possible to see how dominant forms of representation can and must be disrupted for something about the precariousness of life to be apprehended. (1997, xviii)

In Beah's *A Long Way Gone* (2007) he says his experience lasted from 1992-95. It is in the attempt to capture a linear temporality that realism begins its deceptive course of representation. We can call this temporality scandalous.<sup>6</sup> Beah falters in his attempt to reconstitute the face of the child-soldier that he saw himself as having been when he begins with the use of the first person in the memoir, and in the attempt to constitute it. Butler: "When we lose some of these ties by which we are constituted, we do not know who we are or what to do. On one level, I think I have lost 'you' *only to discover that 'I' have gone missing as well*" (1997, 22, my stress). This is the afterwork that leaves the "I" missing—the afterwork of grieving. In contrast to the narrator who stands outside the character or situation, describing himself as the object of the narrative gaze, i.e. as object of the act of narration, the one bearing grief brings one closest to the object being described through its relations with others, and to the Other:

What grief displays, in contrast, is the thrall in which our relations with others hold us, in ways that we cannot always recount or explain, in ways that often interrupt the self-conscious account of ourselves we might try to provide, in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control. I might try to tell a story here about what I am feeling, but it would have to be a story in which the very "I" who seeks to tell the story is stopped in the midst of the telling; the very "I" is called into question by its relation to the Other, a relation that does not precisely reduce me to speechlessness, but does nevertheless clutter my speech with signs of its undoing. I tell a story about the relations I choose, only to expose somewhere along the way, the way I am gripped and undone by these very relations. My narrative falters, as it must. (1997, 23)

Amalek is undone by the act of remembering and accounting for him; the child-soldier is undone by his act of remembering and accounting for his actions; and rather than this grief and mourning being unique to these cases, they are the condition of possibility for all attempts to construct an identity because, "[I]et's face it. We're undone by each other. And if we are not, we're missing something" (Butler 1997, 23).

Beah cast his account into the form of a memoir. The marketers of *A Long Way Gone*, in need of commodifying the memory, highlighted on its cover the fact that the book is a "national bestseller." It is referred to as a "book" in most of the publicity cited on its back cover, and it is explicitly not cast as a novel, despite the fact that it often reads more like fiction than like an actual memoir. Among many examples of the latter genre involving conflict in Africa, we can consider Marie Béatrice Umutesi's *Surviving the Slaughter* (2000), in which Umutesi recounts her experience of the Rwandan genocide and its aftermath. She sets herself in the midst of the Rwandan conflict as an educated woman whose experiences as a Hutu victimized during the genocide contradict the usual portrayals (like those

of *Hotel Rwanda* [2005]), in which Hutus were generally represented as perpetrators and Tutsis as victims. In her account, her family members were subject to attacks by “the rebels,” which is how she refers to the RPF (Rwandan Patriotic Front), and although Tutsis also were represented as harmed by the violence, they are not viewed as those who are primarily being slaughtered, as is usual in most accounts. She joins her personal experiences to the wider political events to claim that Hutus like herself had been persecuted all along, even going back to the pre-colonial period.

In contrast with her down-to-earth tone and credible characterizations, Beah presents himself as an uninformed, innocent, typical child engaged in highly dramatic events. Since his account is framed so as to provide the reader with a context within which to place the events, the paratext follows the narrative, giving a chronology of events. There are maps in both Umutesi’s and Beah’s accounts allowing us to resituate the action, but Beah’s paperback edition begins with pages of praise by the critics, which is also seen on the back cover, including most dismayingly Dave Eggers’s *Vanity Fair* statement that this book has made Beah “arguably the most read African writer in contemporary literature.”<sup>7</sup> What Beah, Eggers, and many others who have undertaken to represent the child soldier in their works, have done is to create a vision of Africa and its recent experience of violence as the site of contestation among really “evil” people, their victims and their rescuers (Butler’s “triumphalist image”).<sup>8</sup> We presumably will have no trouble making the distinction. After all, genocide and crimes against humanity are labels established since the Holocaust and the shock following World War II. If war implicates all its combatants within a generalized hell, genocide and crimes against humanity pit evil forces against its victims who constitute “us,” humanity, those whose readings of the accounts are shaped by our sympathizing as members of the human race with the victims of horrible acts visited on them by monsters.

It has been very difficult to contest this construction, especially in cinema where major films like *Shooting Dogs* (aka *Beyond the Gates* 2005) and *Shake Hands with the Devil* (2005) have successfully demonized the perpetrators, making it difficult to read countervailing accounts like those of Umutesi. Butler presents us with the central conundrum raised by these well-known accounts: their failure to evoke what is human, to confront the impossibility of representing the human along with the equally apodictic necessity to do so: The reasons for this lie in a paradox inherent in the human, the human face, that welcomes the lens of the camera to look, while denying it access to what it sees:

The question that preoccupies me in the light of recent global violence is, Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And, finally, What *makes for a grievable life*? Despite our differences in location and history, my guess is that it is possible to appeal to a “we,” for all of us have some notion of what it is to have lost somebody. Loss has made a tenuous “we” of us all...Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those

attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure. (Butler, 1997:20)

The closer one gets to a conflict, the more loss follows, the more “we” is set against “they,” the more human and evil are thought to be representable and incompatible, until the child crying out in its agony becomes indistinguishable from the one who is shooting. As the title of Mamdani’s study of the Rwandan genocide tells us (*When Victims Become Killers* [2002]), the line between victims and perpetrators can become blurred, even though crimes against humanity continue to be committed. “When we lose some of these ties by which we are constituted, we do not know who we are or what to do. On one level, I think I have lost ‘you’ only to discover that ‘I’ have gone missing as well” (Butler 1997: 22).

This is the burden of one of the most striking accounts to complicate the portrayal of victims and perpetrators, Fabrice Weissman’s “Sierra Leone: Peace at Any Price,” in his collection *In the Shadow of ‘Just’ Wars* (2004). In this chapter Weissman indicates that the RUF (Revolutionary United Front), vilified as the rebels in Beah’s *A Long Way Gone*, behaved in ways that complicated the simple notion that they were demons, hyped up on drugs, who kidnapped children and turned them into monsters. The humanitarian effort to aid the victims excluded aid to those judged to be supporting the RUF, and as a result, says Weissman,

“[i]n the name of the fight against the ‘rebel hand choppers,’ tens of thousands of civilians were denied protection and access to humanitarian relief as this was judged contrary to the intervention forces’ strategy for pacifying the country. A number of humanitarian organisations justified this strategy, thus trampling the very principle of impartiality on which their activity was founded” (44).

Weissman challenged the simple binary Manichean narrative that had become generally accepted: “[T]he demonising of the RUF led to the overshadowing of the violence perpetrated by pro-government forces” (this is the same point Umutesi’s text establishes, where the Interahamwe, and the Hutupower supporters, are represented as devils by Dallaire). Weissman concludes that this demonizing “masked the social and political conflict that fuelled the rebellion.” Ironically, he states, “the return to peace was partly due to the expulsion of many combatants who subsequently found employment in the war that was once again raging in Liberia and which spread to Ivory Coast in 2002” (44).

The same pattern has been occurring in the DRC (Democratic Republic of the Congo) where demobilized combatants, including children, are often re-recruited into a militia as the depressing conditions of unemployment and poverty back home, be it in Burundi, Rwanda, or the Congo cannot compete with the emoluments of militia soldiers whose rapacious lifestyles continue to hold some attraction for the youth despite the dangers.

Weissman does a good job complicating the picture. The RUF's motives in attacking the government included displacing Lebanese merchants involved in gem trafficking (46), thus garnering support from local rural populations; it also represented a threat to the larger mining interests who had demonstrated their indifference to the conditions of life for their workers. This too is a pattern replicated across the continent, in the DRC or Zimbabwe, where resistance to an established economic and political order has been characterized by the international press as the work of demonic militias.<sup>9</sup> Butler's point, that "I think I have lost 'you' only to discover that 'I' have gone missing as well," seems particularly relevant under these circumstances. Weissman does not try to sugarcoat the actions taken by the RUF in Sierra Leone, but rather to give a fully contextualized story, providing us with an understanding of their actions and motivations, something that is occluded in most popular accounts.<sup>10</sup>

When it comes to representing the violence of the RUF, Weissman evokes their destructive nature, but places it within a rational policy where the exercise of power was not limited by legal restraints. This situation evokes Carl Schmitt's portrayal of the space outside the nation state, or Giorgio Agamben's state of exception, where those under the biopower of authority have no rights, and resemble concentration camp inhabitants whose pitiful condition he designated as "bare life." Weissman describes in detail how the RUF administered its territories, using combatants who could prove to be "extremely cruel." He identifies them as including "many soldiers [who] had been forcibly recruited at a very young age and subjected to a brutal process of socialisation as fighters that tested both their endurance and their capacity to administer death and suffering" (54). In creating such cohorts, they were able to destroy the infrastructure in their own territories in ways that bordered on the psychotic, with water towers being pulverised with rocket launchers, "administration buildings and health facilities wrecked in a fury, and electric distribution networks methodically demolished." He states that "civilians and combatants alike lived in a landscape of total devastation strewn with military debris, where food shortages and lack of medical care were the norm" (54-55). Weissman, a member of Médecins sans Frontières, speaks to conditions that he knows well.

When he describes the horrors visited on populations living in government territories, there was also looting, killing, abductions, and amputations that made world headlines. He states that these practices had as their aim "to drive away rural populations living on the fringes of rebel strongholds in order to create a protective no-man's-land," and to undermine Sierra Leoneans' confidence in their government (55). Ironically, the RUF did not have a monopoly on these practices or purposes, and the government troops adopted the same modes of operation as they "burnt villages, killed, wounded, and mutilated civilians suspected of links to the RUF" (55). Nothing appears as shocking as the mutilations, and Weissman tells us that although "the mutilations were habitually ascribed to the RUF, a significant number of them were the work of pro-

government forces” (56). If ECOMOG (the military force representing the Economic Community of West African States) came to the rescue, “as in Liberia, ECOMOG was also involved in diamond trafficking” (56). The binary division between good and evil forces is dissipated under these judgments: “However justified the British and UN interventions may have been, it is regrettable that the ‘just war’ declared against the RUF led to silence over the violent abuses committed by the various pro-government forces” (64). For Weissman, there is no question about the horror of what occurred. But the reportage on these events inevitably sought to render one side (usually Taylor’s RUF) as the villains, and the others, like ECOMOG, as serving the purpose of containing the evil, even if at the cost of taking harsh measures themselves. Weissman undoes that simple binary.

With this ambiguous moral context in mind, it would seem particularly pertinent to see how Beah concludes his account, as the protagonist. Beah himself ends up being taken by UN forces to a camp of DDR (disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration), and ultimately is restored to his humanity by the good offices of a nurse counselor—the same ending we find in the film *Ezra*. Like Ezra, Beah had been motivated to take revenge for the attacks on his family by the “rebels,” had been treated exactly in the same way as those youngsters taken by the RUF described above by Weissman, with the additional factor that drugs were used extensively so as to desensitize the children to the brutality of their actions and to their own wounds. Beah had reason to see in the military commanders and recruiters the same demonic qualities imputed to the Rwandan Interahamwe, as to the Mai Mai, the various militias in the DRC, and in his case the RUF.<sup>11</sup> The pattern has remained the same, even as the militias have morphed: the Rwandan supported Tutsi militia in the DRC, which began as the RCD-Goma eventually turned into elements integrated into the DRC army, then the CNDP under Nkunda, and currently the M23.

In all the accounts of militias and child soldiers, the commanders are described as vicious, and the children as becoming vicious. Even as Weissman details it, horrible acts were committed—the distinction between right and wrong, truth and lies, good and evil, seemingly indisputable. The newspaper headline versions became banners for “triumphalist images” where the face of the Other presumably could be known, its lineaments holding no mystery, no consanguinity with those of the readers.

Beah concludes with the “African wisdom” of his grandfather, whose shadow he evokes from time to time. The grandfather tells the children a riddle tale, one of those tales that ends inconclusively, asking the children to choose between two unpalatable choices. A hunter comes upon a monkey who tells him, if you kill me your mother will die; if you don’t, your father will die. The monkey is not only trying to save its life here; it is articulating a parable that reflects its own bestial nature since it is described as implacable, chewing its food and scratching its head and

belly as the hunter has his rifle trained on it. Beah states that he would shoot the monkey “so that it would no longer have a chance to put other hunters in the same predicament” (218). That is, he refuses the conditions of the dilemma tale whose point is that choice cannot be reduced to a right or wrong—or as Butler would put it, insists upon a language that is commensurate with the need to sustain differences between self and Other, to refuse the Amalek factor. Butler ties this liberal agenda to the triumphalist image, because it is resolved around human rights theory, with the language of clear rights, rather than the murky waters of representation:

Although this language may well establish our legitimacy within a legal framework ensconced in liberal versions of human ontology, it does not do justice to passion and grief and rage, all of which tear us from ourselves, bind us to others, transport us, undo us, implicate us in lives that are not our own, irreversibly, if not fatally.[...]It is not easy to see how a political community is wrought from such ties. One speaks, and one speaks for another, to another, and yet there is no way to collapse the distinction between the Other and oneself. When we say “we” we do nothing more than designate this very problematic. We do not solve it. (1997, 25)

Difference remains, in the conditions that frame identity as well as community.

What are the conditions of representation? In child-soldier accounts we begin with the obligation to convey truthfully what happened. Dilemma tales complicate this *devoir de mémoire*, this obligation to remember and recount the truth. We can see this in the Jewish commandment to retell to Jewish children what happened in Egypt every Passover so that the oppression of the Egyptians would be remembered, along with God’s freeing of the Israelites from that oppression. The memory is to be retained and repeated so that the children will know how to act in the future, every year, to retell it to their children (“You shall tell your child on that day, saying, ‘It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.’” [Exodus 13:8]) The obligation of the tale of freedom, like that enjoined in the Sabbath before Purim is to remember to obliterate the memory of Amalek: “remember to blot out the memory of Amalek.” There is no resolution to this paradoxical commandment to remember to forget. How can we remember the horrors of the Holocaust if they were too terrible? How can we ever forget if we turn remembrance into “never again”? How can we give a face to the monstrous? How can we let the children know what it was like, and how can we not let them know? How can we remember and represent what is unrepresentable, or ought to be unrepresentable, and what are we doing when we give it a face?

If the answer is that the images should be faithful to the reality, that the memory should come to life in the representation, then we are operating under the aegis of the mode of art Rancière calls the regime of representation, one which is marked by three traits. He states that the subjects of representation must possess properties that “permit an adequate

submission of the visible to the sayable” (*The Future of the Image*, 136), that is, that it is possible to show in images what one is putting into words. We can imagine what that Amalek would look like as he is slaughtering the helpless women and children running chaotically in the rear of the columns of stragglers, trying to keep up or to flee. We can visualize it, add a soundtrack with violent percussion, and after, surveying the field, add violin solos. There is a history of such representations. The news accounts of Africans fleeing conflict provide the fodder for such imagery.

Secondly, we would need to understand this horror, since Rancière states that the representative order is marked by an intelligibility “concentrated in the connection of actions,” so that it isn’t irrational, even if it is horrific. In fact, because we can understand it, we can analyze it, we can act to prevent it in the future, we can formulate the new commandment, “never again,” since we know what it is, how to recognize it. It is even legally identified as genocide and crimes against humanity, actions that may appear mad, but that are not undertaken by madmen, and that cannot be stopped by the commandment of “never again.”

Lastly, we can approach this horror and perceive it: the photo of the little girl running down the street in Vietnam, or the torture shots of Abu Ghraib, the man standing on a box, his hands tied to electric shock cords—we recognize them because they aren’t too far from us, nor so close as to compel us to close our eyes. They are not images we like, but we cannot fail to recognize them because they are presented within what Rancière calls a “well-adjusted division of proximity and distance between the representation and those to whom it is addressed” (136).

In the Holocaust, Jews were the Other, and the battle to exterminate them was a battle to establish an order of sameness that wouldn’t be threatened by difference, and thus by change. The order of representation would hold its division of proximity and distance in a well-regulated space that would establish control over the image, over the division of truth and lies, over what is real and what exceeds reality. But the shock of 9/11, like the Holocaust, has been presented as exceeding the limits, and thus approaching Hegel’s sublime, or the unrepresentable. It approaches the unapproachable space of God, for Jews, which is an Otherness that kills those who approach too closely. When Aaron’s sons, sons of the priest, made an offering that brought them into God’s Presence, they were killed instantly, and it is that image that is recalled every Yom Kippur, because for the Jews, those whose fate it was to be forgotten were marked by an Otherness that gave definition to a sublimity, one that Rancière reads as resisting the “imperialism of thought forgetful of the Other,” just as, he says, “the Jewish people is the one that remembers the forgetting, which puts at the basis of its thought and existence this founding relationship to the Other” (133).

Here are the limits of the representation of the unrepresentable—the obligation to forget, not to remember. And it is precisely here in *Song of Night* that Abani, not Beah, succeeds in conveying the condition of the child soldier, in the chapter entitled “The Soul Has No Sign”—“no sign”

conveying no words, no song. The protagonist, My Luck, is dumb because his vocal chords were cut, preventing him from disturbing others in his platoon whose job, like his own, was to dismantle landmines. He has been killed by one such landmine, though at this point in the novel neither he nor the reader knows this. He is seeking to reintegrate into his platoon, and has been trying to reach them, when he winds up floating down a river, under the body of a corpse, before reaching a sandbank in the middle of the river. There he passes some time out of time, remembering his grandfather's words: "There is a lake in the middle of the world. This is the oldest truth of our people. This is the oldest lie" (69). Truth and lies should be incommensurable. Representation and unrepresentableness should be incommensurable. If representation requires commensurability, measured in a distance that is not too far and not too close to be seen—that has meaning, even if the acts are atrocious and hideous—and that can be stated, even if the statement begins with "never," then we can ask whether there are other forms of art besides the representational that might prove more adequate to the task of portraying child soldiers. For Rancière, this is the burden of non-representational contemporary art, which he places within what he terms the regime of the aesthetic, frequently in the form of avant-gardist art. As installation art it directly uses representation to undo its comprehensibility; or as conceptual art it refuses to permit the image to speak in a language other than denial or excessive distance; as public art it eschews canons of beauty that validated representational art that dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The regime of the aesthetic begins for Rancière with Flaubert who placed on the same plane all the elements of our social and perceptual world, anticipating the flatness of neo-Realist art movements of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Abani moves in all these spaces of marginality to realist representationalism in his fiction.

The memory of the lake in the middle of the world, out of time, is one of those circles. My Luck recalls his grandfather describing it as "a lake of fire and water. This lake is a legend of the Igbo. It is invisible, hidden in a fold in time, but there" (69). In the midst of the slaughter, this lake's presence signals an absence, just as Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985) for Rancière also works to bring into relationship a presence and an absence: "If what has occurred, and of which nothing remains, can be represented, it is through an action, a newly created fiction which begins in the here and now. It is through a confrontation between the words uttered here and now about what was and the reality that is materially present and absent in this place" (127). This is the language that conveys the attempt to wrestle now, in the images of those in the present remembering the Holocaust, with the processes of a "double elimination"—that of the Jews and of the memory of the Jews. The lake of fire and water that is hidden, absent from time, and thus from memory, but is present in some fold, like Moses in the fold in the rock of the mountain when God passed by him; this is the perplexed reality of thereness, of haeccity, that Abani evokes when describing this hidden, invisible, legendary lake as "there."

“There” is a place where the present recollection of the myth turns on the memory of the Cross River’s name, arising, according to some, because “the Igbos are Hebrews who wandered down to West Africa from Judea and some of them brought fragments of Christ’s cross with them” (70). But the cross of the victims turned into the guns of the perpetrators as the Igbos used to “crucify thieves and murderers on its banks,” a cleansing of the scum or dirty criminals needed to preserve the wholesomeness of the community.

The circle of marginality does not stop there: the edges of the lake were not immune to the spirits that dwelt in its waters, and chief among them was the mother who refused to allow bridges to cross over its waters from the capital Calabar to the interior. She was opposed to the correspondences that would draw together the opposite banks, and was marked by the supreme legend of hallucinatory irreality, that of a being who is both human and non-human, both water and fire, both woman and god. She is Mami Wata, unrepresentable, yet embodied in the form of a métis in a range of Nigerian, Ghanaian, Cameroonian, Congolese figures.<sup>12</sup> As with Nwapa’s divinity represented by Efuru, or with Henri Duparc’s *Caramel* (2005), proximity to her dangerous beauty assures those intoxicated by her of their death. She is the stranger, the Other, the unconscious affect that opens the child-soldier’s memory to the past, and to the forgetfulness lying in the fold in time. Now called Idemilli in Abani’s *Song for Night*, she moves into the strange world of child-soldiers whose drugged state of inebriation evoked her presence, she who “took all the power from men” (72).

Unrepresentable in her brilliance, she is described thus by the grandfather: “She is a woman all fire and water and more brilliant than a thousand suns; at least those who have been lucky to see her say so” (72). She resembles Abani’s Virgin of Flames in Los Angeles (2007) where she appears as the Virgin of Guadalupe, carrying an AK-47 in one hand, and a strangled dove in the other. There she presides over the polluted Los Angeles River, a graffiti goddess whose image is to be washed away by the police.

My Luck, whom we still think of as alive and remembering his conversation with his grandfather, asks him if it is all real. He is told that it is, and receives riddles as answers when he says that he does not understand: “Nobody does. Everybody does. It is real because it is a tall tale. This lake is the heart of our people. This lake is love. If you find it, and find the pillar, you can climb it into the very heart of God” (73). After receiving more responses along the same line, typical of Abani’s enigmatic popular religiosity, My Luck states that his grandfather taught him a song in which the secret of the lake would be locked into his soul. They sang it over and over until “I couldn’t tell where his voice ended and mine began, and where mine ended and the river began and where the river ended and my blood began” (74). And as My Luck tells us all this in a narrative recounted by a dumb and dead child, we are not surprised

when his account of the song ends with the words, “But I have forgotten that song” (74).

The affect remains because it sustains the charge of evoking the “stranger in the house,” the Other whose presence and memory are necessary to complete the work of forgetfulness and absence. The space of child-soldier atrocities will not be filled by the memoir, or pseudo-memoir, that attempts to answer the question of what it was like, with a phrase like, “[i]t all began when I was playing in the yard with my mother pounding the mortar.” But we can say that that is where the accounts will begin, nonetheless. We should think of it as a prompt to the *devoir d’oublier*, the obligation to forget, that was the mark worn by the wandering Jew whose name Rancière identifies as being that of “the people that is witness to forgetfulness, witness to the original condition of thinking which is hostage of the Other” (131). Child soldier literature and film, in the end, are an attempt to come to terms with that condition of thinking which is hostage to the Other. Where some succeed, as Abani does, it is when the Other is not eliminated, or, we should say, exterminated. Nonetheless, with most representational memoirs, this is precisely what occurs.

Under what regime would the unrepresentable function or appear? In the economic sphere the unrepresentable is what the fetish commodity occludes, its basis in the real which functions like the Lacanian *object a*, something we know is there but can never apprehend because the work it performs in creating the object remains hidden behind the object. It is always already displaced. In art it is the same in that the work that produced the object remains implied, but is not overtly seen, in the object. If the object evokes the labor of production, the act of evocation itself hides the work of producing the evocation all the more. As Butler puts it: “For representation to convey the human, then, representation must not only fail, but it must *show* its failure. There is something unrepresentable that we nevertheless seek to represent, and that paradox must be retained in the representation we give” (1997, 144).

This is exactly how Abani presents the unrepresentable: he proliferates it as something that is unnamable, as something that cannot be spoken or seen or heard or known. My Luck and Ijeoma and the other children who defuse the mines must suffer having their vocal chords cut so they will not cry out if a mine is detonated near them. They cannot speak, so they devise alternative means of signaling their thoughts. My Luck cannot reach his platoon, and the distance between them that he attempts to make up becomes unbridgeable, like the Cross River that the British engineer ultimately despairs of ever building a bridge across.

The unnamable, the unliving, undead, the unspoken, unseen, unheard realities become increasingly unreal moments in My Luck’s memory of what he had previously remembered, and as he relives his past, retraces his steps into the past, the real becomes increasingly undone, his investments in being a living person gradually released. As this happens, both linear temporality and causality are reversed. His journey to

reintegrate into his platoon after the mine explosion has knocked him out turns into the return journey back home, exactly like that of Sozaboy (Saro-Wiwa), who finds on his return that he is in fact a ghost. Sozaboy does not return to the past, just to the state of the unliving in the aftermath of war. My Luck returns to his childhood before he had enlisted as a child soldier, and before his mother had been killed. Before he had committed unspeakable acts of killing and rape, before his commandant, the Major called John Wayne, had told him, to “rape or die.”

In the Child Soldier Narrative and the Genocide Story, the time *before* is marked by our frisson of apprehension, of knowing the axe will fall and the fearful killing will begin. But here the axe has already fallen *before*, and what comes after precedes what came before. The journey through time is reversed, and this is because the regime under which the unrepresentable is functioning is the regime of death. This would seem to align itself with Mbembe’s concept of “Necropolitics” (2003), but here it is a regime that functions by itself without biopower, much less knowledge/power directing it in the interest of the dominant order. It functions beyond the Foucauldian archeology and its biosphere where the dominion of death rules over human bodies. The bodies here are ambiguously presented as dead or alive, or as part of both; death is a beautiful young woman, or sometimes an old woman, witch, or goddess, sometimes Mami Wata, sometimes Idemilli. As it gradually comes to occupy My Luck’s consciousness, he apprehends both its attraction and darkness—it sings to him, but of night.

“Time is standing still.” His watch is “fucked” and the second and hour hands have fallen off. He still keeps it, and it transforms his life into a figure of speech, another paradoxical trope for the mute dead child-soldier who has not yet let go of his life or his words. “My life it turns out is a series of minutes” (55), he says, as though such irrational temporality constituted a form for measurement that operated appropriately in his mindscape where the forest and the river conspired to enfold him in the realm of the spirits. He muses, “I have been walking for too long, and I am dying of thirst. The river to my right is poisonous with the dead” (55).

Night invades his mind, and he morphs into another figure of the West African narrative who occupied spaces without rational boundaries, where logos and pathos were reconciled into one moment, as in Rancière’s aesthetic regime: “Like a spider busy spinning a web, my mind weaves the night into terror” (43). There, witness to his mother’s murder, the butchering of his father, the genocide of the Igbos up north, the killing of the seven-year-old girl whom his commander “John Wayne” wished to rape, to the witches eating the boiled baby parts, and to the explosion that killed Ijeoma and even himself, there he witnessed the atrocities committed by Amalek, and found himself incapable of repeating aloud what he had seen:

. . . and I watch what happens below and I am grateful that I can smell my smell, smell my smell and live while below me it happens, it happens that night bright as

day, but I cannot name it, those things that happened while I watched, and I cannot speak something that was never in words, speak of things I cannot imagine, could never have seen even as I saw it, and I hide and am grateful for my smell crouched like an animal in that dark hot space. (43)

My Luck is the fifteen-year-old child soldier who does not sound like either child or soldier. He is queer, queered, enjoys in some part of himself being forced by John Wayne to commit rape, feels guilty over his pleasure, and ultimately takes a journey through a desolate unreal landscape of that state of exception outside of all locations, where souls of no value, of no use even for sacrifice, like *homo sacer*, pass through on their way to their final death. In *Song for Night*, the place for this end of the journey is the site of deluded memory, where there is no more *lieu de mémoire*, no more rationality or logos for him to grasp, so that he might ultimately be united with his mother, and in joy, in words and not coded “silences,” finally speak: “Mother, I say, and my voice has returned” (167). A pillar of fire and water on the dark lake, finally home, with Idemilli in the center of the earth.

With his unspeakable acts now recalled and evoked, My Luck gives voice to Abani’s African sublime. Not in the manner of Kant, for whom the higher art gestured toward this transcendental unity of feeling and knowing, but as the goddess known as Idemilli, a woman “all fire and water and more brilliant than a thousand suns; at least those who have been lucky to see her say so” (72). My Luck has forgotten the song that will take him to her, and in substitution Abani has given us *Song for Night* so that we might remember to forget, in a regime where the collective testimonial works of literary reportage and representation can only fail to register their words.

## Notes

1. This essay is a modified and more substantial version of a French-language article, “Sur l’impossibilité de représenter l’enfant-soldat dans *Song of Night* de Chris Abani,” in *Etudes littéraires africaines* 32 (2011): 78-90.
2. By “Child Soldier Narrative” (in caps) I am referring to the texts that have turned the historical context of child soldier warfare, and the reportage on those events, into fictional or cinematic representations, representations within an unfolding genre whose qualities are marked by the traits I signal above.
3. *City of God*, Meirelles’s film about violent children involved in gang fighting and drug wars in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, where the vicious gang leader does force a child to kill another of his friends.
4. See Hyden, G. (2006) on neopatrimonial figures and states.

5. The incorporation of a bad conscience enables us to act socially, express ourselves socially through the performance of our subjectivity:

Clearly, what is at stake is something more than and different from a relationship between an external demand offered by regulatory power and an internal recoil registered as its secondary effect. If presupposed in the very notion of the subject is a passionate attachment to subjectivity, then the subject will not emerge save as an exemplification and effect of this attachment. ... [T]he very notion of reflexivity, as an emergent structure of the subject, is the consequence of a "turning back on itself," a repeated self-beratement which comes to form the misnomer of "conscience". (67)

6. Beah's account has become the subject of a huge scandal occasioned by a publication in *The Australian* on Jan 19, 2008, challenging the veracity of his account. Wikipedia has a summary of the affair, as does *Slate* (March 6, 2008).

7. Given the questionable relationship between author and text in Eggers's own *What Is the What* (2006), his praise might be read as self-praise since both of these bestsellers might be read as pandering to the public taste for the morbid, for an African darkness whose heart is to be revealed by those empowered, either by the Western editor or, in the case of Beah, editor, literary agent, and university professors of writing and literature.

8. Since IRIN published its first "Child Soldiers In-Depth" in 2003, legal efforts to curb the practice have been stepped up significantly, but still, up to 300,000 children are involved in more than 30 conflicts worldwide, according to the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF). Efforts by the UN to "name and shame" governments and rebel groups into abiding by the applicable international and domestic instruments have had a limited effect; the Secretary-General's annual report lists dozens of groups that continue to recruit or use children. The largest numbers of child soldiers are in Africa, despite the 1999 African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, the only regional treaty in the world that outlaws child involvement. See *Amnesty International*, "Child Soldiers Fighting in the DRC" (2009) and "From Cradle to War" (2009), as well as *IRIN*, "In-Depth: Fighting for the Rights of Child Soldiers" (2012).

9. A recent example appears in a BBC report of August 16, 2013—which merely repeats what has now become typical in various conflict zones in Africa for some years: "The UN mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo says that 82 children—some as young as eight—have been rescued from an armed group. Monusco says the children, including 13 girls, had been forcibly recruited in the past six months by the Mai Mai Bakata Katanga militia" ("DR Congo Unrest").

10. The popularizing of the war in Darfur provided a good example of this, where one side, mis-termed Arab, was set against “black Africans.” In *Saviors and Survivors: Darfur, Politics, and the War on Terror*, Mahmood Mamdani tried to get us past this reductive binary.

11. If his own commandant is portrayed sympathetically at the outset, by the end his viciousness becomes apparent.

12. See Henry Drewal’s *Sacred Waters: Arts for Mami Wata and other Divinities in Africa and the Diaspora* (2008).

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