

## Article

# Child Soldiers/Child Slaves: Africa's Weaponised Unfree Children in *Blood Diamond* (2006) and *Beasts of No Nation* (2015)

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**Abstract:** The figure of the child is one that, at least in the Westernised imagination, is entangled with notions of innocence, naivety, and freedom. But what of the child who is unfree, who has been stripped of innocence, and for whom naivety is a danger? One expression of this iteration of the figure of the child is the child soldier, which has been a centralising figure in various narratives set during and concerned with African experiences of warfare. This paper is concerned with the figure of the child soldier as it is staged in both Edward Zwick's *Blood Diamond* (2006) and Cary Joji Fukunaga's filmic adaptation of Uzodinma Iweala's novel, *Beasts of No Nation* (2015). In turning to Ashis Nandy's articulation of the tension held within "the child" as being both emblematic of a fantasy of childhood produced by adult nostalgia—hopeful, joyous and free—and always potentially dangerous, this paper pivots the notions of soldiering and slaving on and around the child as a figure. In doing so, the paper asks what it might mean to think of the condition of being a child soldier as being akin to that of being a child slave, weaponised for political and economic ends.

**Keywords:** child soldiers; child slaves; *Blood Diamond*; *Beasts of No Nation*; unfree children

## 1. Introduction

There is a broad and long-established body of work dedicated to the child soldier as a phenomenon, a figure, a concept, and a question that is constituted by a diverse range of contributions ranging from the testimonies of survivors (for example, at the International Criminal Court (ICC)), research produced by scholars across disciplines and non-profit organisations such as Invisible Children, and various literary interventions<sup>1</sup>. The long list of novels and memoirs concerned with this subject include *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (2007) by Ishmael Beah, *Bamboo People* (2010) by Matali Perkins, and *Girl at War* (2015) by Sara Nović. Many such texts were adapted for screen, including *Beasts of No Nation* (2005; 2015), *First They Killed My Father* (2000; 2017) (made for and released by Netflix, like *Beasts of No Nation*), and *Johnny Mad Dog* (2005; 2008). Other filmic representations include *Ballad of the Little Soldier* (1984), *Innocent Voices* (2005), and *War Witch* (2012). This paper is concerned with the figure of the child soldier as it is staged in both Edward Zwick's *Blood Diamond* (2006) and Cary Joji Fukunaga's filmic adaptation of Uzodinma Iweala's novel *Beasts of No Nation* (2015).

Edward Zwick's *Blood Diamond* (Zwick 2006) is set in Sierra Leone during the civil war in 1999. With the strike of a match and the lighting of a paraffin lantern, the viewer is introduced to the first of the central characters of the film in Solomon Vanda, a Mende fisherman, husband, and father. In the first few minutes of the film, the viewer is given a glimpse of a peaceful life and a closeknit family, being focalised specifically through the bond between Solomon and his son, Dia. Dia, a fourteen-year-old-boy, is excited to be attending school, and the promises entangled with education. Soon, however, this seemingly idyllic life is torn apart by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), a rebel group and militia that is challenging the government of Sierra Leone but also pillaging Sierra Leone of its natural resources and enslaving, maiming, and murdering the very people whose "interests" they claim to be representing. Dia, with his mother and siblings, manages



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to escape, while Solomon is captured by the RUF. In one of the first scenes of extreme violence, Solomon, and the viewer, see the RUF chopping off the arms of those who are not deemed strong enough to be useful in the mines, with one soldier asking a captive, “Long sleeve? Or short sleeve?” (00:05:27–00:05:29). This is also the first time the viewer meets the film’s villain, Captain Poison, who explains, “young man, please you must understand—the government wants you to vote, ok? They will tell you that ‘The future is in your hands. We now de future, so we take your hands’” (00:05:32–00:05:40). In this scene, the viewer is introduced not only to the radical violence of the RUF, but also to the use of children in their army. Thus, this moment is a precursor to the violence that Dia, whose freedom is short lived, will come to not only witness but participate in. As is discussed in more detail elsewhere, after Dia is taken by the RUF, he is made to commit murder as part of his indoctrination into the rebel “family”, abuse substances such as alcohol, and, ultimately, become an active member of the RUF, participating in the violence which ruptured his family, home, and sense of childhood as entangled with peace, protection, and love.

Much the same is the story of Agu, a twelve-year-old-boy-turned-soldier who is the focaliser and narrator of Cary Joji Fukunaga’s *Beasts of No Nation* (Fukunaga 2015). The narrative is set in an “unnamed” West-African country in which a civil war rages. The film’s opening shot, which is heard before being scene, is of children playing soccer in a field of very tall grass. The as-yet-unknown narrator’s voice breaks through the chatter and the camera zooms out for the viewer to learn that we have been watching these children through a broken television (tv) (00:01:15–00:01:26). Thus, we hear Agu before we see him. I point to these two instances of precursory aural cues to mark the ways in which the film summons the viewer to not simply look at the story of a child, but to hear this child’s story—to listen to this child as the narrator of his own story. Agu is standing beside the broken tv, which is the first of several remains of a less rural, unkempt world, bracing for the impact of war, presumably again, as the rusted slide and swing sets act as remnants of a former playground. The viewer soon learns that Agu and his community are living in a “buffer zone”, a neutral space supposedly protected from the ongoing conflict, where he enjoys attending school, has friends, and goes to church with his family. Like Dia and Solomon, Agu seems to share a particularly close bond with his father. However, the threat of the war is palpable, as soldiers, some of whom Agu interacts with, are stationed at various points and radio broadcasts map the trajectory of the rebel forces, the National Defense Forces (NDF), and the ensuing violence of encounters between them as both forces move ever closer to this buffer zone. To safeguard his family, Agu’s father tries to send them all away, but the driver will only take Agu’s mother and younger siblings. Agu, along with his father and brother, is left behind when the fighting breaches the buffer zone. Fleeing into the lush brush surrounding the buffer zone, Agu is eventually caught by the NDF, and, like Dia, after initiation, he begins abusing substances such as “brown-brown” (cocaine mixed with smokeless gunpowder) and, as will be discussed in more detail later, eventually becomes an active participant in the atrocities committed by the NDF.

Thus, in both films the narrative of the boy-figure begins with what might be framed as normative childhoods in the popular global imagination, wherein the child lives a relatively peaceful existence, protected by a strong familial structure, during a time when the primary focus is to become educated. In both *Blood Diamond* and *Beasts of No Nation*, despite the threat of war, Dia and Agu are still being educated, both formally and also informally by their fathers. Dia is taught to fish by his father but also does his homework under his supervision. Similarly, Agu gardens and uses play to learn, even trading his “imagination tv” for food, but he also receives a formal education from his father, who is a teacher. This gestures to what Agya Boakye-Boaten has framed as the intertwining of socialisation and education, as well as socialisation/education with childhood and child rearing practices (p. 105). This marks a commitment to the hopes entangled with the figure of the child and the idea of education as a means, traditionally, to socialise the child and, in the postcolonial moment, dismantle poverty and oppression. As Boakye-Boaten contends, “Pedagogical philosophy in African socialization was informal and had relevance

to the existence of the child within the cultural context" (p. 111). However, he continues, "Colonialism introduced radical changes in the socialization of the African", adding that "the informal apprenticeship and direct participation of the children in contributing to their society was substituted with a formal regimental curriculum education based on the cultural values of the colonizer" (p. 111). Speaking specifically to the postcolonial and post-war context of Sierra Leone, Yatta Kanu (2007) explains that there has recently been a call by African intellectuals "for a re-appropriation of pre-colonial forms of education to rediscover the roots of African identity" (p. 65). He contends, however, that "educational reform does not involve pitting indigenous Sierra Leonean cultural knowledge against that of the West". "Instead", he posits, "reform would occur in a 'third space' which recognizes the heterogeneous basis of useful knowledge and the need to find abiding links that connect African knowledge and values and the knowledge and values entailed in Western education". In this sense, education marks not only progress but also freedom. What the films therefore mark is the translation of the discourse of colonialism's framing of education in Africa as a mechanism through which to "civilise"<sup>2</sup>, into the postcolonial discourse, through which education becomes a mechanism for freedom.

Both films also depict the shattering of these hopes through the violence of capitalist exploitation veiled as political upheaval. The viewer sees this in *Blood Diamond* through its archetypal villain, Captain Poison. For example, while presiding over several male captives, who are enslaved and forced to search for diamonds in an unnamed body of water without the promise of freedom or compensation, he proclaims: "[T]he Freetown gov-a-ment and their white masters have raped your land to feed their greed! We [the RUF] have freed you! No more slave and master here!" (00:07:43–00:07: 52). Poison, like the Danny Archer character, intends to trade the diamonds for a way out of Africa, selling them to De Beers, a South African company that the film depicts as having monopolised the diamond industry globally. Similarly, *Beasts of No Nation's* I-Two-C (second in command to Commandant) explains to Agu and the other initiates that their "very own politicians will steal [their] resources and give them away for pennies in exchange for private payoffs". He explains that, in so doing, "they have spit on the constitution. They have spit on your rights. They have tried to spit on your future" (00:37:48–00: 38:02). However, Agu and his peers are not promised any compensation for their work to ensure the "liberation" of the natural resources of the land, nor are they free to leave the battalion should they want to. Later in the film the viewer learns of Commandant's expectation to receive a "share of the resources" from Supreme Commander Goodblood, who informs Commandant that, if he wants to be a man of resources, he should find a job with a mining company.

Both films also depict clearly the mechanisms through which the two child figures are made soldiers, i.e., through processes of indoctrination that include (a) the real or perceived death of the child's original family, (b) the insistence that the rebel army is their new family, (c) forced introduction and later dependence on chemical substances to blunt their emotions because (d) they are made to be active participants in warfare through engaging in acts of violence or being complicit witnesses to acts of violence. In this way, the films highlight the inherent discursive contradiction and irony of the term, "child soldier", while the characters Dia and Agu work as literary interventions to unsettle the binary of victim and perpetrator. A particular expression of this is *Beasts of No Nation* calling attention to what is a relative silence in *Blood Diamond*, i.e, the sexual abuse of child soldiers, including the boy-child, by their comrades and often commanding officers, who both films depict as not only the villain of the narrative but also as a kind of pseudo-father figure in the imposed pseudo-filiative order of the rebel army.

The work of this article is to attend to what Cary Joji Fukunaga's *Beasts of No Nation* (Fukunaga 2015) and Edward Zwick's *Blood Diamond* (Zwick 2006) add to or extend in the body of literature concerned with the figure of the child soldier. The two films focus on West African contexts, both real and imagined, and what is often referred to as the resource curse hypothesis. As Ian Glenn and Martha Evans explain, in the postcolonial African context, "The 'resource curse hypothesis' refers to the theory that instead of benefiting

economically from minerals, resource-rich countries experience slower economic growth and increased political instability because of a constant struggle to access mineral rights and gain control of the state” (Evans and Glenn 2010, p. 33). Beyond this, the films also call attention to the humanitarian consequences of “the resource curse”—specifically that it motivates and underscores the conflicts depicted in these films and thus the transformation of these children into soldiers.

In both films, the viewer bears witness to the transformation of an African boy-child, who, in many ways, serves as a complex and flawed protagonist, into a traumatised soldier. For the purposes of this article, I will focus on four issues in particular. The first is the ways in which *Blood Diamond* and *Beasts of No Nation* call attention to the tension held within the figure of the child as both being potentially good and dangerous, challenging preconceived notions of childhood as statically an age of innocence, naivety, freedom from the burdens and responsibilities we associate with adulthood, and joy. In turning to Ashis Nandy’s articulation of the tension held within “the child” as being both emblematic of a utopic fantasy of childhood produced by adult nostalgia—hopeful, joyous and free—and always potentially dangerous, this paper pivots the notions of soldiering and slaving on and around the child as a figure. As an extension of this, this paper also discusses how the two films demonstrate how contexts of war texture “the child” and rupture childhoods of relative peace and innocence, transforming them into wounded childhoods or childhoods of trauma.

The second issue this paper addresses is how, in *Blood Diamond* and *Beasts of No Nation*, this rupture marks something of a Manichean split<sup>3</sup> in which the utopic childhood before, and the figures that constituted it, are replaced by a wounded, dystopic childhood in which the family is replaced by the pseudo-filiative order of the militia or army, particularly the father figure, who is replaced by the commanding officer. I read these films as demonstrating how, in this pseudo-filiative order, the child becomes a soldier whose military labour goes uncompensated throughout extreme levels of exploitation.

One expression of this exploitation rarely reflected in representations of child soldiers, especially boys, is the sexual exploitation of these children. It is an issue that is, however, highlighted in *Beasts of No Nation*, being a feature of the text that is also the third issue this article discusses. A still-developing body of literature concerns itself with the experience of girls either taken by soldiers as sex slaves or girls taken as soldiers who are also sexually abused.<sup>4</sup> However, comparatively less scholarship is dedicated to exploring and understanding the sexual abuse of the boy child who is also taken as a soldier in the context of war. It is beyond the scope of this paper to address this issue in any significant way; however, it reads *Beasts of No Nation*’s representation of the sexual abuse of boy-child soldiers through the example of Agu. As a literary intervention, this calls attention to the issue of sexual abuse of child combatants in the context of war, and in so doing adds to the broader literature concerned with the figure of the child soldier, particularly in the postcolonial African context. Moreover, the sexual abuse gestured toward in the film further highlights the exploitation of these child soldiers.

Finally, in this paper I turn to the question of the forgiveness and redemption of the child soldier as it is presented by *Blood Diamond* and *Beasts of No Nation* as the fourth issue this paper discusses. In abiding by the charge of the child soldier as a figure that joins seemingly oxymoronic terms, I turn to Hannah Arendt to consider the question of redemption as (im)possible. In Arendt’s terms, from the irreversibility of their actions, for Agu and Dia themselves, as this paper will show, forgiveness and redemption is rendered (im)possible because the actions of the child soldier can neither be punished nor forgiven.

As this article will show, these four issues and contributions are informed, charged and, in some senses, constituted by each other. I argue thus that *Blood Diamond* and *Beasts of No Nation* ask us to think through and reckon with the entanglement of slavery and soldiering, as these are pivoted on and through the figure of the child in the narrative worlds of the films in the context of warfare in postcolonial Africa.



## 2. The Child

Concepts of the child and childhood have developed and changed over the centuries, and so it is necessary to point out that childhood is a historical and social construct, not a naturalised phenomenon. As Ashis Nandy explains, “childhood is culturally defined and created; it, too, is a matter of human choice” (p. 56). However, it is also entangled with notions of development, through which a temporal limit is imposed on childhood. For example, under the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC), a ‘child’ is defined as any human being under the age of 18 (Nandy 1987; Clark-Kazak 2009)<sup>5</sup>, and many of us have been conditioned to subscribe to an idea of the child and childhood that is synonymous with static innocence, naivety, and freedom. This is confirmed for some by lived experience, and for others less so; but how have we come to inherit these notions? As a way into this question, Philippe Ariès’ work *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (Ariès 1960), widely considered to be one of the most influential studies on childhood, proves a useful text.

Ariès argues that, as an idea, childhood was only established after the seventeenth century—the moment when the schooling of children, and the idea of grouping children into cohorts based on their age, becomes prominent. It is, however, only in the 18th century that the education of children becomes normative, with the entanglement of the ideas of childhood and education extending into literature during the European Enlightenment. It was also during this period that John Locke’s notion of the child as “a blank slate” (H. Cunningham 2001, p. 1) becomes popular. As Hugh Cunningham explains, this in turn began a trend that saw the deployment of literature as a medium of instruction, i.e., a means through which to educate and imprint on blank minds, or, in Althusserian terms, to interpellate children into being obedient subjects. At this time, particular emphasis was placed on the purification of the child, showing that the legacies of medieval perceptions of the child still remained.<sup>6</sup> This is due in part, according to Vanessa Joosen and Katrien Vloeberghs, to the “belief that literature exerts a direct influence on the child” (Joosen and Vloeberghs 2006, p. xi). They argue further that it was, at this point, that literature was developed specifically for children, its value being its potential to educate, as well as to provide *Bildung* and guidance to the young. The incorporation of the idea of the child with and into literature thus imbued texts directed at children with the transformative force to improve society and raise humankind to a supposedly more advanced level (Joosen and Vloeberghs 2006, p. xi).

However, this was soon challenged by the Romantics, for whom the child was entangled with nature and a symbol of natural goodness, happiness, and innocence (Cunningham 2001; Plotz 2001; Davis 2011), a sentiment which still informs, popularly, contemporary thinking of childhood. It was, according to Cunningham, the Romantic movement which gave rise to the notion of a right to childhood. Cunningham argues that what ideologically distinguished the Romantic period from its predecessors, is society becoming “child-centred” (Davis 2011, p. 1), viewing childhood as a time in one’s existence that should be protected and sanctified. However, Cunningham warns that such restraints on childhood (that is, to sanctify it), could result in prolonged childhoods, which intern hinder what he argues is “a right to grow up” (Davis 2011, p. 2). Essentially, he makes the claim that the “Romantic view of childhood has outlived its purpose” (Davis 2011, p. 2). This is a point that Robert A. Davis in “Brilliance of a Fire: Innocence, Experience and the Theory of Childhood” (Davis 2011) expands on. He explains that, of all the Romantic assumptions of childhood, the most problematic is that of innocence, stating that:

Advances in the social sciences, deeper engagements with the (often frightful) lives of historically—and—culturally—situated children and, above all, the expanding ethnographic record of varied, multiple childhoods across many societies and epochs all seem to point irresistibly to the fictitious character of the concept of childhood innocence and its questionable basis in a contingent and historically specific set of circumstances with little or no salience for the experience of children in the modern globalised world. (p. 380)

Although the Romantic view of childhood is arguably still a universal ontology, as both Cunningham and Davis have argued, there are alternative experiences and expressions of childhood. For example, fundamental traits of the Romantic view of childhood include the following presumptions: (1) that society is child-centred (or should be); (2) that the child is “born innocent” (Cunningham 2001, p. 1); and (3) that childhood should be spent in nature and “fenced off from adulthood” (Cunningham 1). However, the experiences of childhood(s) globally are often divergent from, or additional to, these assumptions. As will be discussed in more detail in a later section of this article, examples of such divergent childhoods include experiences of childhood that are still happy but in which a child is expected to bare some of the responsibilities of maintaining the household or performing activities that can yield monetary income.

In abiding by this, much contemporary scholarship has focused on the varied post-colonial experiences of childhood and has taken a postcolonial approach to childhood, conceptualising it as pluralistic both as a concept and experience. The postcolonial view of childhood, as Olga Nieuwenhuys explains, calls for the recognition of children as “social ‘being’[s], rather than a ‘becoming’” (p. 7). Thus, argues Nieuwenhuys, by rejecting the idea that modern (socially determined and constructed) childhood is a Western discovery/invention, the postcolonial perspective can, in sum, inspire a more positive approach in which the routine ‘Us vs. Them’ binary makes way for a conceptualisation of childhood(s) as the unstable and contingent result of a situated encounter (Nieuwenhuys 2013, p. 5).

Echoing this, in *New Perspectives on African Childhood: Constructions, Histories, Representations and Understandings* (2019), various authors grapple with the concept and state of childhood in Africa. De-Valera N.Y.M. Botchway, one of the book’s editors, turns to Agya Boakye-Boaten, who explains that the “concept and state of childhood can be found in what [Boakye-Boaten] calls ‘traditional Africa, which is the unadulterated Africa, that is prehistoric Africa, and contemporary Africa, that is Africa after the period of slavery, colonialism, and post-independent Africa’” (Botchway et al. 2019, p. viii). “Within the cosmology of traditional Africa”, she continues, “children were seen as spiritual beings who had reincarnated after living and dying in previous generations” (viii). As such, children were respected members of a society; however, they were also considered human beings “who were biologically vulnerable and in need of help and direction, protection, and proper socialisation to perpetuate their family and cultural legacies” (viii). Boakye-Boaten marks, however, that the notions of childhood continued and continues to undergo transformations (104). He argues that the notion of childhood transcends “period” and incorporates class, given that, in many African cultures and civilisations, children are traditionally considered part of a family’s wealth and “were considered as economic assets for a family”, adding that, with the introduction of “modern money income, within the context of traditional African family system, children have become an economic and social liability for their families” (Boakye-Boaten 2010, p. 105). Thus, as Botchway explains, “African childhood is not static but dynamic and with a long history, a versatile present and negotiable and promising future”, adding that “African childhood also manifests aspects that have similarities and differences because of the different geographical regions and cultural zones on the continent” (x). For example, some rurally situated experiences of childhood may make children responsible for chores such as farming, caregiving, or collecting firewood, whilst others, as she explains, would not necessitate this but may involve, in some urban contexts for example, hawking or begging (xi), whilst other experiences might involve participation in armed conflict. This does not, however, negate also simultaneously experiencing popularly accepted features of childhood, such as play, joy, learning, or, albeit to varying degrees, the protection of innocence.

Thus, as Ashis Nandy notes in *Traditions, Tyranny, and Utopias: Essays in the Politics of Awareness* (1987), “[t]here is nothing natural or inevitable about childhood”. He expands the point regarding the plurality of childhoods by marking that “[t]here are as many childhoods as there are families and cultures” (Nandy 1987, p. 56). In this view of childhood, Nandy explains that “the consciousness of childhood is as much a cultural datum as patterns

of child-rearing and the social role of the child" (Nandy 1987, p. 56). It is important to mark that, in the context of the formerly colonised Global South(s), what this means for the study of childhood(s) is a new recognition of the role of the child as an idea or, as Jo-Ann Wallace explains, as "a necessary precondition of imperialism". "That is", she explains, "that the West has to invent for itself 'the child' before it could think a specifically colonialist imperialism" (p. 176). Thus, explains Bill Ashcroft, the "child became important to the discourse of Empire because the invention of childhood itself in European society was coterminous with the invention of that other notion of supreme importance to imperialism—race" (Ashcroft 2000, pp. 184–85). This found fundamental expression through the phenomenon of slavery. The child as a trope, as Ashcroft explains, "absorbed and resolved" the ways in which the phenomenon of slavery "undermined" the "guarantee of individual freedom which Enlightenment philosophy promised" (Ashcroft 2000, p. 184), and, as expressed previously, produced in the child of empire the effect of naturalising the parent's own contradictory inclination to both nurture and exploit the child:

As a child, the colonial subject is both inherently evil and potentially good, thus submerging the moral conflict of colonial occupation and locating in the child of empire a naturalization of the parents' own contradictory impulses for exploitation and nurture. The child, at once both Other and same, holds in balance the contradictory tendencies of imperial rhetoric: authority is held in balance with nurture; domination with enlightenment; debasement with idealization; negation with affirmation; exploitation with education; filiation with affiliation. This ability to absorb contradiction gives the binary parent/child an inordinately hegemonic potency. (Ashcroft 2000, p. 184)

This ability to absorb contradiction is shown in *Blood Diamond* and *Beasts of No Nation* to remain intact even when the hegemony within which the child (the characters Dia and Agu) is situated changes. In the worlds and contexts of the films, the mode of this change is translation and substitution, presenting the unfamiliar as the familiar to coerce participation in the work of the army. For example, the original family is replaced by and translated into the pseudo-filiative order of the army. In this translated structure, the commanders, who enforce the assimilation of these children into the pseudo-filiative order of the rebel army, position themselves as a father figure and parent. We see these figures indeed try to balance their power and authority with moments of (insincere) care and nurturing; however, this is contradicted by moments of abuse. For example, though Captain Poison seemingly sympathises with Dia early in the film, he does not hesitate to threaten his life to try and extract the location of the large diamond Vandy had hidden from him near the end of the film. Similarly, in *Beasts of No Nation*, as is discussed in more detail in a later section of this paper, when Commandant offers Agu affirmation that he is a good soldier, he uses this to coerce Agu into committing sexual acts. Both instances of abuse contradict the nurturing and protection associated with the father as a figure, but in this way are faithful to the translation of this figure into the distortion of the familial structure that manifests and the pseudo-family of the rebel army. Another example of Dia and Agu's ability as child figures to absorb and hold contradictions is their enslavement within the rebel armies, which is balanced with the rhetoric that they are fighting for the freedom of their people. In this way, in both *Beasts of No Nation* and *Blood Diamond*, the child figure, who often also focalises the narrative, is shown to be a *liminal personae* (Turner 1969)<sup>7</sup>. This ambiguous and often paradoxical figure allows us to see more clearly these contradictions and ethical tensions within the narratives, not least of which is the tension held between the terms "child" and "soldier".

### 3. Children of War

Both *Blood Diamond* and *Beasts of No Nation* feature the phenomenon of child soldiers as a theme, textured by the narratives being situated specifically in postcolonial West Africa and focused through a singular character, with fourteen-year-old Dia Vandy in the

former and twelve-year-old Agu in the latter. According to the United Nations Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, the “[h]uman rights law declares 18 as the minimum legal age for recruitment and use of children in hostilities. Recruiting and using children under the age of 15 as soldiers is prohibited under international humanitarian law—treaty and custom—and is defined as a war crime by the International Criminal Court” (United Nations n.d.).

According to “Wounded Childhood: The use of Children in Armed Conflict in Central Africa”, a report by the International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) for the International Labour Organisation (ILO) mentioned the “use of children in armed conflict being one of the worst forms of child labour” (International Labour Organization (ILO) (2003)). Child labour is defined by the IPEC “as work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that is harmful to physical and mental development” (International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour of the International Labour Organization 2020). Children are, however, legally protected from child labour, as is expressed in the *International Convention on the Rights of Children* and the *African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child* (adopted 1990, entered into force in African Union (1999)). The latter of these pieces of international legislation defines a child as anyone under the age of 18 (Chapter 1, Article 2) and states that:

Every child shall be protected from all forms of economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child’s physical, mental, spiritual, moral, or social development. (Chapter 1, Article 15)

The use of the absolute terms “all” and “any” negates a discussion around any grey area with regard to child labour that is economically exploitative and hazardous to the child’s holistic development. Though entangled with child labour, which Anti-Slavery International suggests is a condition in life that is “harmful for children and hinders their education and development”, child slavery is distinct and “occurs when a child’s labour is exploited for someone’s else gain” (Anti-Slavery International 2017).

In a “Fact-Sheet” published by Anti-Slavery international, the category child slavery is nuanced and textured to hold onto the distinction between child labour, child slavery, and the use of children in armed conflict. It does not, however, frame them as discrete. This paper asks what might be at stake in considering the exploitation of children in armed conflicts as a form of child slavery through a reading of *Blood Diamond* and *Beasts of No Nation*’s staging of the phenomenon of the child soldier in imagined and real postcolonial (West) African contexts.

Though *Beasts of No Nation* does not share *Blood Diamond*’s burden of “truth”<sup>8</sup>, both films illustrate a number of the atrocities experienced during the civil war, including the mutilation of civilians, slavery, and the stealing of children to increase militia. The purpose of this illustration is to emphasise the sheer violence of war, featuring close ups of mutilations, large explosions and indiscriminate shooting. In comparison, the space devoted to the socio-political, economic, and historical contexts is disproportionately inadequate. Both films also call attention to the figure of the child soldier in the postcolonial (West) African context being simultaneously a victim and perpetrator of atrocities and trauma. Both films stage, through their soldiering, the tension held within the figure of the child as being always both potentially good and potentially dangerous.

According to UNICEF, “Thousands of children are recruited and used in armed conflicts across the world. Between 2005 and 2022, more than 105,000 children were verified as recruited and used by parties to conflict, although the actual number of cases is believed to be much higher”<sup>9</sup> (UNICEF 2021). Anti-Slavery International (2022) (established 1839) recognises “Children forced to take part in armed conflicts” as one of the most common forms of child slavery, stating that the participation of children in armed conflicts “includes not only child soldiers, but also porters or girls taken as “wives” for soldiers and militia members”.<sup>10</sup>

Susan Tiefenbrun elaborates on this in “Child Soldiers, Slavery and the Trafficking of Children” (Tiefenbrun 2007), explaining that the “abduction and employment of children



as soldiers is a form of exploitative labor that is tantamount to slavery” (p. 419). Child soldiering, she explains, “is listed as ‘one of the worst forms of child labor’” in the *Convention Concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour* (“ILO Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention 182”)” (p. 419). As explained in an article for Freedom United, the “[s]igma attached to former child soldiers makes it difficult for them to reintegrate into society and receive the specialist support that comes with being recognised as a victim of modern slavery”<sup>11</sup> (Freedom United 2023). This is an issue ignored in *Blood Diamond* and articulated in the ending of *Beast of No Nations*, raising questions regarding the (im)possibility of the redemption of the child soldier, as will be discussed later in this article.

#### 4. “Childhood” Ruptured in *Beasts of No Nation* and *Blood Diamond*

As noted previously, both Zwick’s *Blood Diamond* and Fukunaga’s *Beasts of No Nation* are set in West Africa, deal with the question of the impact of the resource curse hypothesis, and thus the implicitness of the global West in local conflicts, while calling specific attention to the plight of child soldiers. What both films depict is not merely an *interruption* of childhood, as it is popularly imagined and often for many nostalgically remembered, but instead a *rupture*—a violent break or cut.

*Blood Diamond* has multiple narrative strands which intersect but are, arguably, distinct from each other. One narrative arc relates to Danny Archer, a White, Zimbabwean mercenary-turned-diamond-smuggler who is redeemed by the film when he “helps” Solomon Vandy find his family and then his son, staying behind to die so that the two Vandy men might escape. Another narrative arc is that of Captain Poison, the general who is facilitating the illegal mining and sale of diamonds because he simply “want[s] to get out” of the position and context he is participating in. Poison is also who ultimately captures Dia Vandy, Solomon’s fourteen-year-old son, and trains him to be a soldier in his militia, which is a branch of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF).

When the viewer first meets Dia, he lives a seemingly peaceful and somewhat pastoral life outside of Freetown in a small fishing village. This idyllic life is interrupted when a group of militia from the RUF burst into and through the village, separating Solomon from the rest of the Vandy family. Dia, along with his mother and siblings, flees with some of the other community members, but eventually encounters the RUF again and is captured. *Beasts of No Nation* is similar to this but is much more focused on and through its child soldier protagonist, Agu. As mentioned previously, twelve-year-old Agu’s world of relative peace, play, and protection within the “buffer zone” (a neutral space supposedly protected from the conflict which rages around it) is destroyed when the rebels and Native Defense Forces (NDF) overwhelm the peace keeping forces. Agu loses his entire family, as his mother and younger sibling are sent away from the buffer zone before the NDF’s arrival and, when the area is taken by the NDF, his father and brother are both gunned down. Fleeing into the lush brush nearby, Agu is eventually caught by the NDF and is forced to first carry arms and ammunition before, after initiation, actively participating in the violence of the rebel force. In both films, the spaces the boys call home and the moments prior to the contact with the conflicts are staged as relatively idyllic, being charged with the wonder the childhood is imbued with by adults who long for it nostalgically. When this is ruptured, the viewer sees a relatively utopian childhood transform into the dystopian state of a childhood of war. This idea of childhood in, in the case of *Blood Diamond*, postcolonial Sierra Leone is marked early on in the film during a conversation between Dia and Solomon:

Dia [to Solomon]:

My teacher says the country was founded as a utopia. Do you know what that word means,) Papa?

Solomon:

Uh-uh.

Dia:

Well, she says someday when the war is over our world will be a paradise.

A similar exchange is staged between Agu and Father, when Agu is caught listening in on the BBC radio broadcast his father is catching up on:

FATHER:

It's okay Agu, do not be worrying.

We are in a safe place, we are in the-

AGU (Voice over.)

"Buffer zone". That is why so many

refugee are coming here small

small. Many people are suffering

but we are not, here we are safe.

I turn to the concept of utopia made available by Ashis Nandy, as delineated in *Traditions, Tyranny, and Utopias: Essays in the Politics of Awareness* (Nandy 1987). Nandy states, "Utopias . . . [are] ideas about the end-products of salvation . . . [and] can only promise a sharper awareness and critique of existing cultures and institutionalized suffering" (p. 20). In the context of these films, what Dia and Agu gesture toward may refer to what Bhabha calls "the Utopia of progress" (Bhabha 1994, p. 255). Like all utopias, as Nandy argues, this kind of "third world utopia" is not "without an implicit or explicit theory of suffering" (p. 21)—which, in the context of these films, we might name war.

According to Nandy, this kind of suffering, "which has given the Third world its name and uniqueness" (p. 21), must be recognised as a man-made abomination born of the same "poverty, exploitation, indignity, and self-contempt" which gave rise to the political and economic category of the "the third world" (p. 21). However, Nandy explains that just as "[t]heories of salvation do not save" (p. 20), neither can utopias. He warns that an overly determined attempt to actualise a utopia can turn into a dystopia for many or destroy its illusion "by exposing it to the harsh light of human experience" (3). This is what the film depicts when it distorts Dia's fantasy Utopia into the "gangster's paradise" of the RUF. Similarly, though Agu does not use the words "utopia" or "paradise" he does mark a cognisant binary between "safety" and "suffering". The ethos of the idea implicit in Dia's invocation of "utopia" and Agu's "safe place" echoes the idea of childhood previously discussed, i.e., as ontologically different from adulthood, in that the figure indicative of it, as a condition, is meant to enjoy safety, freedom, innocence, nurturing, and being unburdened by economic responsibility (or, if they were to work, being compensated for their labour). Instead, these children are unfree, and their experience of childhood is bereft of safety or security, without a normative sense of care and nurturing. Moreover, their (militarised) labour is staged by the text as quite clearly not being for their own gain or benefit. Instead, the figures of Captain Poison and Commandant represent, in personified fashion, the exploitative underbelly of resource motivated conflicts, through which the human rights violations which curtail peoples' freedoms and rights should be thought of as slavery.

There is, in the aforementioned scene, an interesting overlap between the idea of utopia and the idea of childhood, because, as Nandy argues, for an adult, childhood is a utopia (p. 65). Nandy discusses "the idea of childhood as a lost utopia—found not in autobiographies but mainly in literature, myths and fantasies" (p. 65). Thus, childhood, like utopia, is an idea or fantasy which exists only in the human imagination, in direct opposition to the human experience. This tension is something which the film highlights, particularly through its use of education as a central theme in Dia's narrative. Education and its significance is a theme carried throughout the film, but because education is filtered through child figures, especially Dia as a child-turned-soldier, its symbolism becomes ambiguous. In these first two scenes, education is associated with the potential held by children, as well as hope and progress in Africa. Thus, part of Dia's tragedy when he is taken by the RUF is that he has been robbed not only of his relative innocence, but also

of the hope and opportunities that stem from receiving a school-based education. This education is replaced by the process of Dia's indoctrination into the RUF.

*Of Nurturing and Exploitation—The pseudo-filiative structure of Blood Diamond's RUF and Beasts of No Nation's NDF:*

With regard to the indoctrination of children into the RUF, Nicholas Heeren states:

The training of child soldiers [in Sierra Leone] is almost "classical" in the sense of forging a group-spirit by undoing existing family ties and creating a new feeling of bonding with the group and a total respect for the commanding officers. But this training goes way beyond any classical notion when one realizes that children were actually commanding grown-up men. . .It also goes over the edge as during the initiation process children are forced to kill a companion to enter 'the group'. (n.p.)

What Heeren describes above is easily traceable in both the films. While with the RUF and the NDF, both boys are exposed to and forced to participate in substance abuse and killing. For Dia, he engages in killing after he, surrounded by other "new recruits", is blindfolded, given a large rifle, and told to "pull the trigger". Unbeknownst to Dia, he is not shooting at a lifeless mannequin, an action he saw performed by a soldier previously; instead, when he unloads the rifle he is handed, he kills a man standing against the wall, shaking his head in a plea for his life to be spared, which Dia is unaware of. This phase of indoctrination—killing to become a part of and ensure loyalty to the pseudo-filiative order of the rebel army—is echoed in *Beasts of No Nation*, though, for Agu, there is no blindfold and there is no gun. Instead, his commandant tells him that the men they are killing, and the man kneeling before him, are "the dogs who killed your father" (script, 53) and the "the tyrants who murdered your father" (script 54). Agu is instructed and coerced into killing the man using a machete.

The difference in the weapons also marks an important tension. The use of a gun offers some distance between the person pulling its trigger and the victim, suggesting, perhaps, that there is some remove between Dia and his actions, i.e., the killing Dia commits. *Beasts of No Nation* does not allow Agu this distance, as the machete is an intimate weapon that requires close contact between victim and perpetrator. It is also less efficient a tool for killing that it is for agricultural purposes, particularly in comparison to a gun. Often, and as the film shows, multiple strikes of the machete are required, with more than one person being involved in the killing of a single individual. It is worth noting that Dia's not seeing also implies his "not knowing", echoing the ways in which the figure of the child is assumed to be both innocent and naïve. Conversely, Agu's conscious, albeit coerced, participation is unsettling precisely because it reveals, as Nandy marks, the child's potential for harm and violence.

Reflective of this tension are moments in both texts. Toward the climax of *Blood Diamond*, after the press convoy they were travelling with gets caught in a military ambush, Danny, Maddy, and Solomon are being taken back to Freetown by Benjamin Kapanay, who runs a small rural school that operates specifically to educate former child soldiers and works toward their rehabilitation and reintegration into their communities. The group encounter a roadblock manned by two young, male child soldiers. Archer tells Benjamin to simply drive through the blockade, but Benjamin insists on stopping and talking with the armed boys:

Benjamin:

Do you know where the word "infantry" comes from?

It means child soldier.

They are just children.

In this moment the viewer sees the positivity associated with childhood outweigh for Benjamin the risk associated with these boys also being soldiers.<sup>12</sup> Shortly after, the convey stops beside two children holding AK47's. While Benjamin tries to explain that the convoy

is on its way to a school, the boys yell “only RUF on the road” and shoot into the car, hitting Benjamin. By neatly exiting Benjamin from the narrative, the film suggests that there is little place for optimism in the context it depicts, another indication of the film’s Afropessimism. In this scene the film plays on the paradox of thrusting together the words “child” and “soldier”. The tension created by juxtaposing these two words has two effects. Firstly, it reaffirms the ambiguity of the child figure; its liminality. As Turner explains “[l]iminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (Turner 1969, p. 95). Secondly, it expresses the realisation that “under the right circumstances, children are capable of the most horrific acts, and many remain haunted by them” (Global Lessons 2009). Again, the phenomenon of the child soldier is neither new or exclusively African; however, the Dia narrative highlights that, for many of the RUF child soldiers, soldiering was not a choice, and essentially their childhood and childlikeness was sacrificed by adults who robbed a generation of autonomy and compensated for that with trauma. Thus, *Blood Diamond* and *Beasts of No Nation* hold the tension held within the figure of the child that Nandy marks; however, rather than seeking to constantly redeem Dia and Agu, or highlight their potential for good, the film engages consistently with the ways in which the child’s potential to be dangerous is pulled out, as highlighted and nurtured by the “father-figures” of Captain Poison and Commandant.

This sentiment is expressed early in *Beasts of No Nation*, when Agu first meets Commandant, and an exchange between this leader within the NDR and his second in command, Two-I-C, articulates the idea that a child is always already potentially dangerous:

COMMANDANT

What are we to be doing with this thing?

TWO-I-C

This thing? It is just a boy.

COMMANDANT

A boy.

[Two-I-C is about to explain when Commandant raises his finger to quiet him. Now addressing him in front of the soldiers.]

COMMANDANT (CONT'D)

A boy is nothing? A boy is harmless?

[Commandant looks at the NDF Small Boy Unit Soldiers near him. They scream in unison...]

NDF SBU

Harmless no, sah!

COMMANDANT

Does a boy not have eyes to see?

NDF SBU

Two eyes, sah!

COMMANDANT

A boy has hands to strangle!

NDF SBU Soldiers laugh.

COMMANDANT (CONT'D)

And fingers to pull a trigger.

BUAH!

Commandant simulates firing a gun towards the bush.

COMMANDANT (CONT'D)



A boy is not harmless.

He looks at the men.

COMMANDANT (CONT'D)

A boy is very dangerous.

This view of the child, and the boy-child in particular, as “very dangerous” is a stark contrast of the view of the boy-child soldiers that *Blood Diamond*'s Benjamin describes by saying “they are just children”, as though, despite wielding large guns, they pose no threat. These juxtaposed views mark the duality of “the child” as potentially good and potentially dangerous. This, in turn, is echoed by two archetypes often deployed in American and European filmic representations of Africa: the “good African” and the “bad African”.<sup>13</sup> In *Blood Diamond*, for example, Solomon Vandy is clearly framed as the simplistically “good African”, while Captain Poison is framed as the simply “bad African”. Danny Archer, who is also an African, is complex and an anti-hero that resists the good/bad binary, though, as Diana Adesola Mafe explains, he may be read as representing the archetypal “white hunter” (Mafe 2011, p. 69). In *Beasts of No Nation*, Agu's father, who is hopeful and dedicated to his community and the idea of democracy, is clearly “good”, while Commandant is purely “bad”. This Manicheanism staged through the father and the replacement pseudo-father gets distilled into the figure of the child, who becomes transformed through the process from the idea of the child, which is utopic to an idea of the child that is dystopic through the work of soldiering. In both films, just as the family unit becomes replaced with the army and the father becomes replaced with the commanding officer, the child becomes replaced by the soldier. Ultimately, in both *Blood Diamond* and *Beasts of No Nation*, what Dia and Agu are valued for shifts from their potential to become great to their physical potential to do the labour involved in soldiering, while neither film depicts either of them receiving any compensation for this labour.

#### *Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of the Boy-Child Soldier*

One of the more jarring differences between these two films concerned with the experience of child soldiers in Africa pertains to the question of sexual violence experienced by these children. *Blood Diamond* does not attend to the ways in which children, and in particular the girl-child, are coerced and often forced into engaging in sexual acts. At a reach, brief moments of inebriated young girls partying with the RUF might be read as gesturing toward the enslavement of young girls by various parties participating in war. Ultimately though, the film's silence regarding this problem is deafening. In contrast, *Beasts of No Nation* says volumes about this issue through a (dis)quieting scene that Peter Bradshaw rightly calls “ambiguous”<sup>14</sup> (Bradshaw 2015).

After Agu declares that “bullet is eating everything”, and what seems like seamless and endless trauma, Agu meets with Commandant in his chamber alone. From the point of view of a naïve child, the encounter is akin at first to an exchange between a father and son; however, to an adult, weary of the world, the moment is a clear example of a preferential predator grooming his victim:

Commandant:

You see I've been wanting to help you more than the others, Agu; but you cannot be telling the others how I am helping you like this.

It will have to be our secret. You are knowing how to keep secret?

Agu:

yes, sir.

Commandant:

Well, be saying it.

Agu [through an unknowing smile]:

I can be keeping this secret, Sir.

Commandant:

I am not punishing you, Agu. I am helping you, to care for you.

Commandant [continued]:

Agu kneel down.

Be doing this thing for me.

As the viewer sees Commandant place his hand on Agu's shoulder, and Agu's head begin a downward trajectory, the film cuts to a warmly lit, empty room that the camera peers into through a window. The moment fades to an image of Strika, Agu's friend and unspeaking confidant, who, upon seeing a visibly upset Agu, jumps to his feet and rushes to help hold up Agu. The vacancy of the scene, which the viewer is left to fill, suggests an intended audience of those who know about the dangers of ordinary men in ordinary circumstances, who in this regard are not unlike Commandant. In the script itself, the scene is much less quiet:

Commandant:

I am not punishing you, Agu. I am helping you, to care for you.

[He touches Agu on his shoulder, then his hands drift down Agu's arm to his hand].

COMMANDANT (CONT'D)

This is what commanding officer is supposed to be doing to his best boy soldier. Play with him, cherish him, protect him, enh?

[He brings Agu's hand down towards his own genitals. Agu is too afraid to move. Commandant moves Agu's head towards his crotch.]

COMMANDANT (CONT'D)

Touch my soldier, Agu, with your mouth.

This is a command. You took an oath to obey, and now obey.

[Agu's moves to do as he is told. We tilt away and up to Commandant, leaning back and mentally departing.] (p. 69)

I call attention to this unsettling moment because it works to remind the viewer that, despite Agu's own participation in atrocities, he is in many ways still and also a victim. In this instance, Agu is a victim both of the conflict situation that leads to his role as a perpetrator and of an adult who abuses his trust and admiration for him as the only remaining father figure available to him. The scripting of the scene is certainly less ambiguous than its expression in the final film itself, indicating, rather than merely suggesting, the sexual abuse Agu is set to endure. Moreover, what it also renders more explicit is the lack of agency Agu has at this moment. When Commandant says "this is a command. You took an oath to obey, and now obey", it is clear that Agu has no freedom of choice as an autonomous individual. Moreover, the obligation to obey is one that conjoins the "child" and the "soldier" as fulfilling the commands and wishes of those with more power and seemingly superior to them.

This is preceded by Commandant's minimising of the abuse by conflating it with the needs of a child (such as play, protection, and to be valued) and claiming that this is what is "supposed" to happen between them. In this way the intimacy of the violence as sexual and the betrayal of a child by a trusted adult mark the innate betrayal of childhood as a state of peace in contexts of conflict, and particularly contexts in which children are made to participate in conflict. The words "made to" should be emphasised here, because, as both films clearly show, these children do not have freedom of choice and are coerced into participating in violence and assimilated into the army structure precisely because their needs as children remain. They need to feel a sense of familial protection, care, and belonging, and, in the context of trauma, accept whatever distortions thereof are available to them. This is ultimately the only currency received for their sacrifice and service, and it

may then, in this sense of exploitative labour without due financial gain, be thought of as a particular kind of child slavery.

Referencing Uzodinma Iweala's eponymous novel (2005) upon which Fukunaga's film is based<sup>15</sup>, Tiefenbrun explains that the "trafficking of child soldiers is directly connected to sexual violence and the sexual exploitation of children who are mainly, but not exclusively, young girls" (p. 419). Discussing this further, she cites Julia O'Connell Davidson, who notes that "[c]hild sexual exploitation" is defined as a situation in which an individual takes "unfair advantage of some imbalance of power between themselves and another person under the age of eighteen in order to sexually use them" (pp. 419–20). The significance of the scene that gestures toward sexual assault in *Beasts of No Nation* is both its "ordinariness"—that this dynamic between adult and child, and the power imbalance between them is global—and its specificity—that this abuse which can take place in any context amplifies the trauma of war, particularly as it pertains to a child participant in conflict.

The veiled nature of the scene, wherein we do not see but indeed we "know" what happens between Agu and Commandant, speaks to the veiled nature of the lived experience of child combatants, particularly those forcibly taken into combat by military and militia groups active in war. Consider, for example, the endings of these films. For Dia, his plight ends as he is saved by his father with the help of Archer. Incredibly, the diamond that inspired Captain Poison's pursuit of the boy and his "induction" into the RUF also becomes his salvation—a means through which to pay for transport out of Sierra Leone. Ultimately, Dia is reunited with his family, and Solomon Vandy appears before the Kimberly Conference in South Africa where he testifies to the lived experience of the atrocities committed by various factions motivated by the sale of the eponymous stones. Agu, however, is not reunited with the remaining members of his family. Instead, Agu, and a few other child soldiers who surrendered themselves to the United Nations troops as a way out of the NDR, find themselves in a school much like the one Benjamin is the principal of in *Blood Diamond*. Agu's teachers ask him about his experiences but seem unable to bear the weight of the trauma Agu has experienced. Once again, Agu finds himself a liminal persona, as he is no longer a soldier or slave in war or a child of innocence nor peace. As Agu explains toward the very end of the film: "If this war is ever ending, I cannot go back to do child things" (02:03:37).

## 5. Questions of Rehabilitation and Redemption

Agu's statement that he cannot "go back to child things" affirms that it is unlikely, given the trauma of their experiences as child soldiers, that Agu or Dia could ever return to a childhood like the ones they lived "before" war found them. The viewer is left with a vacuum of information between the moment of Dia and Solomon's escape from the RUF and the moment when Dia arrives by private jet, along with his mother and siblings, to be reunited with Solomon before the Kimberley Conference. Was the boy remorseful? How was he supported? In this regard, the film leaves its audience with more questions than answers. A similar temporal leap through the cut of one scene to another takes place in *Beasts of No Nation*. Agu and some of his "brothers" refuse to continue fighting for Commandant and surrender themselves to United Nations troops. When the viewer next sees Agu, he and a few of the other younger soldiers are at a mission school somewhere along an unnamed coast.

The school is a well-populated place of peace and play. In this way, it harkens back to the beginning of the film and a childhood of peace and relative stability before being ruptured by the war. As the other children surround the car of the headmaster as he pulls up to the school, and soon run off to the beach to play with a gift he throws to them, Agu sits separate, quiet, watching his peers as they run off.

The film cuts to the image of a drawing clearly made by a child, though its red and black content depict scenes of violence. This "picture" is stacked above some others and placed underneath a Bible, presumably to stop them from flying away. One may read this

moment, perhaps, as a metaphor for one of the core principles espoused by Christianity, i.e., forgiveness in the wake of confession.

Despite all of the promise of the space of the school, Agu is suffering from withdrawal and from a crisis of trauma. Struggling with the burdens of his memories, through voiceover he states the following: “I am knowing the sound of people screaming, and the smell of dead bodies” (02:04:30–02:04: 36). As the viewer sees Agu sweating and writhing in bed, he continues: “And I am knowing the feeling of the brown-brown and djamba in my blood” (02:04:38–02: 04: 41). The moment marks an important point about the conjunction of memory and knowledge, for to remember something one must already know it, have learnt it at some point prior to its recollection and, indeed, its return. “Knowing” also works against that facet of memory called “forgetting”. This highlights the insurmountable charge of Agu’s knowledge of the atrocities he committed, as well as of a wounded childhood.

At this school, the boys are allowed to play but also receive support services, though these seem inadequate to attend to the depth and scope of the harm inflicted on these children who survived participating in war. Under the cover of dark, and after trying to rally the other children and burning desks, two boys, Randy and Preacher, decide to return to the war, given that, as Agu reports, Preacher explains that the war is not over. Trying to convince Agu to join them, Preacher says “We are soldiers. Fighting is what we know. That’s what we should do” (02:05:14–02:05: 18). Here, the tension between the knowledge already at these children’s disposal, and the unlearning they are doing at the school as part of their rehabilitation (and indeed their individual repair), is made stark. It is especially significant because it echoes and calls attention to the tension between the unfreedom of being a child soldier and, indeed, a slave in the context of war, as well as the fallacy of freedom after war once these children are no longer forced to participate in it.

What I refer to here as a fallacy of freedom is the idea that a child who is no longer forced to be an active participant in a conflict or in violence, in this case war, is free from that conflict, violence, or war. Certainly, the freedom such a child experiences is not the freedom of the Romantic notion of childhood. It is a tainted by a kind of half-freedom in which the person is physically free from war, but their mind is not. In this sense, one could read the framing of Agu’s expression of the recurring return of the trauma that continues to bind him to the war as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which presents differently in children than it does in adults.<sup>16</sup>

As Debra Kaminer, Soraya Seedat, and Dan J. Stein explain, “[s]tudies indicate that children can develop PTSD after exposure to a range of traumatic stressors, including violent crime, sexual abuse, natural disasters, and war” (p. 121). They warn, however, that there are “two major limitations of the PTSD diagnostic criteria when assessing post-traumatic pathology in young children” (p. 121). The first of these is that “verbal description[s] of internal states and experiences” are required for eight of the eighteen PTSD criteria, a feat the authors describe as “beyond the cognitive and expressive language skills of young children” (p. 122). The second limitation the authors describe refers to the ways in which children often display symptoms of PTSD that are additional to the “symptom clusters of adult PTSD” (p. 122). What is at stake, in paying attention to the ways in which childhood PTSD differs from adult PTSD, is a reckoning with the specificity of context and the ways in which the distinction between childhood and adulthood necessarily is maintained. This, in many ways, is also a question of ethics. Can we hold a child who participated in violent conflict responsible for that violence? What do we do with the uneasy tension of understanding that these participants (dare we use the word perpetrators?) were also always simultaneously victims? Framed differently, we might ask if the child soldier can be redeemed and, were the answer yes, how this would be achieved.

*Blood Diamond* seems to suggest that the answer is to address the root cause and to ensure that the natural resources of a nation are protected, along with the rights, protections and responsibilities of its citizens. *Beasts of No Nation* seems to suggest that one way to love a child such as this is to abide by them and, indeed, by the tension held between the term’s “child” and “soldier”, which, in Qadri Ismail’s (2005), terms is to “display patience, to stay



with it, endure it, work with it, even if it appears . . . unbearable, unending, unendurable” (*Abiding by Sri Lanka*, xxx). To abide by the figure of the child soldier, as it is expressed in the two films this article discusses, is to reckon with the realisation of their enslavement as objectified and uncompensated military labour, enabled, as the films show, through the education to be obedient in both the family and the pseudo-filiative structure of the army. In some sense, the redemption of the figure of the child soldier is then (*im*)possible, precisely because, as Hannah Arendt (2018) argues in *The Human Condition*, people “are unable to forgive what they cannot punish” and “unable to punish what has turned out to be unforgivable” (p. 241). “This”, she explains, “is the true hallmark of those offenses which, since Kant, we call a ‘radical evil’” (p. 241). How do we punish a child who, being unfree and exploited for the economic gain of others in the context of war and warfare, commits atrocities? How do we forgive this child and, in so doing, set them (and ourselves) free from vengeance? *Blood Diamond* offers no real or satisfactory exploration of these questions, as Dia is simply and neatly reunited with and accepted by his family. In *Beasts of No Nation*, redemption also seems out of reach for Agu, who has no family to return to or reconcile with. His last words, the closing lines of the film, however, subtly call attention to the conjunction in Arendt’s statement regarding punishment and forgiveness:

I am seeing more terrible thing  
than ten thousand men and I am  
doing more terrible thing than  
twenty thousand men.  
.  
.  
.  
If I am telling this to you it will  
be making you to think that I am  
some sort of beast or devil.  
I am all of this thing. I am all of  
this thing, but I am also having  
mother and father and brother and  
sister once, and they were loving  
me. (Script, p. 111)

What Agu marks here is the irreversibility of his becoming a child soldier, through which he was forced to leave the positive attributes associated with “the child” behind, in a time “before”. This is marked by the difference in the tense of his statements: “I *am* all of this thing [beast or devil”, “I *am* having a mother, father. . .”, “they *were* loving me”. The shift in tense marks perhaps not so much a change in material reality (after all, Agu no longer “has” his family in any concrete sense). Rather, it marks a shift in what he believes to be his truth; he still has a family who he talks to and about at various points in the film, but he does not, however, believe he still has love. The significance of this is that this belief likely stems from Agu’s inability to forgive himself, finding that he cannot, in Arendt’s terms, have “redemption from the predicament of irreversibility—of being unable to undo what one has done though one did not, and could not, have known what he was doing” (Arendt 237). In this sense, Agu cannot be free, forgiven, or redeemed.

## 6. Conclusions

Cary Joji Fukunaga’s *Beasts of No Nation* (2015) and Edward Zwick’s *Blood Diamond* (2006), both narrative films set in imagined and real postcolonial West African contexts, add to the body of literature concerning the figure of the child soldier by calling attention to some of the textures of this phenomenon in postcolonial (West) African contexts and what this means in regard to thinking about the figure of the child and notions of childhood. In both films, the viewer bears witness to the transformation of an African boy child, who in many ways serves as a complex and flawed protagonist, into a traumatised soldier.

This article draws out and discusses four key issues highlighted by and at stake in the representation of the figure of the child soldier in these two films.

The first is the ways in which *Blood Diamond* and *Beasts of No Nation* stage the tension held within the figure of the child as potentially good or potentially dangerous, challenging preconceived notions of childhood as a singularity, being only and statically what the globally inherited predominantly Western ontology imagines it as being. To do so, I briefly discuss the idea of the child and childhood as utopic and entangled with notions of innocence, naivety, freedom, and joy; however, I also demonstrate how African scholars have framed African notions of the child and childhood as entangled with community, social responsibilities, and roles. In turning to Ashis Nandy, I discuss how the figure of the child, like the idea of the African created by the discourse of colonialism,<sup>17</sup> has the potential to be good but also has an innate potentiality for danger. I reference the discourse on colonialism to call attention to the texturing of these boy soldiers as African. Their contexts, histories, and inheritances are different to stories set elsewhere; importantly, the films abide by the Manicheism that Fanon explained in *The Wretched of the Earth* (Fanon 1963),<sup>18</sup> crafting narrative worlds dichotomised into one side constituted by good subjects (obedient, educated, and so on) and another constituted by bad subjects (violent, greedy, and so on). The intervention Dia and Agu make in these narratives is a literary one in that they enable us to read the problem of this Manicheism precisely because they destabilise it, being both participants in violence and victims thereof.

The second issue this article calls attention to and discusses is how, in both *Blood Diamond* and *Beasts of No Nation*, the childhoods enjoyed by Dia and Agu are ruptured by war, marking a break with the utopic childhood before, as well as the filial relationships and figures that constituted it. This is then replaced by a wounded, dystopic childhood in which the family is replaced by the pseudo-filiative order of the militia or army. In particular, the father, as a figure, is replaced by the dangerous commanding officer. I read these films as demonstrating how, in this pseudo-filiative order, the child becomes a soldier as his potential to be dangerous is nurtured, and whose military labour goes uncompensated under extreme levels of exploitation.

In *Beasts of No Nation* one expression of this exploitation that is quietly highlighted is the sexual abuse of child soldiers; the third issue this article focuses its discussion on. The film's (dis)quiet(ing) marking of Agu's sexual abuse by Commandant reads and makes available for reading a relative silence in literary texts about the idea and phenomenon of child soldiers, and in particular boy-child soldiers. It demonstrates that, beyond their misuse as uncompensated military labour, these soldiering children are subjected to further exploitation, often by adult figures whom they believed would in fact offer something of the utopic childhood they had known before through safety, love, and nurturing. Finally, in offering a reading of *Blood Diamond* and *Beasts of No Nation*, the fourth issue I discussed is the question of the forgiveness and redemption of the child soldier, arguing that both are (im)possible in that, in Hannah Arendt's words, the actions of the child soldier can neither be punished nor forgiven.

These four issues, which contribute to the existing and surrounding body of literature, are informed, charged, and, in some senses, constituted by each other. I argued that *Blood Diamond* and *Beasts of No Nation* ask us to think through and reckon with the entanglement of slavery and soldiering, as these are pivoted on and through the figure of the child in the context of warfare in postcolonial (West) Africa. The films offer ambiguous and, at times, paradoxical representations of Dia and Agu, who are shown to be both, at different times, good children and obedient soldiers. Moreover, what *Blood Diamond* and *Beasts of No Nation* make clear is that, for these two characters, being a child soldier means being without freedom or choice, or, indeed, being unfree.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> It should be noted, and acknowledged, that parts of this work draws on and from, rewrites, and, at certain points, though minimally, reproduces discussion from my earlier work in my Masters' thesis titled *Reading Representations of the African Child in Select Contemporary Films. Films* (Van der Rede 2014), published by The University of the Western Cape. This article builds on, revises, and extends this early work.
- <sup>2</sup> I deploy the phrase “the discourse of colonialism” to invoke its theorisation by Aimé Césaire, who in his seminal essay of the same name, reveals the innate contradiction of colonialism, which purports to be “ridding” the colonised world and subjects of barbarity, and “civilizing” them through education. Education, as Louis Althusser has argued in his essay on ideology, is a mechanism for interpellation, which in colonial contexts means assimilation, the erasure of the subject's original, indigenous sense of the world and being in it. Césaire contends further that, rather than this, the colonial enterprise was always one aimed toward the extraction of Africa's riches and the exploitation of African peoples. He argues further that, through the discourse of colonialism, the African is Othered and produced as the antithesis of the “enlightened” European subject, being produced as synonymous with violence, rape, murder, enslavement, when, in reality, it is the colonialism which facilitates such violence through the dehumanisation of the African. It is the discourse of colonialism, argues Césaire, that constructs a relationship between the coloniser and colonised founded on race, in which the African, for example, becomes equated with the very barbarism that Césaire claims Europe exports through colonisation. Césaire argues convincingly that it is through its discourse that colonialism achieves this ruse. See Césaire (2000).
- <sup>3</sup> Frantz Fanon famously explains in *The Wretched of the Earth* how the colonial world is a Manichean world, dichotomised into White/good and Black/bad. In *Blood Diamond* and *Beasts of No Nation* the Manichean split is threaded not along race but alongside who chooses to abstain from violence and who chooses to wield it.
- <sup>4</sup> Scholarship concerned with, for example, the “comfort women”, has recently begun to grow. The term marks a system of sexual slavery created and controlled by the Imperial Japanese government between 1932 and 1945 which exploited adult women and young girls. The work of Jie-Hyun Lim; Carol Gluck; and Jimin Kim, Beverly Milner (Lee) Bisland, and Sunghee Shin are especially useful.
- <sup>5</sup> Christina Rose Clark-Kazak (2009).
- <sup>6</sup> During the enlightenment, period children were still viewed as being “scarred at birth by original sin” and were considered as yet imperfect “little adults” (Cunningham 2001, p. 1).
- <sup>7</sup> Victor K. Turner, in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Turner 1969), explains that liminal personae “are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space” (p. 95)
- <sup>8</sup> Both films are fictional, *Beasts of No Nation* does not reference a specific country, period, or conflict. Conversely, *Blood Diamond* is specifically set in the context of the 1999 Civil War in Sierra Leone, a lived event and historical trauma. It is worth noting, however, that when Fukunaga was asked what inspired his adaptation of the novel *Beasts of No Nation*, he explained that he “had been working in the subject already for about six years, trying to come up with some kind of story about the civil war in Sierra Leone, the displaced people, and child soldiers. Then, [he] read through the novel and [he] loved the elegant and concise way that Uzodinma Iweala told the story. [He] felt that would be the best way to enter the subject”.
- <sup>9</sup> See (Unicef). Beyond this, it should be noted, as Kaldor and Vincent warn, that there are “no accurate statistics of the casualties” (Kaldor and Vincent 2006, p. 6). He does mark, however, that “conservative estimates suggest that 70,000 people were killed and roughly 2.6 million people, more than half the population, were displaced from their homes” (Kaldor and Vincent 2006, p. 6). Figures obtained after the war suggest far larger scale murder, displacement, and abduction. The various crimes committed throughout the conflict's duration—rape, abduction, mutilation, and amputation—resulted in what Victor called “human insecurity”. This led to what Heeren claims were over 350,000 refugees in camps surrounding Sierra Leone, the vast majority of which were based in Guinea (Heeren 2013, n.p). He further claims that between three and four thousand Sierra Leonean children were forced to become part of the military.
- <sup>10</sup> Anti-Slavery International, “Child Slavery” landing page: (Anti-Slavery International Yeara).
- <sup>11</sup> See (Freedom United 2023).
- <sup>12</sup> A similar reminder happens in *Beasts of No Nation* when Agu, Strika and their “brothers” play soccer in a clearing in the tall grass near a village. Soon, however, the brief sound of play and laughter is interrupted by the sound of gun fire and people screaming.
- <sup>13</sup> For a discussion regarding the archetypes Cameron identifies and conceptualises, specific to *Blood Diamond*, see Mafe (2011).

- <sup>14</sup> (Bradshaw 2015).
- <sup>15</sup> See note 9.
- <sup>16</sup> For a discussion on this see (Kaminer et al. 2005).
- <sup>17</sup> Again, I deploy the phrase “the discourse of colonialism”, to invoke its theorisation by Aime Cesaire.
- <sup>18</sup> Frantz Fanon famously explains in *The Wretched of the Earth* how the colonial world is a Manichean world, dichotomised into Coloniser—White and good—and the colonised—Black and bad. In *Blood Diamond* and *Beasts of No Nation*, the Manichean split is threaded not along race but alongside those who choose to abstain from violence and who choose to wield it.

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