WITNESS AND ARCHIVE: TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES OF A CHILD SOLDIER IN WARCHILD: A child soldier's story

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ABSTRACT
The memoir, WARCHILD: A child soldier's story (Jal 2009), though written several years after the author-narrator’s experience, claims its authority from the child soldier’s forced participation in a war of persecution that is narratively reworked in the child’s imagination as a war of the liberation of South Sudan. This article aims to explore what happens to historical fact when the narrative shifts from the testimony of a child witness to the narrative archived in the form of memoir. Agamben (1999) seeks to explain this lacuna and his idea of the aporia at the core of narrative of testimony in memoir is useful in revealing how in a written account of the self, ‘reality exceeds its factual elements’. Young (1988, 23) amplifies the paradox of ‘factual testimony’, such as memoir, and indicates that this genre cannot achieve the ‘convincing factual authority’ that it wishes to establish because of the ever present ‘anxieties of displacement of events by their own texts’. Thus, the trauma experienced by the child soldier is a result of ‘double dying’ (Rosenfeld 1980) as he witnesses the actual physical dying and death of fellow child soldiers, as much as the death of an authentic account of self in war, produced when fictional metaphors threaten to obliterate raw experience. The article argues that metaphor’s propensity to usurp historical fact is the basis upon which the narrative of the child soldier’s trauma becomes the condition of possibility of remembering and recording both historical facts and the meaning of desecration and liberation.

Keywords: witness, archive, child soldier, testimony, memoir, historical fact, trauma, remembering, liberation, WARCHILD, STORY

Introduction: theoretical and methodological challenges in understanding child soldier narratives
Perceptions still abound that whether coerced, reluctantly recruited or enthusiastically participating (Mamdani 2001), child soldiers are vulnerable, and easily intimidated into fighting in adult wars. The ‘situationist perspective affirms that genocidal leaders always find willing executioners’ (Stone 2010, 284). In fact, as observed by Grunfeld
(2002, 273), many child soldiers ‘are members of armed forces which are currently not at war’. Welzer (in Grunfeld 2002; Stone 2010, 284) amplifies on the above paradoxical agency of child soldiers when he states that what is shocking about child soldiers as perpetrators of violence and genocide lies less in the fact that the individual concerned took advantage of what Gunter Anders called an ‘opportunity for unpunished inhumanity’ that was open to them – that they grasped sexual opportunities, enriched themselves personally and allowed themselves the unfamiliar feeling of unlimited power and command. All this is reprehensible, but not incomprehensible. Rather, what is far more difficulty to understand is the fact that a social development had opened up to them precisely this surprising expansion of their personal scope of action – and that, of all things, it was a dictatorial, totalitarian system that granted them their incomparable expansion of their personal freedom.

Far from merely depicting masses and child soldiers as vulnerable, this harsh criticism in the above passage actually implies that in situations of war, the so-called ordinary people command certain levels of inflationary power that they deploy against enemies to keep them alive. When the above insight is applied to the agency of child soldiers, its meaning begins to revise traditional conceptions of what child soldiers can do on top of what they actually do.

For example, when the stories that are told by child soldiers show the desire to survive, flavoured with the ‘opportunity of unpunished humanity’, appear as narratives, these accounts derive their power from the authority of presence. Child soldiers tell stories of which they were part of, have witnessed and participated in simultaneously as victim and vector. The traumatic experiences captured in such narratives are usually manifested in the graphic descriptions of human squander through rape, death, napalm and hacking by the machete. Psychologically, these modes of humiliation that child soldiers witness, and that happened to themselves or fellow child soldiers are stuck in their minds and remain as permanent mental scars.

However, physical trauma is only but one source of pain that the narrative of trauma shows signs of. Child soldiers must also confront another kind of trauma linked to the challenges of transforming raw stories, and genocidal experiences into telling, mediating the experiences into a narrative that is coherent enough to make sense of their ugly experiences. Depending on the child soldier’s skill with the facility of language, memoir’s desire to promote an authentic account is often constrained by how many of the facts of the writer’s experiences can be obtained through narration. On the other hand, the impulse towards documentary facts is not entirely achieved because even in facts based on historically verifiable events, the imagination takes over and lived experienced is converted and conveyed through symbolism, images and metaphors. As White (1985, 122) puts it:
In any narrative rhetorical devices such as symbolism, images and metaphor repossess a capacity to invoke a world of meaning beyond the author’s intended meaning. Metaphor’s capacity to provide surplus meaning may mean embellishing historical facts or occluding them altogether. Metaphor rearranges as it also re-signify narration in unexpected ways. Therefore, despite the memoirist’s desire to remember and represent facts as they happened, authentically, the historical and the fictional refuse to entirely be opposed to each other so that historical facts become no less than ‘a form of fiction than the novel is a form of historical representation’.

If, therefore, the trauma of narrativity is that in seeking to stabilise, and cohere, it must either contract or expand meanings, this irony is exactly the unpredictable source of the potential aporia of the memoir as genre of ‘Literature of fact or fictions of factual representations’ (ibid., 121). Thus in memoir, the authority of presence that would have given unquestioned signature to the facts told is undermined by the very act of telling which emphasises the actual, the possible and the imaginable. As Young (1988, 21) contends, it must be anticipated that every narrative in memoir is ‘constructed and interpretive’. The consequences of writing any narrative of violence and genocide is that

upon entering narrative, violent events necessarily re-enter the continuum, are totalised by it, and thus seem to lose their ‘violent quality’ and in the process, the ‘trauma of their unassimilability is relieved’ by the ‘mantle of coherence that narrative necessarily imposes on them’ (ibid., 15–16).

The impact of the different levels of trauma outlined above makes it possible for me to argue that the ultimate condition of possibility of memoir is a paradox: ‘it is only after the survivor has affirmed his own existence that he can perceive himself as a witness or trace of the events to which he testifies’ (ibid., 38). Jal’s memoir, WARCHILD: A child soldier’s story (2009) (hereafter WARCHILD) bears all the hallmarks of thinking of the text as both witness and archive. In the text, to the extent that ‘history must meet standards of coherence’ and that ‘fiction must pass the test of correspondence’ (White 1985, 122), the ‘discourse of the historian and that of the imaginative writer [must] overlap, resemble, correspond with each other’ (ibid.) and sometimes these discourses have to bring the claims of authenticity by one over the other into permanent crisis.

The collapse of romance narrative and the emergency of a genocidal war narrative in Warchild

In the preface to his book, Jal (2009) favours to see his narrative as oral

history carried on [his] mother’s tongue and in the songs of village. This is sharply contrasted with the by-product which is a book in which dates, and exact places are mere
This awareness of a memoirist of the struggle between oral and written focalises the fact that part of the imaginative trauma is that writing even of the most memorable memoir is compromised: despite claims to authentic historical facts, memoir is based on a conscious selection of what to write, what to leave out and how to order these facts in particular ways to create a narrative. It is a process that for better or worse results in the loss of certain experiences which never make it into the book as much as is gained by the fact that in narrative that uses images and metaphors, what is emphasised, remembered and recorded is not factual data but the meaning of life.

Jal (2009, Preface) continues to openly defy the binary categories that oppose history to fiction when he says his story is ‘not meant to be a history of a country to be read by scholars’. It is the story of one boy, his memories, and what he witnessed. In these statements the author privileges narrative or raw data, and deploys the rhetorical device of allegory which is a fictional commentary that uses one life to frame the fortunes of several lives within a community or a nation. This controversial preface sets the tone of the story of genocide in which pastoral romance is recalled as an antidote to the brutalisation of the Africans of South Sudan by the Arabs from Khartoum. In the memoir, village life and its momentary times of serenity are receding:

*I loved life in the village. Watching the ostriches and buffalo in the bush, learning to use the ashes of cow dung and sticks to brush my teeth, and dyeing my hair red using the bark of the lour tree. I also liked having Gatluck with us because he played with me often. But most of all I was glad to have left the war behind* (Jal 2009, 23).

The world of pastoral romance is denied a stable identity; while some parts of South Sudan are portrayed as yet un-trammelled by the invasive forces of war, others that also form the narrator’s consciousness have already been sullied by war. The pastoral romance narrative is undermined because ‘in the peaceful village we once knew, rockets blow apart houses with families inside, women are raped, and children are murdered. It is genocide and my people are its victims’ (ibid., 2). The predator is imaged in the form of a fox and in the context of the story, the foxes are in fact both the Northern Arabs as well as the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) on whose political side the child soldier Jal was to fight. For their own part the Arabs do not hide their hatred and violence towards the southerners whom the Arabs derisively describe as ‘slaves’ (ibid., 4). The memoirist’s voice registers the traumatic experiences of a child who saw, and witnessed, violence perpetrated by the Arabs on his family: Arabs beat Uncle John, and ‘punched toward’ (ibid., 5) the narrator’s mother’s mouth. This act of humiliation is calculated to subdue the Southerners’ spirit of resistance that, according to the Northern Arabs, ‘is worth nothing’ (ibid.).
Furthermore, the Northern Arabs are set apart from the southerners: the Northemers are rich, and their police have power and authority. They ‘beat men and women on the street’ and the Arabs vowed to ‘Kill every Nuer man before reaching their women and children (ibid., 7). The destruction of Nuer life takes on genocidal proportions as the Northern Arabs commit atrocities in order to maintain their grip on oil from the South Sudan. As observed by the child soldier narrator:

The war which was to bleed the very heart of my country for decades wasn’t purely tribal or religious. At its heart was money – in particular the oil that lay hidden beneath the lands of the south and from which the northern government wanted to profit. Dollars were the prize, and the best way to get them was to drive those who claimed the land from their homes. Sharia law was introduced and the government armed one tribe against another. Burning villages and dropping bombs from the sky, they would stop at nothing to get what they wanted as the displacement of a people became its destruction (ibid., 7).

The violence encoded in this passage is economic, physical and psychological and it is not imagined. It is experienced, witnessed and ubiquitous. Without using numbers of the dead, or names of places, this passage also reveals that what the memoirist sees and how this reality is mentally processed and interpreted creates new imaginative facts. These facts do not have to grow in stature to become authentic because they are measured against what might be found in a historical text. The child soldier’s memory is also an archive manifesting how the fiction imposes pressure on historical facts.

As White (1985) notes and this applies to the memoir, WARCHILD, the fictions of factual representations are encouraged by the fact that there are ‘many histories that could pass for novels, and many novels that could pass for histories’ (ibid., 121). The memoir either resolves or does not resolve the subjective distinctions between history and fiction. In fact, each can be the other and the advantage of viewing memoir as neither entirely based on raw historical fact nor entirely conjured up as an imaginative story is further underscored by White. Drawing on the history of the discipline of history, and the arbitrary emergency of the category of the fictional, White (ibid., 123) writes that:

Prior to the French Revolution, historiography was conventionally regarded as a literary art. More specifically, it was regarded as a branch of rhetoric and its ‘fictive’ nature generally recognized. Although eighteenth century theorists distinguished rather rigidly (and not always with adequate philosophical justification) between ‘fact’ and ‘fancy’, they did not on the whole view historiography as a representation of the facts unalloyed by elements of fancy.

That history and fiction supplement each other in creating the sense of narrative of violence is further revealed in the memoir, WARCHILD. In it, the child soldier’s trauma is registered variously. For example, the raping of Sarah, the orphan girl who lived with the child narrator, by an Arab soldier is described in ways that shatter the ‘innocent’ world
of the child narrator. During the rape, which the boy sees a spectacle of abominable violence, Aunt Sarah is humiliated. The family of the child narrator is scandalised:

Sarah didn’t move and the soldier raised his belt above her. I heard the sharp crack of the whip against soft skin as the belt came crashing down to whip her again and again. It was like watching a hyena snapping at a baby antelope. Sarah looked so afraid. But she was quiet when the soldier knelt down and pulled up the skirt she was wearing before pushing the long material over her face. I couldn’t breathe as I watched. He was going to kill her. He was going to shoot her (Jal 2009, 16).

Narrative amplifies the banality of evil that describes genocidal acts. In the passage above, the soldier’s menacing power over a hapless woman is registered in the ‘sharp crack’ of a whip denoting physical violence. In contrast, Sarah has her humanity taken away; she is numb. In the passage, ‘heard’, ‘watching’, ‘afraid’ and ‘watched’ are signifiers of a sensory world through which the boy narrator registers the trauma in him and in Sarah. The words also establish the boy as a witness; ‘I watched’, suggests that the child narrator was present at the ritualistic humiliation of an innocent women.

Thus, the memoir scaffolds its authority through establishing the narrator as the subject and object of acts of aggression that turn him and Sarah into objects. The memoirist narrator comments that ‘rape and sexual slavery are weapons as destructive as any bomb’ (ibid., 17). Boys were taken too, captured and stolen to be carried north to work as slaves. Witnessing violence also has the effect of collapsing the social scaffolds of communitarian assistance typical in rural areas where pain and pleasures are shared. On reflecting on Sarah’s ordeal in particular, and that of the Southerners in general, the boy narrator suggests that as a child his world was collapsing in on him ‘falling apart each day in a hundred different ways’ (ibid.).

Genocide is not just any war; genocide kills in ways that go beyond physical annihilation of those named as enemies. In the memoir, the boy narrator registers the disintegration of his community unfolding on his watch as men and women are killed, taken hostage and shepherded into slavery by the northerners. The boy narrator underscores further the barbarity of genocide, of which its harm constitutes a crime against humanity when it is said in the narrative that ‘we also heard stories that streams and streams had been poisoned by the army, making people sick when they drank there. Two of my aunts who lived outside Bantiue died that way’ (ibid.). A war that destroys the sources of livelihood of a community is one of attrition, and it is meant to curtail the capacity of the community to reproduce itself. The ‘bodies of women and children, old and young’ (ibid., 18) that littered the beaten paths by people killed while attempting to escape from the brutal massacres by the soldiers from the north is further is evidence genocide was taking place.
Genocide killing transcends the thinkable and the ethics of war; the vultures that fly low further allow the boy narrator to witness the banality of evil engendered in genocidal violence. In the memoir, ‘a murdered naked woman [was] lying on the ground next to a baby. There were holes where her eyes were meant to be’ (ibid., 19). When the boy narrator’s mother tried to protect her children from the shock of this dastardly murder, ‘it was too late. My sister and I had seen the woman and would never forget. Her memory was carved into us. The stench of this place was inside us. Death was part of us now’ (ibid.). Memoir employs focalisation, in which what is recalled is not necessarily the whole, but part of the whole to represent the whole; ‘Mother’, ‘baby’, ‘sister’ are not merely statistical extensions of the community besieged from without. They are significations of the cruelty of the northern army whose callousness is signified in the ‘soft’ targets of their massacre. Thus, to create effect and for affect, memoir recalls facts that would make any reader repulsed by a cruel action.

The desecration of the family unit is the most effective way to carry out genocide. In the Rwandan genocide, targeting families of Tutsis was deliberately designed to curtail the capacity of the Tutsis to reproduce. In the memoir, WARCHILD, a shift in methods of destroying the Nuer communities indicates the intention of the Arabs from Khartoum to commit crimes against humanity. If killing the physical bodies using instruments of war is considered the new normal in genocidal contexts, those who murder adopt new strategies to annihilate those that they have marked as possessing ungrievable lives (Butler 2010). In the memoir, the Northern Arabs resort to

> burning and looting crops, they destroyed anything that might feed us or the SPLA. They wanted us to starve and set village afire as the lucky ones escaped to the rivers or the forest while their friends and family perished. Murahaleen also came, and they were the ones I was most afraid of as they shouted ‘Allahur Akbar,’ shot ... I remember walking into the village where bones covered the ground. Some were small and some were large, and Mama couldn’t cover our eyes that day – there was too much to see (Jal 2009, 28).

As witness to the destruction of the Nuer, the reader is brought closer to naked force. First, Arabs foment faminogenic policies that entail starving villagers to surrender and then face death. Those of the villagers who survive the bullets are finished off by fatigue and hunger. This method of killing in genocidal contexts such as the one described above has been historically tried and tested and has its precedents in the genocide of the American Indians in the mass murder from which modern America grew (Thornton 1987). Faminogenic policies are very effective at displacing the targeted and the unwanted social groups from their familiar environments so that the weak, diseased, old, young and even the strong are reduced to ‘bare life’ (Agamben 1998, 4). The condition of bare life ensures that reproduction and production within a social group are undermined in ways calculated to change the composition of the social features that distinguish one group from another.
Arendt (1963) correctly notes—and this applies to the experience of the Nuer people of South Sudan—that programmed genocide such as the one that the Nuer experienced is staged methodically. According to her, writing in the context of the Jewish Holocaust, the final solutions involved the expulsion of the Jews, rendering them stateless, forcing the captured Jews into concentration camps and then killing them through various technologies such as gassing. In the case of the Nuer experience, their expulsion from the north, followed by the incessant napalming of their positions in South Sudan, became the killing machine. Those Nuer people who wandered in the dry forests were cornered by hunger and they succumbed to death from starvation. The environment, just like the boy narrator, became witness to an experience ostensibly hidden away from global cameras. Schimmer (2012, 119) has observed the impact of genocide on the environment and argues that where genocide take places there is an ‘abrupt and severe decrease in agricultural activity during the immediate after of the genocide’. Writing on Darfur, Schimmer (ibid., 122) stresses that environmental stress precipitated and facilitated genocide as well as attesting to its impacts. Schimmer (ibid., 128) observes that

societies are vulnerable to even subtle environmental changes—some induced by nature and others by humans. Sometimes violence disrupts the environment and the results may supply evidence of a premeditated intent to destroy its inhabitants. Regardless of whether environment is used as a weapon, however, it always serves as a witness.

In the memoir, WARCHILD, the genocide on the Nuer people that was carried out by the Khartoum ‘government soldiers’ (Jal 2009, 31) who exploded grenades, and killed innocent people, left a trail of physical destruction of children, and babies [and] pregnant women lying burned on the ground with children inside them (ibid., 30). This image invokes moral repugnance in the reader but induces trauma in the boy narrator. The banality of genocide and the evil that it entailed is immortalised in the memoir in the mnemonic device of the folktale of Dog and Fox. In the tale, Dog seeks to persuade Fox to live with human beings, but Fox is not convinced because each time Fox visits Dog, that has accepted slavery, Fox notes that Dog is starved, sometimes given bones and on other occasions for expecting to be treated decently. Fox chooses to live in the forest fending for himself but preserving his freedom.

The metaphysical imperative of this folktale is that it reveals the choices that the Nuer people could adopt—become slaves to the Northern Arabs of Khartoum as Dog was to humans or rebel like Fox that chose to fight it out in the environment. That the narrative of memoir is capable of drawing on oral culture to represent the dilemma of the Nuer people reeling under genocide suggests that the image and the metaphor can authorise their own facts that bring into sharp focus the contradictions between social forces. In this tale, raw facts or history are not displayed but revised and projected in fictional style to confirm that stylisation is an inescapable fate of any narrative, whether
historical or fictional. The tale dissolves the opposition between history and fiction and instead suggests that memoir’s impulse towards the documentary is a mediated narrative. However, the invocation of Dog and Fox – animals of the environment – to comment of the predicament of the Nuer provides a symbolical framework through which it is possible to ‘show proof of past and present violence … and provide[s] warning signs of violence that may be impending’ (Schimmer 2012, 128).

The evidence that the memoir, WARCHILD, is an authentic account of genocide is that it is constructed and this level is manifested in the fact that ideological and narrative choices that the boy narrator cum author makes are hewn from the cultural resources made available by the values and the language that the Nuer people use. But it is significant to observe here that memoir is conscious of its potential for self-irony. In other words, what the boy narrator now turned into child soldier sees, evaluates and condemns as also being responsible for the genocide in South Sudan is not only the Northern Arabs. The trauma of the narrative in memoir is born out of a paradox inherent in any narrative claiming ‘uncontested authority’ over the interpretation of events by those who bear witness to the genocide on the Nuer in South Sudan. The paradox of testimony is that its claims to truth-telling are significantly modified if not undercut by the presence of a gap or aporia between knowing, remembering and telling, all of which are unstable modes of self-recuperation.

Testimony and memoir imply a person who has traversed experience from beginning to end, who has seen and borne witness, in ways that entitle the person to speak and write with authority based on assumed and firm control over narrative. But, as Agamben (1998, 14) maintains, the possibility is ever present ‘for certain words to be left behind others and to be understood in a different sense’. The pressure of fictional imagination on ‘raw data’ contained in historical records suggests in writing as in oral story telling that elements of fancy in narrative unwittingly guarantee that no narrative is allowed to stabilise as the only single and valid interpretation of any set of events.

The memoir WARCHILD’s reliance on historical fact and fiction to construct a narrative of genocide is resolved through the paradox of suggested complicity in a genocide initially arising from a war of persecution (suppression of the Nuer) that is imaginatively re-worked into an agonistic war of liberation (war of independence of South Sudan). The memoir suggests that genocide is history and historical. It has meanings that can influence future events. In the memoir, the meaning of genocide is embedded in the historical conflict over oil and natural resources. The destruction of the Nuer has meaning for the Northern Arabs; for them to maintain control over the human and material resources of South Sudan, the Northern Arabs reckon that they must just continue with their violence on the Nuer to enable the northern elites to dominate the Nuer. By the same logic, the political/moral re-awakening of the Nuer and other Christian groups in the memoir, who mobilise and fight oppression and for the establishment of
a new state called South Sudan, suggests a meaning placed on the liberation struggle borne out of the necessity to defeat a genocidal mentality. These interpretations of the achievements of the memoir, that is, of having foregrounded the meanings of genocide, differentiates African genocide critics from some holocaust critics for which the Jewish holocaust had no meaning, despite legitimate evidence of meaning in the form of the existence of Israel, a country that was, by and large, borne out of the historical necessity to create a home for Jews.

SPLA Genocide and the Agonistic Narrative of Liberation for the Establishment of the New State of South Sudan

In Remnants of Auschwitz: The witness and the archive (1999), Agamben suggests that the meaning of the Jewish Holocaust was incarnated in the statements by numerous witnesses who invoked different reasons that inspired witnesses to survive and to bear witness. For the critic, some witnesses did not want to ‘suppress the witness’ they could become. Others simply wanted to live and, yet for other witnesses, the very fact of surviving was some form of resistance, an affirmation that despite the trauma, ‘the witness does not perish’ (ibid., 15). These reasons that motivate survivors of genocide and mass murder to survive and to bear witness by telling their story are present in the memoir. In the memoir, the invocation of historical evidence is not only meant to expose the tyranny of the Northern Arabs. The irony in the fictional rendering of the memoir is that the narrative also establishes reasons for the Nuer people’s desire to create an independent South Sudan. Contrary to many texts on genocide in Africa and also to some extent, texts on the Jewish holocaust the memoir, WARCHILD openly imagines organised political struggle whose ultimate terminus is the establishment of an independent South Sudan. The child soldier’s father is described as a fighter for freedom for the creation of a new state of South Sudan (Jal 2009, 8). The child narrator’s mother supports this thesis by telling him that Sharia law, the violent seizure of Nuer land and the tyranny of Northern Arabs should be defeated in order for the Nuer people to continue with the ‘freedom to worship, to have our own culture’ (ibid., 13).

The complexity of the genre of memoir is that in its modes of reconstructing remembered history, memoir unwittingly strikes ‘wrong’ notes that complicate the agonistic narrative of liberating South Sudan. For example, while the Northern Arabs are depicted as carrying the most blame for the genocide, the SPLA is not spared criticism for openly recruiting child soldiers most of whom were ill-trained, young and no match for the war machine used by the Northern Arabs from Khartoum. The child narrator is traumatised when he discovers that his own mother was beaten by SPLA soldiers. Furthermore, many men and women who became soldiers in the SPLA did so through coercion, as ‘people were forced to help SPLA on the front lines by carrying food and ammunition’ (ibid., 29). In this statement, the memoir resorts to self-criticism and refuses to project the
SPLA as unblemished heroes in a genocide that happened in the context of a civil war ‘between government troops and SPLA [that] battled each other’ (ibid., 16).

The leaders of the SPLA were self-implicating themselves when they sent young children to war after having lied to the parents of these children that they were going to Ethiopia to get an education. The narrator’s father, Babba, is the godfather of this myth that consigned children to die in the forests and from hunger at camps in Ethiopia. Babba uses falsehoods to convince parents to part with their children:

_We have all heard the stories of children being sold for guns or made into soldiers, but they are not true. My own son is with yours. Would I send him to school if there was any danger. Ethiopia is a good place. There is food, no war, and your sons will have shoes and education. They will return to you educated and strong – ready to rebuild our country when we have won it back forever_ (ibid., 43).

The reality is that children were being sent to war by their elders who lied to them. In another moment of traumatic experience, the child narrator reflects on his friends disappearing from the group journeying to Ethiopia:

_All I can remember of that journey are flashes – the gleaming gray skin of a hippo emerging from the water and a boy being clamped into its jaws in one bite, people throwing themselves off the raft in terror and being pulled into the shallows by crocodiles_ (ibid., 47).

Memoir’s self-ironising the voice of the child narrator reveals fractures within the version of nationalism propounded by the SPLA. In fact, the leaders of the SPLA used deceit, force and violence to recruit child soldiers as well as to cow into submission those of the Nuer parents who requested their children to discontinue the journey to Ethiopia. While the SPLA soldiers let some of the children return to their parents, other children took the initiative and defected from the SPLA: ‘some boys tried to run away and I knew why. We had only eaten maize as we marched south’ (ibid., 51). Hunger killed many of the young recruits, but there were ‘stories of boys disappearing as we walked. Some said they had been taken by villagers who had lost their children in war, other claimed it was the _murahaleen_, but some believed something else was stalking us’ (ibid., 50). Jal carefully deploys words that pluralise the child narrator’s subjectivities to achieve the indictment of the SPLA nationalist movement. One SPLA commander not only threatened the recruited child soldiers, instilling in them the fear that they would be eaten by wild animals should the children attempt to escape, but as the child narrator says: ‘We knew he was famous for ordering his soldiers to kill his own mother’ (ibid., 52). The self-reflexive memoir opens to the reader the ideological silences that the SPLA version of nationalism attempted to impose on the people in whose name the political organisation purported to be fighting for. For the child narrator, although the major portion of blame for the mass murder of the Nuer people should be borne by Northern
Arabs from Khartoum, the SPLA also unwittingly and sometimes wittingly contributed to the deaths of thousands of child soldiers (ibid., 53).

As portrayed within the agonistic narrative of liberation, to create a new state of South Sudan many children died of hunger and disease while crossing forests and rivers into Ethiopia (ibid., 58). However, at the refugee camp at Pinyudo in Ethiopia, nearly 17,000 children came to be known as The Lost Boys of Sudan. Pinyudo is imaged as a form of a prison or concentration camp where children buried their friends. Boys conscripted into the army died from protein-deficient diseases such as kwashiorkor. According to the child narrator, ‘it is not known just how many died on the march to Ethiopia but it was said the paths of the refugees could be traced by following the bones that lay scattered in our wake’ (ibid., 61). While the Pinyudo refugee camp cannot entirely be compared to the concentration camps where Jews were gassed, the memoir, *WARCHILD* attempts to draw parallels between the experiences of Sudanese child soldiers under the genocide forced on them by the Northern Arabs to the persecution of Jews imposed by the Nazis of Germany. In fact the reality of the experiences of child soldiers and children encamped at Pinyudo approximates Arendt’s descriptions of the concept of final solution. According to Arendt (1963, 56–111), in a context of genocide and holocaust the first final solution to a social group marked as enemy was expulsion; the second solution was being shepherded into a concentration camp; and the third solution was killing.

In the case of the child soldiers of South Sudan, they had been expelled from their lands by the Northern Arabs. This expulsion forced South Sudanese children to be camped in Ethiopia where thousands of them died from hunger, disease as well as military incursions by the Khartoum government. Some SPLA commanders also killed child soldiers whom they accused of wanting to desert the army. The narrative that reveals the trauma that the child narrator went through is also politically conscious of its contradictions. One such contradiction is manifested when SPLA leaders incriminate themselves for having lied and coercively forced children into the army. One of the commanders at Pinyudo boasts to the young recruits that:

*Many of you were disappointed to find there were no schools when you came here ... But if we hadn’t told you about the schools, then you would not have wanted to make the journey here, and the khawajas did not keep the promises they made us. Now you are starting to learn at school and must do the best you can so that when we recapture Sudan, you are ready to return and run our country (Jal 2009, 68).*

The myth of collective identities as the informing ideology of South Sudanese nationalism is sustained through fabrications and threats of reprisal to those Dinka and Nuer people who would have chosen not to participate in that war. Furthermore, although it is the banality of evil in the actions of the Northern Arabs that is paraded as the main cause of
the genocide in South Sudan, the memoir refuses to absolve the SPLA leaders of some blame. In other words, the pressure of historical raw facts on fictional narratives is such that in memoir, fiction is denied the capacity to present itself as possessing meanings beyond contestation. This struggle between history and fiction in memoir is not resolved in favour of one genre; instead, it is suggested that the conflation of fact and fiction produces a genre of fiction whose mode of existence in the memoir is allegory.

**Allegory, archiving and the politics of remembering the future in Warchild**

The author of a memoir uses historical facts that can be verified to lend authenticity to the story in the face of sceptical readers who might question the veracity of the story had it only been rendered in fictional terms. But memoirists are vulnerable human beings whose lives physically expire when they die. Testimony and memoir, with their assumed faithfulness to accounts of stories as they happened are thus expected to stand in the shoes of the author. However, while archiving in the form of written narrative is meant to ensure longevity and could always be verified, the irony is that archived material in the written mode is artifactual; it is constructed and the very process of doing this uses selecting and ordering of facts in ways that produce narrative that can be interpreted differently. On the other hand, memoir is a work of the mind, of the author’s imagination and to that extent, cannot escape the fictive identity. Because memoir must survive in the forms of historical facts and fiction conflated into the genre of faction, allegory is the rhetorical device that recalls an ugly past in order to comment on the present. Allegory, as the structural identity of memoir, is concerned with and warns about the repeatability of genocide in the future. Thus, allegory is the figure that assists memoirists to pre-possess multiple futures. These anticipated futures fracture the assumption of unitary subjectivities.

In the memoir, WARCHILD, the child soldier-narrator reminds the reader that the authoritarian tendencies that caused the Northern Arabs to unleash a genocide on the Nuer and the Dinka, can in fact be repeated by the SPLA, the nationalist movement claiming to fight to establish self-rule for South Sudan. The child soldier-narrator is not simply traumatised by the fact that at the age of 11, he kills Arabs and some women in war and actually is praised for it by his superiors (ibid., 102, 140); he is further traumatised by the destruction of Nuer and Dinka lives by the Arabs: ‘some had no eyes, others had lost their legs, while girls are openly raped even at the Pinyudu [sic] camp’ (ibid., 97). What began to eat into the child soldier’s convictions about the justice of the war in which he participated was the increasing authoritarian tendencies in the SPLA. One of the commanders at Pinyudo camp had even shocked the child soldiers by declaring that
you are on the side of justice, and any person who opposes the movement of SPLA is your enemy. If your mother is against us, you kill her; if your father is against us kill him. The SPLA is your family now. Together we will take revenge for all the wrongs done to us and win this war (ibid., 96).

In this passage, self-criticism within the SPLA movement is outlawed; the focus of the struggle is narrowed to ‘revenge’, and child soldiers are elevated above their parents whom they can dispose of politically on the slightest suspicion of being sell-outs or jallabas (African Muslims who had betrayed the movement). At the camps, ‘bigger soldiers got into bed with ‘jenajesh at night, and pain in boys’ eyes the next morning’ (ibid., 108) was visible. Rape of young boys and homosexuality was a threat to the movement. Senior commanders of the SPLA had employed young boys or Jesh a mer, to enforce discipline at the camps. The young SPLA soldiers were terror to the elders, and recommended whipping or imprisoning of other child soldiers at the Pinyudo camp. Furthermore, as evidence that the SPLA was losing political direction, at Pinyudo, the camp was ‘fast becoming divided between rich and poor – those who lived in dust and those who made it into gold’ (ibid., 107). Here, the memoirist relentlessly registers the uncomfortable facts that the very oppressive relations that the SPLA was fighting against had begun to be reproduced in its rank and file.

If the fissuring of the SPLA witnessed and experienced at Pinyudo was a microcosm portending or remembering a fractured South Sudan along the lines of the Dinka and the Nuer, in the political movement itself, the ideological contradictions between the Dinka and the Nuer intensified. At the Kurki camp, John Garang, a Dinka commander, could not stop members of the SPLA turning their guns, machetes and weapons on each other. As the child soldier-narrator puts it:

*I was sure John Garang would be able to motivate exhausted soldiers to fight once more, but some were angry that so many men had died for nothing. Now they were turning on each other as the trouble between Dinka and Nuer SPLA worsened. Troops were arriving at Kurki after being attacked with machetes, while stories were told that some were being shot by their own comrades during battle (ibid., 161).*

The betrayal of the struggle is constructed in a manner that implicates the top echelons of both Dinka and Nuer commanders. The child soldier observes that there were ideological as well as tactical differences between John Garang, a Dinka, and Riek Machar, of Nuer extraction. Although both started out fighting the Northern Arabs, the conflict between Garang and Riek escalated and began to wear down the Dinka and Nuer ordinary soldiers within the movements. The traumatic experience of the child soldier-narrator is accentuated by the fact that although the Dinka and the Nuer were all ‘part of SPLA’ (ibid., 163), a war within a war was happening when comrades were ‘getting killed by our comrades’ (ibid.). One of the major sources of political difference within the cadres in the SPLA was that Garang was projected as one who would never
accept nothing but victory over the whole of Sudan and he will fight this war forever. But Riek wants autonomy for southern Sudan away from the jallabas' (ibid.). Another problem that threatened the SPLA as some Nuer commanders told the child soldier-narrator, was that:

*John Garang doesn’t want anyone to question him, and the Dinka call SPLA theirs. We used to fight with one spirit, but now the Nuer are being labelled thieves. That is why we must join Riek and fight for an independent southern Sudan* (ibid., 165).

Garang was the internationally well-known leader of the SPLA. However, in the memoir *WARCHILD*, association of the SPLA’s dictatorial tendencies with Garang suggests that there were multiple versions of a new Sudan imagined by the different cadres that participated in the SPLA. That the memoir insists on revealing these political contradictions is the author’s strategy to refuse his narrative any stability linked to one ideological camp at the expense of the other within the same political movement. For instance, it is narrated in the memoir that:

*Dr. Garang dreamed of a unified Sudan but Riek wanted a separate South because he believed the North could never be trusted. It meant that Dinka and Nuer soldiers, who had once fought together in the SPLA, were on opposing sides as some remained loyal to Dr. Garang and others joined Rick [sic] Machar ... convinced that Garang’s Dinka supporters had targeted their tribe, armed Nuer civilians called the White Army, who supported Rick [sic], and soldiers who had sided with him rose up in revenge. They had attacked a Dinka area called Bor, and thousands had died – old people, women and babies, no one was safe. Those who had escaped were now wandering the country – thousands of refugees. Arab dictators in Khartoum were happy that our movement had been made weak by this fight* (ibid., 127).

In this correct but dispassionate analysis of the fractures in the SPLA’s narrative of nationalism, the memoir is being subversive of the ideology of nationalism. This ideology mobilises armies from youth and children who are rendered politically expedient when they are seen to be supporting opposing views. Memoir’s self-reflexivity allows it to also cast aspersion on the South Sudanese war of liberation purported to have been fought for the benefit of the children, but most of whom are sacrificed to narrow tribal ideologies. Implicitly too, when thousands of Dinka people die from Nuer violence, the irony that the memoir is trying to manifest is what constitutes the anxiety of liberation struggle. This anxiety is its capacity to operate a programme of genocide to weaken or exterminate one’s ‘friendly army’ so as to guarantee that when the war is won, one side emerges stronger than the other. These ethnic politics are performed in the memoir, *WARCHILD* but hidden in the guise of fighting an external enemy who are the Northern Arabs. The extent to which the Dinka and the Nuer forces also contributed to the massacre of their own people so as to render it thinkable that these ‘liberation armies’ of South Sudan are also culpable of genocide is left open-ended.
However, an allegorical narrative that structures the memoir reveals its capacity to anticipate conflicting versions of a nation’s futures such as that of South Sudan. The allegory denies the genre of testimony and memoir certitudes and the promotion of absolute truths. To the extent that what is written down text has become archive and can be read, the actions of characters in it can also be subjected to new interpretations in the light of new historical justifications and imperatives.

For example, in the memoir, Garang, the legendary and revolutionary leader of the SPLA does not die. But if his actual death on 30 July 2005 verified outside the narrative of WARCHILD is inferred in the text, then the ‘fighting between men, the comrades turning on each other with guns in the guns’ (ibid., 168) that happens between the Dinka and the Nuer represents how the memoir refuses to remember a future happy ending for the South Sudan’s resistance to the Northern Arabs’ genocidal war. The violent internecine war that breaks out amongst the SPLA members is the way in which the memoir’s allegorical structure points to the possibility of another genocide by two groups that initially were united against a common enemy. The memoir reveals that the economic conditions that are likely to make a fratricidal war between the Nuer and the Dinka deteriorate into a full scale genocide in the future shall be caused by the hunger, starvation and disease among the Nuer people that is blamed on the Dinka who are accused of monopolising new positions in the new South Sudan. As the child soldier-narrator states, when he arrived at Riek’s Nuer controlled camp, ‘we arrived to find starvation stealing the village there just as it had taken our comrades’ (ibid., 175). For Jal, the child soldier-narrator, the iconic symbol of poverty that threatened to paralyse the Nuer community was what he witnessed in the form of

*a bonny toddler crouched on all four[s] with its head resting on the ground as a vulture pecked at the diarrhea seeping from its body. The child’s mother lay nearby, too weak to do anything but softly push a stick against the ground to try to scare the bird away. As I ran to chase it, I knew both mother and child would soon be taken (ibid.).*

In the above passage, at the surface level of meaning, the vulture does not represent anything other than itself because, historically, the global media has actually archived the picture of this toddler and the vulture. Memoir, as argued throughout, resorts to historical referents in order to authenticate its narrative and render its meanings of the destruction of human life not only memorable but authoritative.

But, the vulture could very well be the metaphor of the warring members of the SPLA whose actions are depicted as having failed to ‘outrun’ (ibid., 203) historical pasts of genocide in Sudan. The evidence of that failure is not only the violent ways in which the SPLA members kill each other; the morbid symptoms of the failure to leave behind a colonial and historical legacy of genocide threaten to become the culture or the new normal. At the same time the vulture could also be the ugly image of the Northern Arabs
who in the memoir, WARCHILD are never far away from wanting to foment new waves of genocidal war on South Sudan or in neighbouring Darfur. This possibility is expressed by Jal, in ways that do not leave anything to the imagination that the Northern Arabs spoilt for a fight with their neighbours in order to monopolise the control of oil that they had enjoyed unchallenged before the war against genocide. Jal (ibid., 232–233) invokes precise historical dates to authenticate accusations against Khartoum:

In 2003 Khartoum had started attacking an area in western Sudan called Darfur after rebels, angry at the government’s neglect of a region that had supported it, had risen up. To crush them, government planes had started bombing as an armed Arab militia called the janjaweed slaughtered men, women, and children in violence echoing all I had seen as a child.

What traumatises Jal (ibid., 233) is that in the past,

where Muslim and Christian had once fought each other, the government was now killing its own—black Muslims who’d fought and died for it in the war against the south. Thousands had died, even more forced to flee ... I understood now that the war in Sudan wasn’t simply about Islam against Christianity, one tribe against another: Muslims, angry at what Khartoum had done, had joined SPLA, and Khartoum was attacking Africans who’d supported it.

Furthermore, the bloodletting that Northern Arabs had become accustomed to shocked the child soldier because like so many children of Sudan, child soldiers were all witnesses to the Northern Arabs’ shamelessness and dastardly conduct of a genocidal war in which ‘two million died’ (ibid., 255).

This number of deaths, whose veracity can be historically authenticated, is more than the casualties of ‘Angola, Bosnia, Chechnya, Kosovo, Liberia, the Persian Gulf, Sierra Leone, Somalia and Rwanda put together’ (ibid., 254). That the Northern Arabs could start and prosecute a genocide in which such great numbers of people died without the international criminal court possessing the political will power to try the northern perpetrators reveals how much African lives, in the international view, do not count for much, and these lives are not, to borrow a popular word from Butler, ‘grievable’ (2010, 4). In the memoir, WARCHILD, the Northern Arabs are not punished by the international criminal courts, hence are spurred to do more and as recorded matter-of-factly by Jal (2009, 254–255), ‘the killing continues in Darfur, many of the 4 million refugees from Sudan wait to return home, and in May 2008 fighting broke out between northern and southern forces in the disputed oil-rich town of Abyei’. The visible marks of Sudan’s genocidal war on South Sudan are written on the bodies of the people of South Sudan, and the poverty visited on families, people and the country, despite its oil riches.

The memoir, WARCHILD is concerned with the violated lives of children in contexts of war in general and genocide in particular. The memoirist does not want to portray a
picture of his narrative as the only one depicting the ultimate truth about the plight of child soldiers. Jal (ibid., 254) says that ‘everyone in this country has a story to tell, but I am telling mine to speak for all those who can’t’. As a former child soldier, Jal believes that children did not want war, or to be forced to participate in any war. But the possibility of creating a grand narrative speaking on behalf of the silenced children is only partially achieved in the memoir. Each time Jal thinks of Nyaruach, his sister who was raped by a warlord (ibid., 255), or his friend Lual, who died of fatigue while searching for his tribes people scattered by war (ibid., 171), or his Dinka comrade, Deng who died from Arab bullets, Jal is more and more convinced that there are more versions of the stories of genocide in Sudan than his memoir could capture. Jal (ibid., 256) observes that ‘childhood in Africa does not hold the same romance that it does in Europe and America’.

This partly explains why Jal could not paint beautiful pictures after the war. The white family he is living with in Kenya encourages him to ‘draw beautiful things’ (ibid., 184). According to Jal (ibid., 183), the white family, ‘didn’t like the pictures I drew of jeeps, tanks, and houses on fire instead of hippos, birds and crocodiles’. The fate of the narrative of the child soldier can be influenced by those who would pay for the publication of the memoir. Jal’s refusal to make his drawings beautiful rejects not only the patronage of those who have not experienced war; the ‘ugly’ pictures are necessary for him because they remind him of the ugliness of genocide. Repulsive details in memoir can motivate people to find solutions to end war. This view is shared by Langer (1998, 1) for whom one of the ways to pre-empt genocide can be achieved by ‘using – and perhaps abusing its grim details to fortify a prior commitment to an ideal of moral reality, community responsibility, or religious belief that leaves us with space to retain faith’ in human capacity to overcome adversity.

Besides the task of challenging the suffering of children and child soldiers in war and genocidal contexts, the memoir raises questions with political and ethical dimensions. For example, is creating a new independent state always the desirable or logical conclusion of a war fought against genocidal mentality? Such a question could very well be answered in the affirmative because the piles of physical and psychological evidence of the pain that the Nuer and the Dinka went through as depicted in WARCHILD under the dictatorial authority of the Khartoum regime can justify the separation and creation of an independent state of South Sudan. Moreover, the example of Israel created in 1948 out of the holocaust and as the ‘safe’ home of world Jews is a model that oppressed ethnic groups in Africa can follow. But, the post-1994 Rwandan model in which victims and perpetrators live together in the same geographical space complicates WARCHILD’s political unconscious imagination that supports the creation of new states out of genocidal wars.
The memoir’s concern is also to show that genocide has meaning; it is destructive and hence the mentality that sustains genocide must be fought even if it means that the ultimate terminus of that resistance is the establishment of a new and independent state such as South Sudan that was borne out of a protracted war of genocide on the Nuer and Dinka people. Genocide has meaning in Africa because its genesis is not abstract; social groups go to war to defend privilege or to fight in order to establish an egalitarian society. As Jal (2009, 257) concludes his memoir,

*the best investment is in human life – either spiritually or physically . . . I am proof that one person can rise above any challenge, and if I can, then so will others if they are given the chance. Hope must never die.*

In the ‘literature of atrocity’ (Langer 1975, 3), the witness and the archive are necessary to inspire readers to aspire towards a morally upright society. The raw facts of history that make up elements of the narrative of memoir establish verifiable contexts that allow humanity to go back to its dark ages in order to learn from the past to avoid past historical tragedies brought about by genocide. The fictional elements of memoir are indispensable because literary metaphors can suggest unexpected, positive and alternative models of human living.

**Conclusion**

The aim of this article was to explore the concepts ‘witness’, ‘archive’ and ‘trauma’ in relation to Jal’s memoir, *WARCHILD: A child soldier’s story*. Critical studies on child soldiers have tended to depict them as outright victims of war and genocide. The article explored Jal’s experience as the witness whose creative work narrated his suffering under the cruel rule of the Northern Arabs in Khartoum. The article also revealed the traumatic experiences that Jal went through as he witnessed the members of the SPLA (to which he belonged) begin fighting each other along the Dinka and the Nuer tribal lines. It was demonstrated that the achievement of Jal’s memoir is to reveal that genocide has meaning for both the victors and the vanquished. The experiences of genocide, though traumatic to a young soldier, provided a context in which the SPLA fought for the liberation of South Sudan. Memoir, it was revealed in the article, is an amalgam of raw historical facts and fiction creatively re-worked in the author’s imagination. The concept ‘witness’ was explored and it was argued that testimonies by witnesses can provide first-hand information about the atrocities perpetrated in genocide. Therefore, in the literature of atrocities, historical facts that only the witness who went through the experience can reconstruct, approximate an authentic account of genocide. It was, however, revealed that even with witnesses, selecting what to write about and ordering specific facts in certain ways means a departure from the actual reality. The implication of this observation is that in memoir there is not only one
narrative of trauma. The narrative describing the child soldier’s traumatic experiences emphasises the child soldier-narrator’s physical pain, psychological disorientation and spiritual dislocation. However, the constant clash between history and fiction in memoir produces an imaginative narrative whose meanings question the documentary inclination of authority vested in the voice of the memoirist. In other words, a memoir whose story is based on war and genocide, such as WARCHILD, is also a traumatised narrative because the admixtures of genres in it, denies it a single perspective from which it might have been possible to claim to narrate a story whose veracity is based on the authority of presence of the witness. Because a child soldier is human, vulnerable and will inevitably perish one day, the memoir as book has become the archive that stands for the witness. This transition of memoir from a witness who testifies to an author who narrates means that the memoir is a constructed narrative that is subjected to different interpretations. Whether this process is perceived by readers as either enriching or diminishing the archive/memoir’s meanings as originally intended by the witness, who is now transformed into the archivist, is the fate of all narratives. The article, however, concluded that the memoir’s inherent capacity to produce multiple subjective interpretations makes the child soldier’s story an allegory of humans who struggle to overcome adversity in social life. This is what makes genocide – the subject of the memoir – have meaning despite being a form of negative and disruptive energy.

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References


