

The Child-Soldier Deject: Abjection, Subjectivity, and Systemic Marginalization  
in Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* and Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah Is Not Obligated*

By

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International Human Rights is a multi-layered ideological system at the intersection of law, cultural narrative, social norms, collective ethics, and personal morality. Its lofty ideals are in direct challenge to the everyday forces of destruction and chaos that threaten order, which Julia Kristeva, in *The Powers of Horror*, claims is the substance of the abject. People's fascination and perturbation with the abject are embodied in our cultural obsessions: one being the popularity of literatures depicting violent atrocities happening in faraway places—specifically, child-soldier narratives. The argument presented in this thesis is premised by the observation that global literatures tend to pander to the comforts of a Western readership, keeping abject content bracketed out of the narrative with only suggestions of the real violence taking place in conflict-ridden states. The thesis argues that two texts, Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* and Kourouma's *Allah is Not Obligated*, have challenged such trends by presenting the abject to readers through their narrators. In so doing, they begin to close the comfortable gap between reader and subject, as the reader's only point of access to the literature is filtered through a narrator who embodies abjection himself. The introduction provides a framework for understanding human rights literatures through the lens of Kristeva's theory of abjection, and the chapters that follow are in-depth character studies of the two texts' narrators and their linguistic habits. The chapters illustrate how and to what ends the authors deviate from convention in order to foster productive identification between reader and subject.

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*INTRODUCTION* | CLOSING THE GEOPOLITICAL GAP BETWEEN READER AND SUBJECT:  
UNDERSTANDING LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS  
THROUGH THE LENS OF PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY

Julia Kristeva, in the conclusion of her essay *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, poses a challenge to the reader. After 200 pages of theoretical scaffolding and illustrations through French literature, the Bible, and historiographies of hatred pursuant to her unveiling of chaos, Kristeva nudges her reader, wondering if, “perhaps [the reader] might be able to read this book as something other than an intellectual exercise,” to acknowledge the dark undercurrents that are, “when all is said and done...the other facet of religious, moral, and ideological codes on which rest the sleep of individuals and the breathing spells of society” (209). It is a stark moment of practicality, a provocation of the theoretical to become the actualized. As I will discuss, Kristeva names the *abject* as the primer and safeguard of our protective, orderly systems of ideology—an underlying, beyond-reach component of what we refer to as a civilized society, a chaos to which we have a hardwired aversion. Kristeva suggests that her theory of abjection can and should assume a practically applied function for examining the ethics of our ideological systems.

✧ MAPPING THE ABJECT ONTO HUMAN RIGHTS LITERATURES

International Human Rights is one such multi-layered ideological system at the intersection of law, cultural narrative, social norms, collective ethics, and personal morality. Human rights law has a reciprocal relationship with its contingent policies, shaping society as much as society shapes it. Its lofty ideals are in direct challenge to the everyday forces of destruction and chaos that threaten the Symbolic, which Kristeva claims is the substance of the abject. People’s simultaneous fascination and perturbation with the abject are embodied in our

cultural obsessions: a notable one for the Western hemisphere being the recent popularity of literatures depicting violent atrocities happening in faraway places—specifically, narratives about the acts committed by child soldiers in militant factions. From their comfortable sitting rooms, readers can sit in awe of the savage acts of the other while maintaining a safe distance from the possibility that such circumstances could ever happen to them. While literatures depicting human rights abuses endeavor to spark conversation, increase awareness, and catalyze action on the part of the reader, the texts have a tendency to simply re-affirm the rights of the Western reader, leaving them firmly distanced from the violation and in a better position to appreciate their own status as a rights-bearing, autonomous citizen.

Sophia McLennan and Joseph Slaughter discuss the detachment of reader from subject in a way that has concrete implications for how the public conceives of human rights themselves, as audiences are informed of and perceive the reality of the rights climate through literatures like child-soldier narratives. Unfortunately, distance between reader and subject creates a perpetual “gap between the imagination of Human Rights and the state of their practice” (4), something counterproductive to the supposed function of human rights literatures. There are a variety of explanations for this result. A prescient theory is that global literatures tend to pander to the comforts of a Western readership, keeping abject content bracketed out of the narrative and including only mere suggestions of the real violence, death, and destruction taking place in conflict-ridden states. However, there are authors who have challenged such trends by presenting the abject to readers through their narrators. In so doing, they begin to close this perceived gap between reader and subject, as the reader’s only point of access to the literature is filtered through a narrator who embodies abjection himself. As Kristeva would agree, literature is one of

the most sophisticated tools we have to better understand our natural impulses to draw near, but not too near, the violent and chaotic forces of abjection.

Two authors of child-soldier narratives who push back against the tendency to partition off violence from human rights literatures are Uzodinma Iweala and Ahmadou Kourouma. Both Iweala and Kourouma employ narrators characterized in and through abjection: they represent the disturbing reality that there is no clear delineation between victim and perpetrator, and that, given certain circumstances, any human being may be capable of committing the acts they show and tell to the reader. To argue this point, I will provide an introductory overview of the problematic pandering to Western narrative conventions recorded in the human rights literary discourse community, and establish a definition of the subject/abject character found in both Iweala and Kourouma's narratives, whom I name the "deject" after the Kristevan idiom. In Chapter One, I investigate the narrator of Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation*, Agu, and his material and linguistic expressions of Kristeva's theory of abjection. In Chapter Two, I discuss how the narrator of Kourouma's *Allah Is Not Obligated*, Birahima, is characterized as a willful participant in warfare first through his associations with his abject mother, a woman ostracized for her physical disabilities and unorthodox religious practices. In so doing, I establish the deject narrator as a literary mechanism for bringing Western readers closer to identifying with the perpetrators of atrocities, closing the comfortable gap between the self and the other in order to render a more complex portrait of rights violations and the multitudes of people they affect.

#### ❖ WESTERN CONVENTION AND LITERARY DISTORTION

While the mission of much of human rights literature is to give voice to the voiceless, spark conversation, and allow for collective witnessing, the uncomfortable truth is that literature can also be the tool with which writers might construct an illusory human rights climate, a trend

initially borne of ideals but that results in counter-productivity. All cultural forms that give voice to human rights violations have the potential to contribute to a grander narrative that drives a normative, but nonetheless illusory, understanding of an equitable rights climate. The most ubiquitous genre that discusses an ideally equitable, though hierarchical, society is the *Bildungsroman*, the coming-of-age narrative form favored by citizens of Western democratic states. A historic genre, the first *Bildungsroman* appeared in 18<sup>th</sup> century Germany, originating with the publication of Johann Wolfgang Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. Karl Morgenstern calls the *Bildungsroman* "the most noble category of the novel," (654) a sub-genre that depicts a character's leaving behind of childish naiveté and becoming enlightened in the social and civic realities of their world. Morgenstern notes that the *Bildungsroman* depicts the formation of the main character into an exemplary, productive member of German society, but also "promotes the development of the reader to a greater extent than any other kind of novel" (654-655). The genre encourages the reader to combine his<sup>1</sup> inner characteristics with his external environment, finding a societal niche in which he can find the full expression of his civic productivity.

*Bildungsromane* operate on the premise that there is a knowable, hierarchical social order in which a given citizen can find a position in society to be economically productive and politically active. This idealism inspires in the reader a sense that there is a knowable order to life, and while scholars like Morgenstern have shown the benefits of such representation, there are alternative arguments that discuss the detriments such generic conventions might have on a contemporary readership. Joseph Slaughter discusses the *Bildungsroman* as a genre with a normative content trajectory that reinforces an understanding of a stable, categorical social order

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<sup>1</sup> While both female and male child soldiers are recruited at nearly similar rates, and many texts foreground the experience of the female child soldier, I will be using a male pronoun to keep consistent with my focus on the male narrators of Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* and Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah is Not Obligated*.



when, in fact, such order does not exist in equal iterations throughout the globe. In referring to the form of the *Bildungsroman* and the content of human rights literatures, Slaughter introduces the concept of “enabling fictions.” “Enabling fictions” point to the detrimental effects idealistic representations may have on those attempting to form a somewhat realistic understanding of social systems. These texts may render falsities in service of an idealistic purpose: “Human rights and the *Bildungsroman* are mutually enabling fictions: each projects an image of the human personality that ratifies the other’s vision of the ideal relations between individual and society” (1407). The difficulty with this reciprocity is that, in narrating the process of achieving equal rights and citizen status, authors may underestimate literature’s utility as a truth-telling mechanism, causing readers and the general public to discern that the fight for human rights continues to gain positive ground.

In attempting to reinforce the necessity of the Symbolic Order central to the *Bildungsroman*’s purpose, writers may uncritically employ a narrative form that obfuscates the fact that large and small atrocities continue to occur around the globe and that many societies are indeed unstable, leaving citizens with little choice to find their natural place in the established system. This is ultimately damaging to the movement itself: the illusion of an equal rights environment hides and contributes to the opposite, and allows for rights violations to occur beyond the purview of the public imagination and under the radar of our legal and cultural order.

#### ❖ ELEMENTS OF ABJECTION

Kristeva’s theory of the abject contains multiple case studies in moving beyond the notion of an ideal system of order and probing the chaotic ruptures of the Symbolic, focusing on language and the feminine. Put forth in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva finds fertile ground in the chaos that breaks through order: particularly those transgressions of poetry against

traditionally structured language. The categorization of marginality, of *other*, foregrounds poetry's rebellious stylistics. The artist/poet becomes a marginal speaking subject who breaks through the constraints of patriarchal authority and language conventions. In discussing this categorization, Toril Moi observes, "If 'femininity' has a definition at all in Kristevan terms, it is simply, as we have seen, as 'that which is marginalized by the patriarchal symbolic order'" (165). A conflation of femininity with marginalization "allows us to view this repression of the feminine in terms of positionality(...) What is perceived as marginal at any given time depends on the position one occupies" (165). Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* simply narrows the focus on marginalization to the (in-)edible morsel of filth and death, the undertow of cleanliness and life.

In expanding upon the works of Freud and Lacan, Kristeva builds her theory using the stages of psychosexual development and understands them as a reflection of our lives within the Symbolic Order as a whole. As is commonly understood in the psychoanalytic tradition, the Oedipal crisis solidifies the mother as *not me*, rejected by the child. Prior to this crisis, the mother was the site of total unification, a sublime expanse of complete cohesion. A distinct fragmentation occurs after the child enters the Symbolic. No longer identifying with/as the mother, the child rejects and excludes her under the watchful eye of the father, the utmost symbol of authority, order, and hierarchical categorization. Kristeva understands the mother's place as one of exile and negation, a threat to the order of the father that the author terms *the abject*. Abjection, then, is the undercurrent—sensed, but not easily pointed to—of disruption and deconstruction that lies beneath the safe boundaries of systematization. Not an object, as objectification has utility in delineating boundaries of *me* and *not me*, there is only one characteristic of the abject: "that of being opposed to I" (1). The abject blurs the lines of order,

collapses meaning in a way that reveals all categories as constructed; providing brief glimpses into the porousness of identity, the illusory structures of society, and the chaos beneath order.

Because identity is reliant on a subconscious pull toward categorization and away from order, we can find the abject and our repulsion of it in our daily experiences. Bodily fluids, unsanitary conditions, and lifeless bodies trigger psychosomatic impulses to expel the threat of death, to bring us back into the neat categorization of **me**, a wholeness for which we are constantly searching. We perform this process of pushing away on an individual and collective scale, a similar drive marking a precedent for our systems of safety, security, and cleanliness.

For Kristeva, the rotten, anarchic aspects of society, the abject, render insight to our places and subjectivity within the Symbolic. These places of rebellion, regarded as collapses of meaning into nothingness, are reminders that we are actively and defensively constructing our lived realities. We maintain order and stave off degradation for the sake of finding unity and maintaining a clean and proper body. To better understand the constraints of the Symbolic, one must confront its ruptures, maybe even explore them. This is an obvious function of literature, which “may also involve not an ultimate resistance to but an unveiling of the abject: an elaboration, a discharge, and a hollowing out of abjection through the Crisis of the Word” (208). Literature’s linguistic component contributes to its “privileged status,” to generate “the ultimate coding of our crises, of our most intimate and most serious apocalypses” (208). In writing literature that engages the abject, writers unconsciously give parts of themselves over to abjection, approaching it as closely as anyone can in order to reveal the truth and demystify the power of that which we push away.

## ❖ HUMAN RIGHTS LITERATURE AS ENGAGING ABJECTION

At its very core, the act of witnessing must encompass a horrific component: one does not witness something unless it includes traumatization or ideological truth-telling, often both.

Human rights literatures capitalize on paradox in their aim to convey the signification of disorder as a means to endorse order: witnessing a violation of human rights or re-establishment of rights acknowledges systemic failure and points to the necessity of the system itself. As the public gained a greater awareness of rights violations, writers felt compelled to facilitate a literary witnessing. Sidonie Smith and Kay Schaffer, in their vast work on life writing and trauma literatures, cite the “wide-scale transformations—geographic, economic, political, cultural, and psychic” that occurred in the 1980s as creating conducive conditions for examining the breakdown of once-stable social and political structures through literature. These “transformations” the authors specify include

[t]he opening of the Berlin wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union into ethnic states...the end of the policy of apartheid in South Africa, the global movements of indigenous peoples to reclaim lands...the changing demography of the new Europe through immigration, the rise (And collapse) of Asian economies and the expansion of the Asian diaspora, the refugee crisis around the globe, and before and after September 11, 2001, the rise of international religious fundamentalisms. (5)

Changes in political regimes, domestic border breakdown, racial and ethnic integration, and territorial disputes threaten the social and cultural ideologies that provide a sense of safety, order, and categorization for a people. Established ideologies resist heterogeneity and chaos, and when chaos breaks through the structure of the self-referential, homogenizing Symbolic, the abject is revealed. This unveiling is what drives people to write and unconsciously approach the abject in

an effort to better understand what may be a curse to their sense of bodily and ontological security (Kristeva 16).

In mapping a Kristevan reading on to human rights literatures, it is important we turn to the authority that constructed the human rights system in the first place: the drafters of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The ideals behind enabling fictions of human rights are dictated by the same authorities: mostly White, Anglo-European leaders of powerful nation states influenced by democracy and Enlightenment-era understandings of human dignity. Joseph Slaughter determines the effects of such idealistic portraiture in his investigation of the *Bildungsroman*, which by convention renders a Western, democratic rising to citizenry in an effort to make visible the universal dignity and contingent rights of humanity as a whole. In constructing human rights as a legal system, policymakers borrowed heavily from the vocabulary of the *Bildungsroman* and other texts considered within the early human rights corpus, giving further credence to literary representations of international equality as though they mirror reality. As Slaughter highlights, conflating idealistic literary form with legal and political function glosses over the human tendency toward hierarchical supremacy and systemic inequality. As is clear today, the romantic façade of a stable, knowable system of order makes it less likely for viewers to peer beyond the margins of the ideal, where quotidian rights violations occur on a massive and insidious scale.

#### ❖ WESTERN AUDIENCES AND GEOPOLITICAL DISTANCE

Demographically, there is a geographic chasm between the literature's readership and its content. Therefore, making texts consumable seems to have established a series of problematic conventions that cater to a Western readership and reinforce the veil of equal rights codification, in turn fueling the complacency necessary for violations to occur on an international scale.

Publishing traumatic truth-telling, Smith and Schaffer write, provides “commodified experiences for general audiences with diverse desires, and also for an increasing number of niche audiences interested in particular kinds of suffering,” a pattern reliant on “the increasing education, disposable income, and leisure time of the post-World War II generations in Western democratic nations and pockets of modernities elsewhere around the globe” (11). The pattern’s persistence is contingent on the economic and publishing trends of a Western market, which in turn shapes the literary discourse itself. Consider Smith & Schaffer’s designation of the industry’s Western dependency which “affects the kinds of stories published and circulated, the forms those stories take, and the appeals they make to audiences” (14). A strong Western influence tends to alter the literature, which “may lose [its] local specificity and resonance in translation” (15). In marketing texts through the lens of a Western readership, the audience has disproportionate influence on the literature’s content, making the characters and events malleable in terms of established conventions, and those tend heavily toward Western tropes.

In alignment with Slaughter’s exploration of Western forms, Smith and Schaffer call specific attention to the *Bildungsroman* in regards to “the market for personal stories, often telling of individualist triumph over adversity, of the ‘little person’ achieving fame, of people who struggle and survive illness, catastrophe, or violence” and its appeal to “to readers and viewers in the West,” noting its rapid popularity in the age of a global marketplace. Slaughter would extend Schaffer & Smith’s argument to include the particularly detrimental effects that privileging such narrative content has on public conceptions of rights as a whole, essentially fostering the environment for further rights violations to occur in the underbelly of established systems of order.

Slaughter notes that his exploration is not totalizing. He hopes to establish a blueprint for other scholars to investigate other forms of literature and their contributions to the dissemination of rights norms, with a hope that “clarifying the hegemonic complicity between the *Bildungsroman* and human rights might offer a methodology for thinking the formal and ideological human rights implications of other, nonhegemonic literary genres” (1407-1408). Scholars have been taking up this call for expanding the investigation into the real-world implications of mapping literary narratives onto the public imaginary of human rights. This is particularly prevalent in African studies, as a postcolonial framework allows for a fruitful mining of the relationship between the heavily Western audience and the trend of African authors conforming to Western conventions. Slaughter chose to start his investigation with the *Bildungsroman*, the generic embodiment of Western democratic idealism, because of its contemporary global ubiquity. It has staged a type of generic imperialism through market pressure, mapping itself onto representations of foreign cultures by authors who feel that to be heard, they must sanitize and minimize their cultural *otherness*. The more a narrative is inclusive of the comfortable consumables Western audiences are familiar with, the more likely an author is to be heard in a competitive market.

As scholars like Akin Adesokan have noted, the economic environment both warps the literary historiography of the African continent and places significant economic power in the hands of Western consumers. Adesokan notes this shift as found in works written by young Africans and marketed primarily outside of African nations, where the most prizes are awarded and bestsellers are marketed using the trappings of a highly developed economy (16). The possibility for reinforcing global hegemony is clear to Adesokan, as he predicts

If this phenomenon advances literary cultures in postcolonial contexts, it does so through a

process of “reversed extraversion”—the centripetal dispersal of influence of a novel first published outside of its author’s primary sphere of interest. This institutional development represents a noteworthy move for the transformation of an audience into a market. (16)

Through Adesokan’s consideration of the politicized economic influence on African writing, it is clear that this tendency to fit within Western paradigms enables an unequal power system not unlike that of global colonialism. One of the texts he presents as exemplary of this dynamic is the popular child-soldier narrative. Texts discussing instances of child-soldierdom are particularly fascinating to investigate, as the explicit depiction of violence in African tribal wars make them particularly susceptible to internalizing and bolstering established stereotypes about the continent. Adesokan concisely surmises this by referring to some child-soldier narratives as “ ‘scatological’ writing, the idea of evoking the observance of bodily functions—eating, excretion, copulation, and so on—in luscious prose and linking it to the negative exercise of power” (12). However, it is clear that the Western influence tends to push the texts to one of two extremes: either in bolstering the “dark continent” caricature, or casting the African citizen as steadfastly victimized by their government and/or culture.

#### ❖ RESISTING DOMINANT LITERARY TRENDS: TOWARD A MORE AMBIGUOUS CHARACTERIZATION

As Joseph Slaughter would agree, caricatures of the combatants as either void of morality or as purified victims distort an audience’s understanding of the rights environment in the African states. While Adesokan understands some narratives as distilled through a hyper-violent lens of Western/white cultural superiority, Maureen Moynagh notes a contradictory tendency to cast characters as “sanitized victim,” which means “writers have to bracket out the violence committed by child soldiers. This bracketing of violence is easier to accomplish in the third-



person accounts” (44). This “bracketing” of violence, essentially a distancing between perpetrator and action, reflects Western readership preferences. Westerners with a penchant for humanitarian stories prefer to keep the victims and perpetrators of those stories at a safe distance: as a function of *other*, characters must fit within operational categories that fulfill a comfortable narrative construction. The narrative’s purpose is, often, to remind the reader of their protected rights and expressive liberties rather than cast the rights violation in more complex, ambiguous terms. In order reaffirm their identities as privileged rights-bearers, readers must push away, and keep from them, those who willingly live in and contribute to the chaos at the margins of the rights system. A caricature or distilled version of this person makes the texts more consumable and more comfortable for the primary market.

The influence of the Western market remains strong, but there are authors who have pushed back against the necessity to please an outside readership. Ahmadou Kourouma and Uzodinma Iweala have both authored child-soldier narrators resistant to the categorizations of caricatured villain and white-washed victim, producing texts that approach the ambiguity of a hybrid victim/perpetrator figure. Both of these texts fall under Adesokan’s “scatological” designation, as they use much imagery surrounding filth, excrement, and violence to make the reader an active participant in incivility and destruction. Iweala’s 2006 novella *Beasts of No Nation*, follows young Agu in a stream-of-consciousness narrative in a nameless West African state. Kourouma’s *Allah is Not Obligated* (2007) tells outspoken Birahima’s journey in the glamorous militias of Johnson and Taylor as he moves through Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. The two narrators discuss the range of thought and emotion that occur to someone who, victimized by the political and social circumstances of his nation, participates willingly in child warfare.

The abject, as Julia Kristeva describes in her essay, *The Powers of Horror*, is clearly present in both material and hegemonic forms. However, both Iweala and Kourouma employ narrators that transcend stereotypical child soldier characterizations and speak to their victimization, willingness, and guilt about their duties as child soldiers. In so doing, Iweala and Kourouma's narrators exist in and speak from the liminal grey area between pure victim and absolute villain. An ambiguous characterization deviates from the narrative trend of removing violence and agency from the child soldier. Portraying the child soldier as a combination of victim, abject, and agent, have led me to read Iweala's and Kourouma's narrators as hybrid subject-abject figures, also known as the Kristevan "deject." The deject is an exile who lives outside normative moral and social codes, a criminal who schemes, lies, and kills without raising authority's attention. In fact, the deject uses the outward presentation of abiding by systems of order as a tool to ultimately destroy it. Kristeva refers to pre-meditated crime and serial criminals as being exemplary of abjection, pointing to "any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law" but specifically to "premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge" as more closely approaching the abject, because "they heighten the display of such fragility" (4). The deject is the human embodiment of abjection, in that he "is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady" (4), a "debtor who sells you up, a friend who stabs you" (4). Most relevant to the discussion of the dejects in child-soldier narratives, Kristeva identifies the abject core of "the traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a savior" (4). As I will discuss in the proceeding chapters, the narrators in Iweala and Kourouma's texts often follow-up descriptions of horrific violence with expressions of guilt, prayer orations, and even justifications of the acts as being for their greater good. The deject operates best under the veil of abiding by Symbolic authority while doing everything he can to

undermine it.

Iweala and Kourouma employ the deject as a means to call attention to the rampant inequality occurring in the international rights environment. Both Agu and Birahima assist in ripping open the seams of the Symbolic through grotesque anecdotes and laughable contradictions, exposing the dynamic facets of chaos the rights system is attempting to order. To negotiate this paradox, both authors employ a speaker who makes clear his willful choice in living outside the moral codes of his society. In so doing, both authors resist pandering to a Western audience: specifically, they resist acquiescing to readers who want to privilege a distorted narrative and distract from the surreptitious violence occurring on a massive global scale. The narrators live in an uncomfortable proximity to the abject, and in order to consume the text, a Western readership must acknowledge the narrator's humanity. The reader must confront their own position in an unequal rights environment through identifying with some aspect of the narrator's humanity despite his horrific acts.

The ideal outcome of using this typified narrator, then, is to force the reader to ask, "Am I, too, capable of such things?" and even, perhaps, "*under what conditions* would I *choose* to do such a thing?" Through their narrators, Iweala and Kourouma gesture toward an examination of the conditions that foster the environment for rights violations to take place. The authors suggest that confronting the abject forces a privileged readership to consider the systemic issues contributing to these outbursts of violence and death, and even their own positions in said system.

CHAPTER ONE | THE CHILD SOLDIER DEJECT: MATERIAL AND SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATIONS OF THE ABJECT IN UZODINMA IWEALA'S *BEASTS OF NO NATION*

*“When I am saying all of this, she is just looking at me and I am seeing water in her eye. So I am saying to her, if I am telling this to you it will be making you to think that I am some sort of beast or devil. Amy is never saying anything when I am saying this, but the water is just shining in her eye. And I am saying to her, fine. I am all of this thing. I am all of this thing, but I am also having mother once, and she is loving me.” Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation**

At the close of Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation*, the young protagonist Agu speaks raw truths to his American aid worker, Amy. He is in therapy with this “white woman from America who is coming here to be helping people like me” (141). People like Agu are former West African child soldiers recently liberated from tribal warfare by foreign humanitarian aid organizations. This scene, in which the altruistic Westerner, the white purveyor of democracy and human rights, stages a rescue and assists in the rehabilitation of affected peoples, is familiar to readers of human rights literatures. Such a trope is the product of a surge in narratives depicting the humanitarian atrocity of child-soldiering; the literature itself a response to a notable increase in the number of children being recruited to military factions engaged in civil war during the 1990s. As discussed in the introduction, more and more literature containing child-soldier characters saturated the market and found a loyal audience in Western readerships. This began influencing the literature itself, as authors considered reader preferences in their depictions of child soldiers and their war-torn conflicts.

As previously discussed, some authors push back against Western tropes in their representations of child-soldierdom. Iweala's narrator, Agu, defies a common understanding of child soldiers as straightforward victims, and instead presents readers with a complex, hybrid subject termed the “deject” who retains his autonomy and speaks clearly about the choice to participate in the violence and destruction involved in tribal warfare and associated with the

abject. Before discussing the deject, I will first establish a working definition for the particular discursive trend this character is pushing against, known as the “Savage-Victim-Savior paradigm.” I will then discuss how Agu’s character is inextricably intertwined with the abject, first through his experiences with murder and his proximity to bodily fluids; and secondly, through the language with which he narrates the text.

#### ❖ THE SAVAGE-VICTIM-SAVIOR PARADIGM: A STARTING POINT

The scene transcribed above is, though out of context, reflective of an enduring paradigm traceable in human rights discourse. Deemed by Makau Mutua the “Savage-Victim-Savior” (SVS) Paradigm, this trope places participants in and victims of rights violations in prescribed categories. Comprised of three main components, the SVS paradigm is a “three-dimensional compound metaphor... its discourse uni-directional and predictable, a black-and-white construction that pits good against evil” (202). Mutua deconstructs this metaphor in an effort to show it as an extension of White savior imagery into cross-cultural, globalized discourse. Mutua reveals the utility of the paradigm, premised on Western “altruism,” as maintaining the West’s privileged position in an international hegemony.

The SVS paradigm is deeply embedded in literatures meant to disseminate human rights norms, and its effects are far-reaching: a similar hierarchical inequality, one that privileges and centralizes Western culture, can be found in common understandings of the international rights environment. This creates a chasm between postcolonial lenses of historical and contemporary systems of power and the idyllic rhetoric of human rights upon which global justice is based. Margaret Kohn writes that this is primarily a narrative issue: “postcolonial critics see universal, abstract concepts as metaphors that are embedded in problematic narratives [...] [which] can have the unintended consequence of undermining the practices that could help make the world

more just” (188). Indeed, these problematic narratives have begun garnering more attention as scholars seek to identify and address the systemic inequality illustrated in the literature of human rights. This is a mission with concrete implications: the narratives of human rights abuses and humanitarian intervention influence the language around which policy and legal statutes are built. Because of its out-sized influence on people’s lived experiences, Mutua understands this metaphor as both “damning” and far-reaching (201). The metaphor infects policy-making and contributes to an unequal rights environment heavily reliant on the altruism and power of the West to solve the world’s problems.

Mutua contends the SVS metaphor is one “that depicts an epochal contest pitting savages, on one hand, against victims and saviors, on the other” (201). In maintaining a narrative binary of good and evil, the Western human rights disseminators are cast as the heroic problem-solvers, and the non-Western victim of human rights abuses is cast as the passive object of Western identity validation. However, after placing the final scene from *Beasts of No Nation* (transcribed above) in its narrative context, one can see how distinctly different it is than narratives that substantiate the Savage-Victim-Savior paradigm. Rather than positioning the Western savior as the point of focalization and the filter through which the survivor of rights abuses might recover their subjectivity, this humanitarian character, Amy, is mostly silent.

#### ❖ *BEASTS OF NO NATION* AS CHALLENGING THE SVS PARADIGM

Amy treats Agu like a subordinate, but we know this because Agu expressly identifies their inherently unequal relationship and calls attention to its absurdity. The only second-hand dialogue we receive from Amy, a majority silent character, is pressing Agu to speak more, to articulate his thoughts and emotions to her. Agu sees a fundamental problem with these encouragements, believing that, “I am like old man and she is like small girl because I am

fighting in war and she is not knowing what war is” (141), which results in enduring frustrations for Agu as he is “saying to her sometimes, I am not saying many thing because I am knowing too many terrible thing to be saying to you” (141). Here, Agu attempts to shed light on the vast distance between the two of them, not only in age or experience, but most importantly as a means to distinguish the obvious difference between their positionality in the international rights environment. Agu’s character, in illustrating this particular rehabilitation method’s flaws, echoes Mutua’s sentiment that “the human rights corpus, though well-meaning, is fundamentally Eurocentric...[and] falls within the historical continuum of the Eurocentric colonial project, in which actors are cast into superior and subordinate positions” (204). Agu subverts this positioning, drawing attention to Amy’s naïveté and the ultimately futile nature of their interactions. Agu’s refusal to be categorized as a helpless victim persists throughout the duration of the preceding narrative, a first-person account that starts at his initial capture and catalogues his journey in a traveling tribal militia made up mostly of child soldiers. Agu, our narrator, is not located in a particular country; but, rather, he speaks with subjectivity from the chaotic margins of orderly society as a whole.

The child soldier, seen as a novel figure experiencing a profound violation of human rights, has garnered attention in the literary discourse community precisely because of its refusal to be located within the Savage-Victim-Savior construction. Maureen Moynagh discusses the ambiguous, heterogeneous identity of the child soldier and its troublesome representation in human rights literatures. Aligned with Mutua, Moynagh calls into focus the trending literary paradigm of human rights narratives that leans heavily on the categorical innocence of the victimized child and capitalizes on the “politics of life” while downplaying the “politics of death” (Fassin as qtd. in Moynagh 40). She believes the child soldier challenges the “tidy binary” of

innocent and guilty as he is equally victim and perpetrator, both violator and violated. Her discussion of the child soldier first highlights the rehabilitation narrative that underscores many pieces of human rights literatures, portraying the subject of human rights violations as passive, innocent, and in need of rescue.

#### ❖ AGU AS DEJECT: RESISTANT TO VICTIMIZATION

The agency of the child soldier obscures the delineation between victim and combatant, because, as Moynagh observes, “while NGOs like Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers insist that child soldiers themselves ought to be understood as ‘victims,’ the child-soldier figure remains an ambiguous one” (41). The tendency to see these willful agents as *only* victims of their circumstances can be understood through a psychological and socialized aversion to the abject, a deep-seated refusal to confront the powers of chaos and horror at work beneath our neat systems of order and safety. Additionally, Western exceptionalism substantiates the literary pattern that forcibly categorizes characters as “good” and “evil,” as Western democracy must stand as a pillar for upholding rights and intervening during abuses. The literature that ascribes to this pattern depicts an imaginary rights environment, unreflective of the reality that those nations who tout their upstanding rights policies are the most likely to commit abuses.

In reviewing the literature, it becomes clear that many texts that focus on the child soldier refuse the subject agency, making him a passive victim in need of rescue from Western intervention: the portrayal most comfortable for a Western readership. However, I argue that Agu is an example of the Kristevan “deject” figure: a hybrid subject-abject character with an exiled social positionality. The deject lives on the margins of society but maintains his agency and voice in doing so. He acknowledges his subversive, liminal existence and uses it to his



advantage in a society ordered by moral and social authority. In portraying the child soldier as both agent and victim, Iweala's character blurs the victim/combatant binary and challenges the problematic iterations of the narrative Moynagh has discovered, causing a rupture in the archetype that allows for a persistently Eurocentric understanding of progress in the realm of human rights. Of primary importance—considering not only Agu's material proximity to experiences with the abject, but also the maintenance of his subjectivity as one through whom the abject exists—is his mode of communication, the particular language with which he speaks his guilt into existence. Agu uses a unique form of Pidgin English, first depicted by Ken Saro-Wiwa in his text *Sozaboy*, deemed “Rotten English.” The language is a combination of tribal dialect and English vocabulary, and the term insinuates that the purity of English has been infected by or otherwise imposed upon by African languages. It is often used in varying degrees by other authors of child-soldier narratives, and implies the author wants to both isolate and reflect the reader in the linguistic construction of the text. I argue that Rotten English, as a hybrid language, allows the deject to speak to the Western world at large while maintaining his marginalized identity as subject-abject, a decisive gesture of agency and subjectivity by a narrator whose type is most often cast as helpless.

The physical and social environments of Iweala's child soldier is characterized almost exclusively by the abject, forcing the reader to approach the psychosomatically and morally repulsive through the narrator's experiences. As the reader (and Agu) becomes oriented with the novel's plot and Agu's imminent coercion into the tribal military, the components of abjection reveal themselves at increasing degrees of complexity. The opening scene of *Beasts of No Nation* begins with the sensation of bugs crawling over the speaker's body, forcing him to want to sneeze, to expel the sensation, and what the reader can assume is his plight, from his body.

Within the same breath our narrator describes a “voice that is just touching my body like knife” (1). The reader’s immediate orientation with the narrative is associated with the filth of bugs crawling on one’s skin and the clear and present threat of death. Throughout the narrative, Agu’s position in the fringe military aligns with Kristeva’s discussion of abjection in such distinct and clear ways that it is difficult to ignore.

#### ❖ THE MATERIAL EXPERIENCE OF ABJECTION

While Kristeva is firm that abjection is more so an experience than a subject or object, there are concrete characteristics that can be assigned to the concept in order to create a better understanding of how and through what we encounter the abject. Kristeva points to bodily reactions that function to expel an undesired substance from the body or to prevent that substance from entering the body. Her focus on the gag reflex in response to a loathed food is the most relatable, as it is a biological function as well as a psychological one; a person must first perceive the substance to be undesirable, to be filthy or incapable of consuming in order to trigger the biological reaction: “‘I’ want none of that element.. ‘I’ do not assimilate it, ‘I’ expel it” (3). The substance is perceived as threatening to the health and well-being of the body, and the biological function takes over to prevent it by preemptively starting the expulsion process of vomiting. The process of vomiting calls attention to the body’s, the person’s, inability to assimilate the substance into themselves: “it reacts, it abreacts. It abjects” (3). The impulse to vomit is Agu’s first reaction to his introduction of child-soldiering, when he is being beaten and dragged from the shelter in which he was hiding: “Again and again he is hitting me... I am trying to scream, but he is knocking the air from my chest... I am tasting blood. I am feeling like vomiting... My body is just sliding slowly from the stall out into the light and onto the mud” (Iweala 3). Agu is dragged out into the filth of the elements, tasting a bodily fluid in his mouth

and feeling the impulse to expel the perceived threat from his body; but, he does not. The narrative continues without Agu actually vomiting, a process that would indicate the threat being unassimilated into the body and the self. This initial encounter with filth suggests that Agu's survival necessitates an unprecedented tolerance for violence and chaos, one he had never been forced to approach prior to his captivity in the tribal militia.

Agu's initial perceptions of his fellow soldiers are all characterized through abjection, in great contrast to his previously orderly life in the village: their clothes are dirty and tattered, they are skinny and hungry-looking, their hats and shirts are soaked with sweat. Agu describes how the group indiscriminately uses the world as their toilet; in fact, they are encouraged to urinate and defecate on the side of the road and in the middle of campsites to assert their masculinity and divorce them from the human need for privacy and decency. From the outset, this community of lost children and warring adults is inextricably linked to “ (...)bodily fluids, (...) defilement (...) shit...what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death” (Kristeva 3). An encounter with filth and bodily fluids is what Kristeva believes to be a confrontation of the self with the reality that the subject is indeed alive; it is these fluids that one must expel and remove from the body in order to continue living. In essence, the abject confronts the subject with the continual possibility of death, and from here, Kristeva discusses the corpse as the ultimate experience with abjection.

#### ❖ DUTY, AGENCY, AND THE ABJECT

Agu's position as subject-object is hinged on the actions he must take in order to fulfill his duty as child soldier: to create the most corpses as possible in every village the army attacks, to cause chaos through bodily violence and village destruction. His first lesson in killing is an enemy soldier, one who has attempted to run away from the imminent slaughter that is about to

befall himself and his comrades. Commandant, the leader of the army into which Agu has become indoctrinated, forces Agu to kill the soldier to prove his worth. The experience is lengthy: the man makes multiple attempts to escape, taking advantage of Agu's inability to act. That is, until Commandant takes Agu's hand and begins chopping the man's body with the machete, forcing Agu to finish the job he started. The experience is drenched in fluids and gore, as Agu describes "the blood is spilling out like milk from coconut... I am seeing each drop of blood and each drop of sweat flying here and there...I am feeling how the blood is just wetting on my leg and my face... there is just blood, blood, blood" (21). Immediately afterward, Agu begins vomiting uncontrollably in an attempt to expel the experience from his psyche and from his body. Kristeva perceives the encounter with the corpse as "the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders...The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection" (4). The corpse is "death infecting life," it is both "imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us" (4). Agu, as agent in infecting life with death, is wholly pushed to the margins of society and becomes that through which the abject is expressed: a hybrid subject-object, one who lives on the border of life and death, "the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite... immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles... a debtor who sells you up, a friend who stabs you..." (4) ... A child who rapes mothers and daughters and then murders the entire family with a single machete.

#### ❖ EXISTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS OF A LIMINAL IDENTITY

The preliminary chapter of *Powers of Horror*, "Approaching Abjection," makes it clear the experience of abjection is both physical and psychological: the abject is that which we use to solidify our own existence as living, dignified human beings, clean in bodily hygiene and social intention. In that very simplistic definition, the child soldier is conventionally cast as the *other*,

the not me. In the Western mindset, we posit the phenomenon of child-soldierdom as simply not possible in our developed, dignified, ethically-transcendent world: it operates in service of the exceptionalist narrative so central to American society, identity, and codes of justice. The Westerner would never ask a child to chop bodies with machetes, rape women and children, pillage and urinate (both metaphorically and literally) upon an entire village's way of life. The child soldier is the abject for the Westerner in that we keep it at arm's length, for "if I acknowledge it, [the abject] annihilates me" (Kristeva 2). At the same time, our awareness of the child soldier allows us to further solidify our aforementioned notions of our society as developed, dignified, and ethical. In this way, "abject and abjection are my [the Western ideology's] safeguards. The primers of my [Western] culture" (2). At first evaluation, it seems prudent of us to keep this threat as far away as possible, so as to not break down the safe social and ideological systems that allow us to live our lives. However, the demarcation of *clean* and *dirty*, *moral* and *immoral*, *me* and *not me* is illusory, a permeable boundary that requires constant attention and re-substantiation in order to persist as true in our collective consciousness.

In his condition as child soldier, Agu becomes "the one by whom the abject exists," (8) what Kristeva terms as the *deject*. While the body and mind are wired to expel and reject the abject, the *deject* instead hovers in the ambiguity between abjective death and life: he "places (himself), separates (himself), situates (himself) and therefore *strays* instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing" (8) (emphasis Kristeva's). The *deject* both recognizes his abjection and divides himself from it, enacting and enforcing the abject upon others, but putting forth much effort to keep from assimilating it into himself. Kristeva notes this process is "not without laughter—since laughing is a way of placing or displacing abjection" (8). While the point is developed no further in her preliminary chapter, its alignment with Iweala's narrator is

uncannily consistent. Agu's indoctrination into child-soldierdom is complete when he becomes addicted to narcotics; "gun juice" helps to numb his emotions and increase his aggression. The drugs separate Agu from the horror of his actions, away from abjection, while simultaneously situating him as a more efficient soldier, solidifying him as that through which the abject is expressed. Agu often finds himself laughing while he murders his victims under the influence of the drugs, an attempt to maintain the precarious border between himself and the horrific reality of his new existence. It is through these myriad alignments with Kristevan abjection that Agu is cast as both the subject (narrator) and the abject (child soldier) or, to use the Kristevan term, the deject.

The remainder of the narrative chronicles Agu's struggle to live on the margins of ordered society: Agu's proximity to filth and death is necessary for his survival, a contradiction that results in the fragmented, hybridized identity that is the child soldier. In order to live, Agu must persistently commit violent, immoral acts of murder, rape, and looting. Kristeva views abjection as a border, a fluctuation between life and death: each time Agu kills a person, he lives another day. Therefore, he through whom the abject is expressed, the deject, exists in a constant state of flux, a conflict zone where the reiteration of life and threat of death are both immediately close at hand. Maureen Moynagh sees the current literary trends of the child-soldier narrative as an "impediment to the human rights model," (41) as it refuses to cross the constructed delineation between victim and perpetrator, ignoring the ambiguous and liminal space in-between order and chaos. Agu's portrayal as deject challenges this trend: Iweala casts him as having a heterogeneous existence that defies traditional discourse archetypes. In Moynagh's investigation of child-soldier narratives, she finds that often "readers are positioned instead in relation to the humanitarian agent, while the child-soldier figure is scripted as oddly passive and

effectively mute” (43). It is clear that Agu defies this pattern: the narrative is from strictly his perspective; the words on the page are from Agu’s consciousness. The only figure the reader can relate to is Agu, for he is the only character of the narrative whose complexities as an adolescent in an extreme circumstance are fully fleshed out: no secondary or tertiary characters are described beyond a single facet of representation, none of them speak to the reader without Agu as a filter. As readers who are given limitless access to Agu’s thoughts, emotions, and perceptions, we are cognizant of the contradictions raging both outside and within him as he attempts to negotiate his hybrid identity as child soldier and reconcile the child he was before the war and the monster, as he perceives himself, that he is now. This is in challenge to the tenets of current child-soldier narratives that dictate readerly connection with the “child-as-victim... not the child-as-soldier” (Moynagh 45). It is much more comfortable for a Western readership to objectify the child soldier as *only* a victim, rather than contend with him as a person with choice and autonomy victimized by circumstances outside of his control.

The reader sees Agu as a victim very early in the text: after he witnesses his father’s murder, he is ripped from his home and forcibly introduced to the tribal military, a livelihood steeped in abjection and horror. However, Agu is candid with his reader: he speaks from a place of confusion yet conviction when he describes his wartime mindset, and by extension, the mindset of the group. In a description of a village raid, Agu recalls, “in the corner, there is desk being eaten by termite and in the other corner is bed smelling like chicken and goat. I am wanting to kill. We are all wanting to kill” (47). The phrase *I am wanting to kill* is repeated often throughout the narrative. For Moynagh, this is in stark contrast to other narratives’ reliance on the brainwashing explanation: rather than *they are making me kill*, Agu admits to his reader the *he is wanting to kill*. This narrative pattern subverts the popular notion that the child soldier is

“the ideal sentimental protagonist” (Moynagh 47) and instead reasserts that insidious notion that, indeed, “the child- soldier is precisely not this reassuringly pure and innocent child, but a child who also commits terrifying acts of brutality” (47). Agu’s articulated subjectivity when it comes to these acts of brutality dislocates him from mainstream society, willfully exiling himself to the borderlines of chaos. It is difficult for a reader to come to this conclusion, as the child soldier’s proximity to the abject is so striking that one’s first impulse is to either wholly reject him or reposition him as soldier-as-victim: neither are truthful portrayals of the child soldier condition, which is one of ambiguity and heterogeneity, not neat categorization.

#### ❖ THE DEJECT AS HYBRID AND LIMINAL

We see ambiguity and heterogeneity represented in Iweala’s narrator. The character’s paradoxical hybrid identity continually antagonizes itself, creating an internal conflict for Agu: he agonizes over the ambiguity and heterogeneity of his existence. The acts he commits oppose the child-like dreams he had of becoming a doctor or an engineer, something that would make his parents proud and allow him to contribute to the community he so loved. His innocence and confusion regarding the situation challenge his notion of ‘soldier,’ whom he has understood as proud, skilled, and honored by those around him— instead, his duties as soldier entail destroying communities, families, and bodies. Agu is torn between the two disparate components of his identity: child with dreams and soldier with duties. Agu’s interior schism arises out of the tension between the cultural and social ideologies of his childhood and the new doctrine of his soldierdom.

This conflict is one inherent to the condition of the child, particular those in African literatures written by third-generation Nigerians like Iweala, as Madeleine Hron investigates. Hron discusses the *abiku*, the child-figure that is “caught up in the often interminable cycle of



birth, death, and return” (28). The *abiku*, like the deject, lives in a state of fluctuation where death is always close-at-hand, both threatening and re-asserting the child’s living existence. The author views the Nigerian notion of childhood as a “space of hybridity, possibility and, most importantly, resistance” (29). Most often in these texts the child, while still seen as not-yet-an-adult, is introduced to the complex interplay of power differentials, societal constructions, and their visible embodiment in everyday life. Hron’s discussion notes the narrator “is constantly negotiating, questioning, or even resisting these cultural constructions, even by virtue of its own constructedness” (29). The reader sees this collision, or attempt at negotiation, occur at varying levels in Agu’s internal thought process: first in a justification for his actions and later in hopes for reparation.

Toward the beginning of the narrative when Agu is a fresh face among the soldiers, he attempts to explain his actions through a naive, child-like reasoning that aims to marry his two competing worldviews: “I am not bad boy. I am not bad boy. I am soldier and soldier is not bad if he is killing. I am telling this to myself because soldier is supposed to be killing, killing, killing. So if I am killing, then I am only doing what is right” (23). Agu’s previous education in his village taught him that murder is something “bad boys” do, making him a bad boy, too. However, his title as “soldier” mitigates this notion, as it justifies his actions as part of his duties. Later in the text, Agu’s thought process becomes even more conflicted, the two identities more disparate than ever. In a train of thought that discusses his experiences in church and labels religion and education as top priorities in his village, the only way Agu is able to negotiate his hybrid identity is that one component will serve as reparation for the other:

And I am thinking that when it is over I can be going to university to study. I am thinking that I want to be Doctor because then I will be able to be helping people instead of killing

them and then maybe I will be forgiven for all my sin...Then I will go back to church. I will go back to church to ask God for forgiveness every day. (76-77)

It is clear that Agu yearns for when the war is over, as his previous culture and ideologies will then be allowable. At this time, they are submissive to his current culture of child-soldierdom, yet continue to surface during his daily duties. With this, it is quite easy to see how *Beasts of No Nation* can be read as a *Bildungsroman*, but with a deject character who subverts the normal trajectory of the genre's content. Agu's thoughts of 'after the war' are in reaction to his present circumstance: he wishes for a time where he can be re-situated in his previous culture, where those views and beliefs will again resurface as the dominant ideology. However, as his guerrilla army continues to destroy lives, villages, and entire communities, it becomes clear that Agu will have to find a way to tolerate the ambiguity of his hybrid identity, as a return to his life as a child is no longer possible, and his life as a soldier is one that entails constant physical and psychological negotiation of the abject.

Prior to discussing the way in which Agu successfully speaks both from and outside his state as deject, one must investigate if it is even possible for the abject to speak. After all, the abject is categorized as neither subject nor object, but it seems as though there is space for subjectivity in the deject, the hybrid existence of the subject-abject. Thea Harrington explores this metanarrative in Kristevan theory and finds that Kristeva's performative act of discussing abjection allows the abject to speak. Harrington begins her essay with four critical questions, the last of which this discussion is most concerned with, which asks, "Why must the abject speak, and what does it say?" (139) While the main focus of Harrington's essay is the performative aspect of Kristeva's text, that through discussing abjection she approaches it and gives it voice, Harrington includes a discussion about the way in which the abject can speak. This is through a

breakdown of dialectical norms that begins with the recognition that the subject, the speaker, is comprised of both substance and lack, a displacement “via the workings of loss” (145). This causes the speaker, the subject, to “[turn] inward” (146) and come to the realization that “nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory” (Kristeva as qtd. in Harrington 146). Therefore, the deject must construct his reality through his previous experiences as a child, combined with his current duties as soldier. These disparate experiences result in a unique articulation of his clashing existences.

Agu’s hybrid existence occurs out of loss: his parents are both murdered and his village destroyed, making his environment one that he cannot recognize. Throughout the narrative, Agu interjects reminiscent flashbacks about his village and pre-war life: the function of these being to show how disparate his memory and reality are, which illustrates his existence in exile and interminable ambiguity of hybridity. Harrington notes that because the breakdown of the subject/object duality causes an existence based in lack, a lack that humans fear and consistently “other” in order to reiterate the substantive component of their self concept, the abject can speak “only in a kind of ceaseless wordplay that does not mention fear... if that object is unveiled, it would reveal in utterance the unspeakable: the primal *manque* and one’s own loss within it” (146). While Agu feels the need to document his struggle in the *manque*, the hyphen of child-soldier narrator, he never explicitly uses the word “fear,” or “afraid;” rather, he works around the specific signifiers while still articulating the notion through that which is expressed through him: the abject.

To elucidate this avoidance of “fear,” one must refer to the origin of loss: Agu describes the moment where loss and death were closest to himself and his village, as he is trapped in a small shack with many other people, hoping that the guerrilla army that has invaded their homes

and community does not discover them. Agu asks questions and illustrates his fear through the horrific hypothetical situations running through the villagers' minds, asking, "Will we die, I am asking? Will they be killing us?" (71). Someone in the hut begins hypothesizing about their fate, saying, "They will just be loading us onto one truck, bleeding like that so our blood is dripping from the edge ... they will be playing with our body and using our intestine as whip to be whipping each other and cutting off our hand and holding them to be shaking each other" (71-72). Never does Agu specifically articulate his fear by using the symbolic signifier for it. Instead, he uses our repulsion of the abject to convey this notion. Agu's narrative not only allows the abject to speak by speaking through abjection (what Harrington deems the "performance of a practice"[139]), he employs a specific type of language that in itself is a signifier of the abject.

#### ❖ ROTTEN ENGLISH AS SIGNIFYING THE ABJECT

It is quite easy to determine that the English in which Agu narrates his story is far from conventional. Iweala is participating in a contemporary tradition of Nigerian literature that employs the use of a language that combines the structures and metaphorical nature of various African dialects with the signifiers of English: a Pidgin English identified by Ken Saro-Wiwa as "Rotten English." Saro-Wiwa employed the unique World English in his novel *Sozaboy*, describing it in the Author's note as "a mixture of Nigerian pidgin English, broken English and occasional flashes of good, even idiomatic English" (Saro-Wiwa as qtd. in North 100). Michael North describes the language as "ruleless and lawless, an improvisation" (100) that represents the amalgamative ethnic and dialectic nature of Nigeria's population. Iweala uses Rotten English as a means for Agu to express his hybrid identity of deject to a Western readership: the "rotting" of the language signifies its abject character, a decaying and decomposition of the dominant language that the "Western savior" has deceptively cast as globally accessible.

However, the outcome of the language is quite the opposite of the abject, assigning innovative signification to conventional signifiers through the present progressive syntax and reiterative verb use. In comparison, any reader would see these components lacking in traditional Englishes that abide by the strict structures of the Symbolic Order. North echoes this notion, asserting that, “his [Saro-Wiwa’s] language, in all its rottenness, turns out to embody virtues that are conspicuously absent from the more powerful discourses that confront him” (101). Of course, it is best to turn to tangible examples of these “[embodied] virtues,” those that highlight the “rottenness” of the language in its most obvious manifestations.

The novel in its entirety is an example of Rotten English, but for the sake of concision I will use a singular substantive excerpt that incorporates all the components of the language in relatively few sentences. The excerpt is as follows:

I am just hearing one blast and the whole ground began shaking shaking... I am not knowing where to be hiding so I am just running up and down the road. I am hearing another GBWEM landing right next to me. And then I was feeling fire on my body but I wasn't burning. When I am looking up, I am seeing people hanging from tree like piece of meat. Head just hanging like coconut before it is falling off. (79)

It is important to note that this is a story Agu is repeating, told to him by a fellow soldier named Griot. His namesake refers to the West African term, particularly associated with tribes who use singing to preserve tribal memory, for *storyteller*. His words are representative of the rich oral tradition of his culture, and therefore, offer fertile ground for linguistic analysis. The anecdote above is about Griot’s initiation into the guerrilla group and how he lost his village and family to the horrors of war like all the other boys around him. However, Agu is the only voice here, conveying the story in his own language to the reader, continuing the oral tradition as he heard

the tale from his comrade. The first noticeable component of Rotten English at work is the present progressive tense. Although the anecdote is set in the past, the syntax denotes that the action is occurring right now, as the speaker tells it. The tense contributes an interesting significance to the tale, as though it is recurring over and over within its own time: the boy is continually re-victimized and lives the event again and again, an infinite cycle untouched by temporal passing. According to Iain Lambert, this atemporal structure “provides an immediacy which is effective in conveying the adrenalin rush” (289) that the speaker is intimating. In addition, this adrenalin rush is clearly occurring as a part of the subject’s fear response, a notion clearly made known to the reader but is not directly addressed, a continuation of Harrington’s discussion of the speaking subject who cannot acknowledge fear.

The second component of Rotten English in this excerpt is the “reduplication” (Lambert 290) of verbs, and in other places of the novel, nouns. Here the speaker describes the impact of artillery hitting the ground as causing it to be “shaking shaking.” The reduplication of the verb reiterates the impact of the machinery, making it all the more present and aggressive: instead of a slight tremble of the earth, we know it is significantly more abrupt and impactful, amplifying the chaos and panic of the scene.

Because Rotten English assigns an inherently different and more significant meaning to conventional signifiers, my discussion will now turn to Kristeva’s semiotic, the undercurrent of language that allows us a cathartic release in opposition to the strict categorization of signs and signification in the Symbolic Order. The aforementioned “lawlessness” of Rotten English is reminiscent of the rebellion and threat against the Symbolic posed by Kristeva’s semiotic, a fitting alignment that capitalizes on ambiguity and heterogeneity of language that the Symbolic attempts to control.

✧ CONCLUSION: IDENTIFYING WITH THE DEJECT, APPROACHING ABJECTION

The semiotic, as Toril Moi articulates in *Sexual/Textual Politics*, is categorized by the chora, a “rhythmic pulsion rather than a new language. It constitutes, in other words, the heterogeneous, disruptive dimension of language, that which can never be caught up in the closure of traditional linguistic theory” (161). The semiotic is the tie to our first epistemology: the way we understood our existence was through the womb of the mother; our communication to the outside world was through the fluidity and rhythms of our mother’s body, and each of us, both male and female, retain that way of knowing through the semiotic. The semiotic is also categorized by marginality: it is oppressed by and cast aside in favor of the Symbolic Order of linguistic communication. It continues to live in the undertones of our language, enriching linguistic expression while simultaneously threatening its neat composition of signifier and signified. Semiotic theory is one of “marginality, subversion, and dissidence” (Moi 163) and reflects “any other struggle against a centralized power structure” (163). We can read the pidgin syntax of Rotten English as following suit with the semiotic’s rebellious and revolutionary character, the reduplication of verbs and reliance on the present progressive as capitalizing on what Kristeva describes in Part I (“The Semiotic and the Symbolic”) of *Revolution in Poetic Language* as “the regulated aspect of the chora,” as its “vocal and gestural organization is subject to what we shall call an objective ordering, which is dictated by natural or socio-historical constraints” (2073). The reduplication of verbs is particularly reminiscent of a vocal and gestural reiteration of an important anecdotal component, we can read it with emphasis even though none is stylistically denoted: the ground was shaking *shaking*. It is this other-than-categorical emphasis the semiotic allows for, providing an opportunity for the reader to make a cathartic

connection with the narrator that defies the binaristic (signifier/signified) and heavily structured Symbolic.

Iweala's use of Rotten English is a unifying strategy, one that connects the opposing dualities, the inherent hybridity, of Agu's identity as deject and allows him to express both his subjectivity and his needs to the dominant discourse community. The "rotting" component of the language, the decomposition of the strict conventions of English, parallels the child-soldier condition based in abjection and power differentials. Rotten English is also inherently political: both Nigerian and English, it mirrors the power-differentials and heterogeneity of child-soldierdom. Its reliance on the present progressive continually "reenacts the moment when the abject came to exist" (152) as every past notion recurs in its own temporality, including the moment of Agu's capture and thrusting into the ambiguity of the in-between. The last two paragraphs of the novel are, arguably, the most demonstrative of the semiotic and unifying power of Rotten English. I will return to the same passage with which we started as a means to provide an exemplar of the cyclical cohesiveness that the language imparts on the reader, as well as a reference for more specific examples in my conclusion. At this point in the novel, the war is over: one of the guerrilla soldiers has betrayed the Commandant and killed him, effectively relieving the group of their duties. The United Nations has sent humanitarian workers to the area in order to begin the process of rehabilitation, a problematic theme that is often seen in human rights narratives but only comes into play within the last few moments of *Beasts of No Nation*. The aid worker who is facilitating Agu's recovery, Amy, is silent though present, as Agu's narration is now directed toward the both of us: reader and Amy:

I am saying to her sometimes, I am not saying many thing because I am knowing too many terrible thing to be saying to you. I am seeing more terrible thing than ten thousand



men and I am doing more terrible thing than twenty thousand men. So, if I am saying these thing, then it will be making me to sadding too much and you to sadding too much in this life. I am wanting to be happy in this life because of everything I am seeing. I am just wanting to be happy. When I am saying all of this, she is just looking at me and I am seeing water in her eye. So I am saying to her, if I am telling this to you it will be making you think that I am some sort of beast or devil. Amy is never saying anything when I am saying this, but the water is just shining in her eye. I am saying to her, fine. I am all of this thing. I am all of this thing, but I am also having mother once, and she is loving me.

(141-142)

Here, Agu resists the Savage-Victim-Savior paradigm and establishes himself as both monster and human; yes, he has acted with agency and committed horrific acts against thousands of people, but, he reminds Amy, he is also human: at one point, he had a mother, and she loved him unconditionally. This last line of the text, “I am also having mother once, and she is loving me” resounds with the reader because it directly incorporates the characteristics of the *chora*, the pulsations and undercurrents of the mother’s womb and the semiotic. These last two paragraphs illustrate Rotten English as “the interpretive speech that provides the rhythm and enchains the gaps” of Agu’s deject identity: markedly cathartic and affective, Rotten English allows the abject to speak through “a ‘bilingualism’ that betrays its ‘cohabitation with the abject’” (Harrington 152). Its function as a language, and particularly a language that has been portrayed as the globally dominant means of discourse, allows Agu to speak as abject and as human. As a subject with a hybrid identity, Rotten English allows Agu to make a definitive gesture of agency and confront the “Problem of Form” that Moynagh believes consistently refuses the child soldier subjectivity, portraying him as passive victim in need of rescue. Instead, Rotten English

confronts the Western readership with “the ethically unsettling” (52), particularly because it allows us to see the awareness and agency that the child soldier exercises in the matter.

Rotten English is the linguistic equivalent of the paradoxical heterogeneity of child-soldier, both abject and human: Agu’s life in the hyphenated ambiguity between child and soldier necessitates a fragmentation of identity, as Harrington describes: “one must sever oneself in order to be” (153); but it is this fragmentation that makes room for hope and healing. Rotten English provides the “possibility of catharsis” (153) that “rests in the ability to speak in two languages...and also to speak as an other—to speak as the abject” (153). Agu is speaking on behalf of both sides of his identity: a beast without a nation, and a child who was once loved by a mother. In casting Agu as deject and providing him with both agency and a means to impart that agency on the reader through Rotten English, Uzodinma Iweala creates a child soldier narrative that resists the literary traditions of the human rights discourse. *Beasts of No Nation* allows for a unique reader experience: one that makes the abject approachable, understandable, and even relatable. The human rights discourse is presently caught in a rather strict paradigm that dictates one portrayal of the child soldier: one that dictates the Western consciousness to keep the passive object at an arm’s length, distanced enough as to not become it, but close enough to solidify our own existences as living, civilized, and ethical. Iweala’s narrative, however, presents the possibility that the closer to the deject we come, the more tolerance we may have of the ambiguity of their existence, a heterogeneity that resists our traditional epistemology. By making the abject approachable and allowing it to act with agency, Iweala’s narrative precipitates a change in the discourse community of human rights. This change will allow the violator and violated equal chance at recovery, but most importantly, a recovery enacted not through the

Western Savior but through the healing of a fragmented and disparate identity actively catalyzed by the subject of the violation.

*CHAPTER TWO | INHERITED MARGINALITY, CHOSEN EXILE: THE CHILD SOLDIER NARRATOR AND SYSTEMIC FAMILIAL PERSECUTION IN AHMADOU KOUROUMA'S ALLAH IS NOT OBLIGED*

On 20 November 1989, the United Nations General Assembly signed and ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This document affirmed the child's access to fundamental human rights such as "the inherent right to life" (art. 6.1) and "[to the maximum extent possible] the survival and development of the child" (art. 6.2). The document dictates the parameters around ensuring the safety and wellbeing of any child citizen in the 140 signatory states, from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe. These articles apply to states in both peace time and conflict, with Article 38 being entirely dedicated to the rights of the child living amidst war: "In accordance with their obligations under international humanitarian law to protect the civilian population in armed conflicts, States Parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure protection and care of children who are affected by an armed conflict" (38.4). Since the convention's enactment, however, nothing substantive has been done to prevent the continued usage of child soldiers in armed conflict – the practice remains in developing nations warring under unstable governments. At the same time, the globe is increasingly aware of the child soldier phenomenon to the point of commodification: stories told by former child soldiers about their time in military factions have garnered heavy popularity in the Western hemisphere. The dissonance between awareness and action is stark.

The disparity between awareness and action reveals the inefficacy of the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child, a top-down human rights mechanism. As discussed in the Introduction, Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection is useful for investigating such ruptures in institutional authority, and more broadly, the Symbolic Order. In this circumstance, the power of

capitalism outweighs the influence of human rights dissemination. To frame this chapter, I will investigate how human rights literatures pander to Western consumer preferences, specifically in the use of the European *Bildungsroman* as a form that can distort or sanitize narrative content. I will then look into the ways author Ahmadou Kourouma pushes back against this tendency. His novel *Allah is Not Obligated* confronts readers with a narrator who embodies the abject, a violence and chaos that Western consumers prefer to keep at a much greater distance (if not totally absent from the narrative altogether). Kourouma's narrator, Birahima, has been read as a pícaro, a rogue postcolonial figure subverting the idyllic goals of the European *Bildungsroman*. However, I believe that with the knowledge of the abject, Birahima should be seen as a hybrid subject-abject figure, a deject of similar characterization to Uzodinma Iweala's narrator Agu. Birahima's subversive character is partially predetermined: the fate of his mother as a highly marginalized member of their village is then mapped onto him, and limits his options for survival. Birahima then willfully chooses a life on the margins of moral society, illustrating his retained subjectivity while living in close proximity to the abject. He seeks out and chooses a life of child-soldierdom for its real and perceived privileges on the fringes of moral society.

Many texts that discuss child-soldiering employ a first-person narrator and are modeled after the classic *Bildungsroman* genre familiar to a Western readership, therefore guaranteeing more attention in developed economies and prioritizing capital gain over the dissemination of equalizing rights norms. To challenge this trend, some authors have inserted subversive narrators into their texts to undermine the usual plot trajectory found in "coming-of-age" forms. Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah is Not Obligated* is one such novel. Young Birahima is a boy who joins a tribal militia in order to escape the impoverishment and social ostracization he experiences in his village of Togobala, Guinea. *Allah is Not Obligated* is a unique text in that it represents Birahima

as a victim of his familial and social environments, but *also* as a willful participant in civil warfare –solidifying his type as the deject figure as discussed in Chapter One. This is in contrast to the more common tack of casting child soldiers as coerced, kidnapped, or otherwise unwilling/passive combatants. I argue that Kourouma characterizes Birahima first and foremost through the village’s persecution of his broken family and disabled mother, which illustrates the environmental conditions that can drive an individual to willfully participate in child warfare.

#### ❖ CONFLICT ZONES & CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Despite the straightforward language of Article 38.2, “States Parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure that persons who have not attained the age of fifteen years do not take a direct part in hostilities,” children around the world continue to be recruited for direct participation in armed combat. As Scott Gates and Simon Reich discuss in *Security Continuum: Child Soldiers in the Age of Fractured States*, child soldiers are most often used in countries saturated in civil conflict and “remain in a perpetual state of insecurity” (6). The psychological, physical, and economic effects on a person under continued threat are well-documented: Gates and Reich cite a higher probability for individual and group criminality, unemployment, lack of education, and domestic and sexual abuse (7). A child living in conflict is more vulnerable, as “the breakdown of traditional extended familial, communal, and broader societal structures has a severe impact on them, given their greater dependence” (8). Like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which calls the family unit “the natural and fundamental group unit of society,” the Convention on the Rights of the Child places primacy on the child’s right to developing in a loving, nurturing family environment. The child’s family name assists in conferring personhood, as all children “shall be registered immediately after birth and shall have the right from birth to a name, the right to acquire a nationality and, as far as possible, the right to know and be cared for

by his or her parents” (“Office of the High Commissioner”). Living in a nation engulfed in hardship heightens the probability a child’s family and/or community will be fractured, leaving him or her with few options to meet basic needs, let alone grow up in a loving environment. This is precisely the circumstance the reader finds Birahima in: we learn that village authority consistently persecutes his mother for her disability, and the neighboring civil wars threaten the security of his nation as a whole. To escape persecution by village authority, Birahima ends up running away from home, returning only to say goodbye to his dying mother. In an effort to place Birahima in a more stable environment, his grandmother sends him to Sierra Leone to live with his Aunt. On the way, Birahima’s travel guide exposes him to the glamour and privilege of child-soldiering, something Birahima admires and aspires to. Over the course of the novel, the reader understands this choice as a result of his growing up in an unstable family and community, essentially exiled to a life of lack and pain by his own village. To better understand Birahima’s choice to live on the fringes of moral society and join the militaries of Johnson and Taylor, I turn to Julia Kristeva, who focuses heavily on both the development of the child and a given individual’s position amidst complex social structures.

#### ❖ PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY AND FAMILIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Julia Kristeva operates in the tradition of Freudian psychoanalysis, which investigates the relationships and fragmentations that occur among individuals in a traditional family structure: child, father, and mother. The instance of child development most prescient to this discussion is in regards to the Oedipal crisis, in which the positions of the child and the mother become distinct and individuated. To be brief, the Oedipal crisis solidifies the mother as *not me*, and the child ultimately rejects her. Prior to this crisis, the mother was the site of total unification, a sublime expanse of complete cohesion. The child is unable to differentiate between the self and

the mother, perceiving them as one in the same. After the child enters the Mirror stage, there's a distinct fragmentation that occurs. No longer identifying with/as the mother, the child rejects and excludes her under the watchful eye of the father, the utmost symbol of authority, order, and hierarchical categorization. Casting the mother off to a place of exile and negation is the child's first psychosexual encounter with what Kristeva terms "abjection." The child pushes the mother away in favor of acquiescing to the father's authority and from there, the child begins to build an identity that starts with *not my mother* and is constructed around abiding by the rules of the father.

Abjection, as described in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, is the undercurrent—sensed, but not easily pointed to—of disruption and deconstruction that lies beneath the safe boundaries of systematization. Not an object, as objectification has utility in delineating boundaries of *me* and *not me*, there is only one characteristic of the abject: "that of being opposed to I" (1). The abject blurs the lines of order, collapses meaning in a way that reveals all category as constructed. The abject provides brief glimpses into the porousness of identity: the child must push the mother away in order to construct his own identity, making the mother representative of the chaos and confusion that erodes order and understanding. Because identity is reliant on a subconscious pull toward categorization and away from order, we can find the abject and our repulsion of it in our daily experiences. Bodily fluids, unsanitary conditions, and lifeless bodies trigger psychosomatic impulses to expel the threat of death and chaos, to bring us back into the neat categorization of **me**, an illusory wholeness for which we are constantly searching.

These notions of exile, fragmentation, heterogeneity, chaos, negation, collapse, and borderline are what drive my reading of the child soldier, and more specifically, my reading of



Birahima in *Allah is Not Obligated*. Kourouma introduces the reader to Birahima through his relationship to his mother, making it clear that because his mother experiences the social and economic consequences of being disabled in a developing nation (and, as I will discuss, perceived as possibly demonic), Birahima understands himself as being marginalized in similar terms. In a way, this is mimetic of the child's perception of himself and his mother being unified before he reaches the Mirror stage and that essential fragmentation occurs: he bears the social consequences of his mother's disability as though they are one and the same.

#### ✧ ACKNOWLEDGING THE ABJECT IN CHILD SOLDIER NARRATIVES

The novel is first set in Togobala, Guinea, where religion is the most pervasive form of authority, penetrating all aspects of social and cultural life in the village. Birahima's introduction to this system of authority is primarily through his mother's position in the village, and how she is treated at the mercy of the village law. It is undeniable that Birahima's mother, who suffers physical disability, is discriminated against and persecuted for her visible difference. As a young girl, Birahima's mother was circumcised as Malinké culture dictates. Her wound hemorrhaged, causing her to nearly bleed out. She lived through the ordeal, but suffered atrophied muscles and an amputation because of it. Her skin developed sores and ulcers, one of which never healed and repeatedly split open with infection. In order to avoid further sores, she uses her arms, legs, and rear to scoot on their hut's dirt floor. Birahima's family, though he never describes them as such, seems to be unable to provide her with any medical accommodations like a wheelchair or crutches. She is central to the first few chapters of the text, with Birahima insisting that, to tell the story of his life as a child soldier, he must first familiarize the reader with his mother's condition. Religion is pervasively influential in Togobala culture, so her disability and physical presentation are often described in conflated terms of religious devotion and demonic association.

Birahima's hybrid identity is first expressed through personal anecdotes about his mother, the psychosexual figure upon which Kristeva's theory of abjection is allegorized. His first encounter with being an arbiter of pain, infection, and eventually, death, is enmeshed with his childhood memory and adolescent rejection of his mother.

Birahima chooses to be a child soldier with little persuasion necessary. Though he is a citizen of Guinea and an of-age tribal member, he is decidedly shirking moral and religious norms in order to live a life of chaos, destruction, and violence. Julia Kristeva gestures toward similar figures when discussing abjection. Kristeva pulls characters from French literature, most of them scheming murderers, to illustrate the forces of abjection that are present in everyday life. She identifies this murderous, subversive person as the "deject." "The one by whom the abject exists" (8) is an individual living on the borders of civil society, apart from the orderly forces of life and serving as an agent for destruction. The deject has exercised agency over his or her marginal existence and has willfully elected to live within sight of, but undoubtedly beyond, the purview of society's orderly systems. This means the deject lives in a perpetual conflict zone, maintaining a proximity to life and death that he or she must constantly negotiate with agency and intention. Abjection itself is the collapse of meaning, the repulsive undercurrent of chaos that we must push away to know and negotiate the world through social and cultural systems of order. The deject operates as a medium through which chaos ruptures order, and in so doing, fluctuates in the chasm between substance and collapse, life and death, sublime and abject. Kristeva's illustrations of the abject in literature heavily involve an undercurrent of deception, in which citizens scheme under the guise of social and moral complicity in order to shirk the normal rules of society and gain some sort of perceived or real advantage. A combination of murder and

desire is central to the deject's character: he must willingly act in a way that places him on the outermost margins of accepted codes for social and moral conduct.

Scholars have been attempting to understand the deject characterization in its literary iteration, particularly because of the interest the child soldier narrative garners. The child-soldier narrator in Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah is Not Obligated* is written as a deject: driven to child warfare in Sierra Leone due to economic hardship, but nonetheless voluntary, Birahima is a deject with a distinctive voice, a brash subjectivity that jars readers and challenges generic convention. As a deject, Birahima is a liminal figure: his proximity to the abject is undeniable, yet he is able to maintain subjectivity and speak from the borderlines of social exile, making clear his continued willingness to participate in child warfare. However, this perpetrator is also a victim: Birahima's choice to enter into the wars is fueled by his systemic marginalization within the power structures of his village, pushing him to the chaotic fringes of social, economic, and religious normativity. In his village, being located on the fringes of normativity earned him ostracization, condemnation, and the intense familial suffering that comes with the ever-present threat of persecution. In the glamorous militaries of Taylor and Johnson, however, his fringe identification and behavior earns him privilege. Thus, it is my argument that Birahima's victimization by the suffocating systems of power in his village prompted his willful entrance into child soldierdom, effectively giving him a hybrid character: that of the deject.

Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah is Not Obligated* pushes the boundaries of narrator characterization in depicting Birahima as having choice, something essential to the deject's existence. However, I believe focusing on the environmental conditions outside of the narrator's control will help readers to better understand the variables that result in the choice to join a tribal militia as a child. Environmental conditions, like the child's position in village society, his access

to resources, and his family life, limit his options for survival. The question comes down to a simple dichotomy: does Birahima remain on the margins of his society and continue to struggle to live a dignified life in the village, or does he move further away from complicity in systems of order and benefit from the privileges given to young children who wield Kalishnikovs in times of civil war? To underscore the importance of the child-soldier deject's voice, the tool he possesses to express himself within and through abjection, an exploration of the character must start by first placing trust in his self-identification. Birahima signifies himself as deject first by describing his relationship with his now-deceased mother, whom he refers to in the French *maman*. My exploration will focus on how *maman*'s social position is crucial to understanding the multi-layered marginalization Birahima experiences at the hands of village authority.

#### ✧ BIRAHIMA'S MAMAN: THE PREMISE FOR SYSTEMATIC PERSECUTION

In psychoanalytic thought, the initial rejection of the mother is what signals a child's passage into the Symbolic: by pushing away from the mother, the child begins to form a separate identity from her, one driven by the authority of the Father and his Laws. Though he does not have a father's influence, as he died when Birahima was a baby, he is well aware of the types of authority and Law imposed upon his and his mother's lives. Birahima accesses an understanding of his place within systems of authority by watching his mother's violent entrapment as a marginalized citizen within them, and, as an extension of his mother by kinship, begins to understand himself as similarly marginalized. Birahima and his *maman*'s location on the limits of normative Togobala society is multi-layered and palimpsestic, oppressing and determining for him a life of poverty and social ostracization. After witnessing his mother's suffering and identifying himself as both an arbiter and receiver of it, Birahima willfully chooses a life on the margins, one that incorporates *some* facet of perceived or comparative privilege. This attempt at

maintaining agency through self-exile solidifies Birahima's trajectory into child-soldierdom and an existence hovering on the outskirts of society, serving the force of horror and chaos: abjection.

The narrative is mostly a travel log, as Birahima journeys to his Aunt's house after his mother dies, crossing through conflict-ridden territories to do so. Birahima finds it incredibly important to recount the events that led up to his time "in Liberia and Sierra Leone where I was a child doing tribal warfare, and where I got fucked-up on lots of hard drugs" (4), much of which includes his relationship with his mother and his experience in Togobala living with her. As Kristeva would agree, examining a child's relationship to his mother is integral to understanding how he negotiates systems of law and order. It is clear from the outset that Birahima's association to his disabled mother helps inform him of his options in life, and lays out the choices he has before him for survival. The first, most important thing he needs the reader to know is that his mother lived with a noticeable disability: his *maman* moved around "on the two cheeks of her arse. She propped herself up on her hands and her left leg" (6). Birahima's memories of his mother are characterized by suffering, punctuated with moments of joy. Birahima's childhood was painful for his mother, physically injuring her with his toddling:

I was crawling around all over the place and getting into everything. Sometimes, I'd fall on to *maman*'s ulcer and she'd howl with the pain. The ulcer would start bleeding.

*Maman* would howl like a hyena with its paws caught in the teeth of a wolf trap. She would start crying. *Maman* had too many tears, the corners of her eyes were always full of tears and her throat was always full of sobs suffocating her. (9)

*Maman*'s legs were injured and vulnerable, one described as a "shepherd's crook," the other a "crushed serpent's head" that bore the burden of an un-healing lesion the Larousse lexicon describes as "necrosis of tissue" (5-6). The dichotomy of shepherd and serpent is a familiar one

to those in the Judeo-Christian tradition, referring to the imagery of Christ and Satan, respectively. It is also consistent with Julia Kristeva's description of the relationship between the abject and systems of order: what control is to chaos, the sublime is to abjection (*Powers* 11). Within the same vein of religious rhetoric, one would say this ulcer was Birahima's maman's cross to bear. Or, as Birahima's Muslim grandmother constantly proclaimed, Allah had "ordained [maman] to be miserable on earth" (9). As biblical embodiment, between her Christ-like and demonic legs, maman's body lay suspended between damnation and salvation. This echoes her precarious situation in the eyes of the village authorities, teetering on the material and symbolic planes of abjection. Birahima's first memory of his mother involves physical harm and moral suffering, and therefore sets a precedent for the continued realization of himself through similar terms. The judgment of his village, which is guided heavily in terms of religious doctrine and a certain amount of predestination, solidifies Birahima and his mother as socially marginalized.

#### ❖ THE ABJECT AND THE SUBLIME: MAMAN AS DEMON AND MARTYR

To his village, Birahima is a child conceived and borne of a woman who lived a life of bad omen, entering the world from a womb between the physical embodiments of damnation and salvation that were her amputated, atrophied, and withered limbs. The child asks readers to travel back with him in time, "prior to her circumcision" (14), that prompts the narrator to release all the information he has on the various religious sects found in the surrounding territories, falling somewhere on a scale from "pious Muslim" to "pagan animist" (16). He continues with an entire explication of various lineage and tribal tendencies to fall on a spectrum of religiosity and doctrinal devotion, which can be boiled down to an essentially "really good" and "really bad" child's understanding of moral fortitude. It becomes clear that, to live in Togobala means to

understand and participate in a penetrative religious practice, one that is both inclusive and judgmental of variants. As the reader's point of access to the complex systems of colonized and indigenous power systems is this child, the religious mechanisms of his culture remain ethereal and intangible to the reader, making it difficult to locate where, exactly, he and his family lie within the larger social structure of the village.

However, as Birahima recalls his upbringing, it becomes clearer that maman's disability places her on the fringe of normative social standings and religious devotion, the two being inextricably linked in Birahima's village. The reader is soon informed that maman's disability occurred during her circumcision ceremony, a rite of passage for Malinké women that ensures eligibility for marriage and status as an adult member of the tribe. Birahima offers an explanation for her injury, essentially a conflation of two possible events that contributed to his mother's injuries, one a medical explanation and the other mystical. This reflects a pattern of medical and spiritual/religious explanations coexisting in the collective memory of the tribe. Because maman became injured prior to Birahima's conception and birth, the reader can imply that Birahima is repeating the explanation(s) told to him by village or familial kin. The explanation is this: out of the group of girls chosen to undergo excision, Birahima claims that the ritual performer, or "djinn," usually chooses the most beautiful for sacrifice. This justification is in contrast to his previous explanation, in which Birahima mentions that once all the girls were excised, maman was the only one whose blood would not clot. He then goes on to claim that maman, whose beauty was of epic proportions, was the one chosen for sacrifice. These two explanations, one of acute blood loss and the other of divine intervention, indicate to the tribal members that maman lived a life of poor omen. It is never clear to the reader if she was purposely injured for a ritual sacrifice, or if this was simply an unexpected complication. The fact that it does not seem to

matter underscores the significance of maman's ambiguous categorization as both martyr and demon – either way, she is perceived as *other*, beyond the scope of what is deemed a normative Togobala existence.

As a primer of our culture, and all aspects of our cultural identities, it follows that wherever there is religion, there is abjection. Kristeva concisely surmises this paradox, stating

Abjection appears as a rite of defilement and pollution in the paganism that accompanies societies with a dominant or surviving matrilinear character. It takes on the form of the *exclusion* of a substance (nutritive or linked to sexuality), the execution of which coincides with the sacred since it sets it up. (17)

This description of a sublime religious ideology contingent upon the recognition and exclusion of the abject closely aligns with Birahima's description of the religious mechanisms at work in his village. Maman's disability prevents her from following the proper social processes a young woman should perform: it arrests her ability to participate in social normalcy. The reader knows she sustained clear injuries from the excision ceremony, but she nonetheless survived it.

Problematically, the pre-ordained outcome of the ceremony should have been either coming-of-age and unification with the tribe, or sacrificial, god-condoned death. This alternative result, that maman was neither sacrificed nor achieved full passage into adulthood with a healed circumcision, can be either seen as an evil circumvention of Allah's will or simultaneously pitiable and admirable martyrdom. Both categorizations mark her as someone who cannot fully participate in the social and cultural life of the village, diminishing her personhood in the eyes of the familial and religious authorities.

For the Malinké tribe, the rites of excision and cleansing serve as both indigenous and Islamic mechanisms to rid the participant of their chaos and sin, to commit them to Allah while



fulfilling the necessity for a rite of passage as an adult tribal member. As John Walsh concisely states, Birahima's village employs a "fusion of an animist belief system with Islam" that "plays a major role in the daily lives of [his] extended families" (186), as religion is inseparable from individual and collective identity. As both indigenous and Islamic practices coexist in the village, religion is tied to both familial and national belonging, penetrating the social, cultural, and governing institutions of the village. These layered hegemonic systems are what engulf Birahima's maman, and Birahima recognizes how these systems affect her in a complex, almost ungraspable way: they essentially place her both in exile and entrapment, denying her full belonging in the village and keeping her in sight as a function of otherness. Birahima, in identifying with his mother, perceives his position of liminality through her.

To further complicate the village perception of Birahima and his family, Maman was widely known as being a participant in a non-traditional marriage, and community members considered it in their explanations of her perpetual ailments. Because she was visibly disabled, and unable to provide an income for her family, Birahima's maman had to resort to non-traditional means to ensure economic security for her family. After Birahima's father died, his mother was, traditionally, to be transferred over to her brother-in-law as a wife. Birahima's uncle, Issa, was not willing to marry his sister-in-law: "he was always saying cruel things about my father and my grandmother and even my grandfather...and anyway Issa didn't want a wife who walked around on her arse with her rotting leg stuck up in the air" (22). So, the family determined "the tradition didn't count" (22). Because the doctrine of the village religious leaders proclaimed that maman had to be married within a year of her husband's death, she chose her mystic healer to wed. Her healer, who Birahima calls Balla, visits the hut every day to tend to maman's wounds and spend time with Birahima. The village and family authorities determine

that maman would marry Balla in defiance of the village, who “were all dead set against the marriage because Balla was a Bambara kaffir [non-doctrinal practitioner of Islam] who didn’t perform the five daily prayers and didn’t fast during Ramadan” (23). In agreeing to wed Balla, maman entered into an unordained marriage, confirming her family’s *othered* status and ensuring them further consequences for being on the lowest rungs of society.

The enmeshment of religious and social authority in the village wrought suffering for Birahima’s mother and family at all institutional levels. Even in seeking medical help, authorities punish the family for their existence outside normative social practices. After denying maman help for her ulcer, “the nurse said that what maman was suffering from was not a toubab [European] disease, it was a Black Nigger African Native disease. A disease that the medicine and the science of the white man could not cure” (17). Maman’s past actions and marginalized designation as disabled, disfigured, and broken are all written into her medical prognosis. Her marginalization is writ large, denying her the privileged attention of doctors trained in Western medicine. She is refused treatment, and told that ““Only the grigris [medallions] of an African healer can heal your wound. If [the surgeon] operates on your leg, you will die, absolutely die, you will die like a dog” (17-18). To compound the significance of this refusal, Birahima justifies the outcome by stating that his mother was turned away by a nurse who “was a Muslim and could not tell a lie” (18). As Birahima illustrates, his maman’s suffering is condoned by organized religion, accepted by the village, and perpetuated by the competing power systems of social and ethical normativity.

Birahima witnessed his mother’s pendulum swing toward the horizon of death and demonism only to be pulled back toward the living and morally righteous through various medicinal and spiritual rituals meant to save her leg and her life. The failure of these herbal

decoctions and blessings sent her health and moral characterization swinging back toward death once again, re-opening her wound and necessitating explanations of how she must have, in some way, made a moral failing for which she is bearing the consequences.

The social ostracization and hardship Birahima experiences because of his mother's disability causes him to express his own identity through the more superficial parallels of injury and healing. This gestures toward the more ephemeral concept of his living a liminal existence, a subject-bject position fostered by a brutalizing public discourse unable to locate him or his mother within normative modes of social understanding. Birahima uses the village's doctrine-infused language to speak about his own existence, which is significant when considering his proximity to the abject and sublime. Birahima's proximity to abjection works on both sociocultural and material levels, and the reader understands him through these terms by his articulated reflexivity: essentially, we know about it because he *tells* us.

The linguistic expression of hybridity, of being both subject and abject, is evidence of Birahima's retained autonomy. In considering the Symbolic, and more specifically, the margins of order, linguistic construction is our only referent to the unattainable truth of reality. Consider Kristeva's introductory answer to the question, "Defilement—A Social Elaboration of the Borderline Patient?" In harkening back to the foundations of Lacanian linguistic theory, she asks the reader to consider, "Basic symbolic institutions; such as *sacrifice* or *myths*" which allow for a communal and individuated understanding of a given person's compliance with social and cultural codes of conduct (72). In the grand narratives of religion and national history, one can find a safe niche, a position that helps them make decisions and stay in good standing with authority. As language is substantive of one's consciousness and contingent humanity, so it is influenced and influences the extension of the self-community, that which establishes the

referential circuit of self-expression and hierarchical placement. Birahima internalizes the spoken reality of his community members, and articulates how easily his mother's status, whether self-perceived or that of the community, is molded and oppressed by palimpsestic systems of authority. This authority, "through frustrations and prohibitions... shapes the body into a *territory*" with markers that signal a "differentiation of proper-clean and improper- dirty, possible and impossible" (72). At any given time, Birahima's mother is passively situated within these frameworks, physically and socially unable to lay claim to her own identity; perceived as unorthodox, unclean, and unworthy of medical interventions to alleviate her suffering. As a function of othering to the village, Birahima's maman struggles to locate herself within the constructions of the phallic authority that rules over every aspect of village life: from medicine to marriage.

#### ❖ THE TRANSFERENCE OF OBJECT ASSOCIATION THROUGH KINSHIP

Collective tribal memory is passed down to Birahima from his grandmother and mother, and now to readers: understood through a perceived brokenness and linked to moral weakness/fortitude, the narrator sets the foundation for his characterization through the simultaneously nourishing and infectious effects of his mother's milk. Birahima ultimately rejects his mother, opting to live on the street instead of in their hut. As a baby, Birahima embraced a life filled with the pleasant stink of his maman and grandmother's excretions and fluids, the putrid and comforting scents of an open wound and herbed goat meat. But as he became more cognizant of his mother's position in the village, of her history with the tribe and her diminutive position within the power structures of the region, Birahima began pushing her away. In an effort to dissociate himself from his mother and her apparently evil nature, Birahima removes himself from the home and opts to live *even further* on the margins of society. A willful

orphan, Birahima attempts to win the admiration of his village by displacing himself from his demonic mother, who, among other rumors, was said to eat her own leg and the souls of her neighbors at night.

After a failed interaction with a village healer that did damage to maman's social and health statuses, the rumors about Birahima's maman become unbearable for the young boy, who reports his own mother as "the leader of the soul-eaters" who would "devour souls...and even devour her own ulcer. That was why the ulcer never healed" (20). The rumors explain medical professionals' unwillingness to treat her, as her sorcery is "why the ulcer never healed. No one in the world could ever heal her ulcer because every night my mother devoured souls and devoured her own rotting leg" (20). Such a grotesque description illustrates the primary example Kristeva provides as an experience with the abject: an attempt to ingest something perceived as toxic or infectious, which should be followed with the psychosomatic impulse to gag and expel the threat of death. Instead, Birahima's maman is reportedly ingesting her own diseased leg, finding sustenance through illness and death. This rumor is the final judgment for Birahima, who can no longer bear the burden of his mother's reputation. After being told this news by, assumingly, people he knows and trusts, Birahima is beside himself with sorrow. He decides to abandon his mother and dissociate from her demonism: "on the morning of the fifth day, I left maman's hut forever and decided that I was never going to eat with maman ever again" (20). He lives life on the street, homeless, stealing for sustenance and venturing into the woods. It is not until Birahima hears of his mother's death that he returns to his hut, to see his grandmother and mourn his maman.

A village faith leader, the Imam, is in the hut tending to maman's body and giving consolation to the family. Consider the profound, even laughable confusion embodied in the language of the following explanation for maman's death, afforded to the reader in Birahima's words:

My maman died because Allah wanted her back. The imam said that a devout Muslim isn't allowed to criticize Allah or say anything bad about him. Then he said that my mother didn't die of magic, she died of her ulcer[...] and because the time Allah had accorded her on earth was up[...]Then the imam said that what the filthy old kaffirs had said was not true. He said it wasn't true that maman used to magically eat away at her rotting ulcer at night. But it didn't placate me and I started crying for my mum all over again. Then the imam said that I had not been kind to maman. (24)

First, we see a predetermination by Allah to take maman back to heaven, the initial explanation offered to Birahima. He is reminded that he cannot be angry at Allah, because devout Muslims do not criticize or blame or say anything negatively about the highest authority. Remember that, at this point, it is well-established that Birahima and his family are anything but devout Muslims: as a result of his mother's disability, they were unable to follow orthodox Muslim doctrine. He is then told that, in fact, the ostracization they were facing was totally unfounded: his mother was not dying of a magic demon that lived within her, it was a combination of Allah's will and her chronic illness. This means that, not only did Birahima, maman, grandmother, and Balla suffer the social, medical, and economic consequences of being seen as non-normative, non-devout practitioners of Islam; but, Birahima's attempt to escape this marginalization by leaving his mother was *not* going to be perceived as a positive dissociation by society. Instead of rejecting

his demonic kin in attempt to seek salvation, Birahima abandoned his suffering mother at the end of her life, an existentially punishable offense in the eyes of the religious and village authorities.

From the beginning of his relationship with her, and the beginning of his life, Birahima has known and lived in proximity to the material threats of sickness, illness, and death: the symbolic experiences of the abject, the rotting ulcers and bodily fluids of one with chronic illness, living without community support and unable to receive proper medical attention. He has understood and withstood the consequences of living in marginalized oppression of religious and social authority, the two experiences inextricable. This realization, that he has abandoned his mother at her greatest time of need, occurs to Birahima with inconsolable force, and the narrator's material enmeshment with the abject becomes clearer than ever. Birahima remarks that, "Even now it hurts, it burns my heart every time I think about maman's death because I think maman really wasn't a witch who devoured souls and that makes me remember the night she died" (24). In discussing this night, he refers to his mother as already corpse-like, as starting "to rot away, to really rot away" (25). He sleeps next to her decomposing body, and "in the morning, maman's fingers were holding on to my arm so tight that Balla and my grandmother and another woman had to use all their strength to drag me away from my mother" (25). Birahima's last memories of his mother are of her corpse, and the physiological realities of rigor mortis impressed on his living body.

#### ❖ THE DEJECT AS EXTENDING TRADITIONAL NARRATIVE TROPES

Birahima's deject character, however, includes a necessary proximity to the abject *and* articulated subjectivity. The deject figure is one who willfully lives in the chaotic margins of society, using law and order as a veil under which he may operate as that through which the abject exists. While much of Birahima's exile from normative society is out of his control, he

makes it clear that he expresses willful subjectivity at two pivotal moments: first, his abandonment of his mother after hearing rumors of her demonic magic; and second, in his pursuit of a position in the militaries of Johnson and Taylor in Liberia. As illustrated, Birahima comes to regret his choice to dissociate from his mother; but his willful entrance into child-soldierdom is articulated through consistent and audible agency. His unique voice, which punctuates the story with Malinké curse words and dictionary definitions from *La Rousse Lexicon* to help less-educated readers, has piqued the curiosity of many literary critics. Maureen Moynagh is one such critic who has noted his unique voice, attributing Kourouma's style to the novel as written in the picaresque tradition. While Moynagh's investigation renders many fruitful observations, she neglects to consider the importance of Birahima's relationship with his mother as being central to his liminality.

Maureen Moynagh discusses Birahima in an investigation into the generic features of child-soldier narratives and its contributions to the public imaginary regarding tribal warfare. Moynagh's essay, "Human Rights, Child-Soldier Narratives, and the Problem of Form" casts Birahima as pícaro. The picaresque genre originates in 16<sup>th</sup> century Spain, and portrays what M.H. Abrams defines in his *Glossary of Literary Terms* "the escapades of an insouciant rascal who lives by his wits and shows little if any alteration of character through the long succession of his adventures" (191). Termed after the Spanish for "rogue" (*pícaro*), the genre is both satiric and comedic, exposing the contradictions of society through laughable episodes that highlight the disconnect between reality and our ideal (unrealistic) perceptions of it. One of the most famous picaresque novels, Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, is noted as a "quasi-picaresque" (191) text foundational to the modern novel's emergence in Victorian-era Britain. Birahima



certainly fits the pícaro mold: the nonsense explanations he gives for his mother's disability, and the justifications for the village's persecution of his family, are absurd at their core.

As Angela Hague notes, the most ubiquitous understanding of the pícaro is Claudio Guillen's "Toward a Definition of the Pícaresque," which casts the pícaro as an individual in conflict with his "inwardness and experience," (212) "an outsider who must function in an environment 'for which he is not prepared'" (212). The narrator must negotiate between inner concealment of the self and an outward performance of social roles, inserting philosophical musings on the irony of an impersonator playing a role, and society believing him. This negotiation puts the pícaro in the position of inserting personal musings on the machinations of society, an outsider positionality that "'offers no synthesis of human life'" (Guillen as qtd. in Hague 213). Since this figure takes on different iterations dependent upon the fluctuating sociocultural environment in which it is produced, Moynagh goes on to further define Birahima's embodiment of the pícaro, a subversive character that distorts the idyllic goals of the *Bildungsroman* and reveals the illusion of civic and social order. In response to many readings of *Allah is Not Obligated as Bildungsroman*, Moynagh believes Birahima distorts the lofty, transcendent end-point of the *Bildungsroman*. One can recognize the pícaro in that he ends exactly where he started: "he does not develop; instead, he comes full circle, back to his already fallen point of departure" (51). While it may be clear to the reader that Birahima is not in any better a position at the end of the novel than he was at the start, Birahima has gained a considerable amount of control over his life, something unavailable to him in his mother's hut. This is no small aspect when considering the environmental conditions that limit an individual's options, compelling them to join militias at such a young age. Control is inherently linked to choice, and an examination of the narrator without due consideration of his relationship with his

mother and the persecution he experienced in association to her is inadequate in fully understanding how one may *choose* a life on the outermost limits of social and moral codes: the life of the child soldier.

✧ CONSIDERING CHOICE AND CONTROL: THE POWER OF PRIVILEGE IN EXILE

Moynagh's reading of Birahima as pícaro is not necessarily in challenge to the characteristics of the deject as set forth in the introduction, but it stops short of recognizing the source of the child's willful liminality: his mother. In the reading the child soldier as picaresque, the character is outside of social norms and processes, beyond the space of integration. The pícaro happily teeters in a constructed state of "arrested development," creating for himself an identity in opposition to progress that revels in a perpetual stuntedness. Birahima is a "moralizing" pícaro, one who "deplores his abject life in the name of a higher law that he is unable to respect" (Pavel as qtd. in Moynagh 52). This type of "moralizing" occurs when Birahima calls attention to the deplorable existence he willingly lives, always in the rhetoric of religion, damnation, and salvation. Moynagh believes Birahima "recognizes the absence of divine justice in his world; Yet he persists, despite his lack of education and his "bad French," in his efforts to make some kind of meaning out of the moral economy into which he has been plunged" (52).

Birahima calls out the depravity of his situation using the necessarily religious language of his village to do so – something he learned by listening to and repeating the myths surrounding his mother's illness. Moynagh echoes his rhetoric, stating that he is "damned," living in "the absence of divine justice" and contending with the "moral economy into which he has been plunged," yet she does not recognize the person responsible for his introduction to this moral economy. Birahima identifies himself through the languages of religion and defilement,

the dichotomous dialect of his village, learned by listening to their judgments and contradictory explanations for his mother's suffering.

While edging toward a more ambiguous understanding of the figure with which readers might contend, Moynagh's reading stops short of discussing the access point of Birahima's subject-object position: his introduction to, and further marginalization within, the complex power systems at work in his village. This point of access is designated as such by both cultural and social constructions, his first introduction to them through his mother's position in the village. In experiencing her wrought existence within the religious and ableist systems of power, Birahima opts to locate himself outside of it, rejecting his mother, his religion, and devoting himself to an object existence as an alternative to his undoubtedly precarious position within layered power systems. This is the choice of the child, who was once victim of social, religious, and economic ostracization but who later, with agency, lives willfully on the outskirts of society and speaks from a position of not only abjection and exile, but one of privilege.

Birahima's borderline existence in his village caused a hyper-awareness of hierarchical placement and the punishments or privileges associated with said placement. This is consistent with Kristeva's theoretical deject, who, "instead of sounding himself as to his "being," he does so concerning his place: 'Where am I?' instead of 'Who am I?' For the space that engrosses the deject, the excluded, is never *one*, nor *homogeneous*, nor *totalizable*, but essentially divisible, fold-able, and catastrophic" (8). Birahima's journey toward child-soldierdom is represented as a geopolitical journey: he travels to Liberia from Guinea, initially in an attempt to find his aunt, but decides to join a rebel faction along the way. He travels, quite literally, across the ethnic, linguistic, and territorial disputes fragmenting many West African states, confronting the catastrophic wars and systems as he goes.

The premise for the journey is to bring Birahima from the margins of normative existence and into the more ordered systems of citizenry. In the eyes of the village he had failed to follow social guidelines. Birahima admits he, “never went to the French school or even to the Qur’anic school,” instead “skipping classes to be a street kid or go hunting in the forests with Balla” (28). Even the adult supervision of Balla is seen negatively, as he was “teaching [Birahima] hunting and animism and magic instead of... the holy word of Allah from the Qur’an” (28). Afraid that Birahima would “grow up to be a Bambara kaffir... and not a proper Malinké who performs the five daily prayers,” (28) his grandmother sends him with an escort across the border of Guinea, through Sierra Leone to Liberia.

Birahima and his guide, Yacouba, have similar tendencies, and both shirk normative moral practice in order to embrace a life of chaos and exile. We learn Yacouba is a conman, who frequently robs people of their investments and smuggles illegal goods from village to village. He tells Birahima of the glamorous factions of child soldiers found in Liberia, and the young boy quickly grasps their privileges, from “money...even American dollars” to “shoes and stripes and radios and helmets and even cars that they call four-by-fours” (37). Upon this realization, Birahima shouts in child-like excitement, “*Walahe! Walahe!* I want to go to Liberia. Right now this minute. I want to be a child-soldier, a small-soldier” (37). Thus, Birahima automatically locates the child soldier in a privileged position: though corrupt and morally ignoble, but certainly no less outcast, he would undoubtedly be in a place with more benefits than he currently experiences. According to Yacouba’s promises, Birahima’s life as a child soldier would reap him no more scrutiny from society as his life as his mother’s child did, but would award him with the economic advancement and physical power that were refused him by the authorities of Togobala.

Birahima's choice to join the tribal factions is well-informed: in another obvious gesture of agency, Birahima guides the reader through a researched discussion of the current wartime climate in Liberia. The reader better sees how Birahima's past as a "street kid", his time on the lowest, most marginalized rungs of Togobala society, affords him privilege and safety on the even further margins of society and civilized warfare. Birahima's subjectivity is retained, and even bolstered, through articulations that illustrate his knowledge-based choices. He is well-versed in the history of non-government factions, naming the "four big important warlords: Doe, Taylor, Johnson, and Hajji Koroma" (44) and the resulting economic effects of their waged destruction, noting, "the small-soldiers don't get paid. They just kill people and steal everything worth stealing...so as they have enough to eat and all the other stuff they need, [they] sell off everything they steal really cheap. That's why in Liberia you can get everything really cheap" (44). Birahima voices the benefits of socially subversive economic practices in an elementary yet sound way. It seems as though further marginalization of oneself, and further enmeshment in the subversive chaos of tribal warfare, will earn Birahima more privilege than he could ever imagine by abiding by the normative social and moral codes of his village.

As Kristeva claims of the deject, "the stray considers himself equivalent to a Third Party. He secures the latter's judgment, he acts on the strength of its power in order to condemn, he grounds himself on its law to tear the veil of oblivion but also to set up its object as inoperative" (9). Birahima makes clear the structure of the tribal militia is loosely based on existing political and military operations, but is only used as a means to allow further chaos and destruction to exist. An arbitrary, pseudo-structure, "is skewed, a topology of catastrophe" (Kristeva 9). The scene in which Birahima describes sentencing and criminal prosecution in Liberia under the tribal militias illustrates this 'topology of catastrophe,' a thinly veiled "system" that acts as a

justification for the continued destruction of order. The child soldier benefits from the illusion of order, making it all the easier to engage in and benefit from dis-order. Although Birahima makes it known that stealing and thievery are pervasive practices necessary for survival, being caught doing so won't thieves the death sentence. In Senniquellie (Liberia),

[The convicts are] tied to wooden stakes and they're blindfolded(...)Then they're shot dead, to the applause of the lively, cheerful crowd. And in spite of everything, yes in spite of everything, some of the people watching are surprised to discover that, while they were clapping, thieves relieved them of their wallets because there are so many thieves in Senniquellie that executing a bunch of them won't serve as a lesson for the rest. (101)

And thus, the deject benefits from both the *veil* of order and systems, and the underlying chaos of abjection frothing beneath it. Birahima is distinctive and deviant from the generic conventions of child-soldier narratives: he resists the categorization of victim, and reiterates his subjectivity from the margins of the Symbolic in a deliberate, disruptive manner.

#### ❖ CONCLUSION: HUMANITY, SUBJECTIVITY, AND ABJECTION

Unafraid to discuss the paradoxical operations of his militia, Birahima revels in the rewards he reaps from them and is wholly unapologetic about it. Despite this, Kristeva makes clear the deject is not inhuman – he has the capacity to recognize, assimilate and participate in normative society; the revolution of his character is found in the fact that he *chooses not to*. Our tendencies to push the abject away from us are beneficial to the deject: we do not examine him too closely, we do not consider he may be something *like* us. This allows him to operate at the margins of chaos, negotiating this position between life and death at a relatively unobstructed pace. By hearing the deject, however, we are forced to contextualize him. This deject in particular, Birahima, takes great pains to explain his history, viewpoints, and choices to the

reader. He includes moments of great humor and trickery throughout his narrative of violence and death, allowing the reader to laugh *with* him despite the horrific circumstances. By allowing the deject his subjectivity, and creating a connection between the reader and the narrator, it is possible to find identification with him: confronting the component of his character that is steeped in *choice* is not far from asking oneself, “Would *I* choose the same?”

In Chapter One, I discussed Agu’s material proximity to and active engagement with the abject in Uzodinma Iweala’s *Beasts of No Nation*. Iweala’s refusal to safeguard readers from the violent acts child soldiers willfully commit challenges the literary trends of sanitizing content to better serve Western audience preferences. It subverts the normative prioritization of comfort over realism to jar readers into questioning the easily consumable, black-and-white portrayals of child soldiers as absolute victims. In Kourouma’s *Allah is Not Obligated*, the focus on the narrator’s relationship to his mother not only furthers identification between the narrator and the reader— as all readers had a mother once— but also activates a critical delineation between what is in the child soldier’s control and what is outside of it. By focusing on the environmental conditions outside of his control, one may better understand the push-factors in his decision to join the tribal militias. To understand Birahima’s perception of the privileges he may earn on the outermost edge of order and chaos, it is crucial to first critically examine the systemic oppression that drove him further to the margins. Birahima’s combined marginalization by religious, social, and economic authority left him with little choice, but a choice nonetheless.

Kristeva’s theory of the abject, and this extended examination of the deject’s origins, have the potential to open up the liminal space between order and chaos. The existence of child militias is a rupture in the human rights environment, a multi-faceted system of authority that draws on religious, social, and economic understandings of justice and morality. While it may be

easier to categorize such instances as phenomena from a geopolitical distance, the reality is that there are observable conditions at work in the sociocultural context of these rights abuses that make the choice of child-soldierdom all the more appealing for participants. This, of course, is assuming that those involved in child militias are viewed *as* participants, those who have exercised choice over their lives in the only capacity they are allowed. The more participants are rendered in multi-faceted characterizations, in as much variety as there are victims, participants, and every categorization in-between, the more likely readers will begin conceptualizing the international rights environment as it is, not as it should be.

The international imperative is to make sure these child soldiers will no longer have to serve as soldiers. But as Agu reminds us, war ensures they will never be children again. If we are to understand child soldiers as passive victims, unable to lay claim to the choices before them, what agency do they have in their own rehabilitation? Disarmament, Demobilization, and Rehabilitation programs, put in place by organizations like the United Nations and UNICEF (Katz) are meant to provide former child soldiers a sense of purpose and value in re-committing to the social and moral mainstream of their societies. However, the majority of Westerners engaged with human rights literatures have a distilled view of the child-soldier experience in warfare according to simple dichotomies.

Brigit Katz notes the programs initiated by Western organizations often fail to adequately address the range of difficulties involved in disarming former child soldiers because they are informed by rigid, gendered ideas of innocence and aggression. Katz recognizes that difficulties with rehabilitation are further complicated with female child soldiers, a demographic of combatant that continues to slip even further through the cracks of NGO programs. Girls are attracted to the opportunity to rise in military rank, where they “transform from frightened



recruits to vicious fighters, emboldened by a sort of power that they would not have acquired in the patriarchal communities where they were raised” (n. page). In essence, organizations are asking combatants to give up the privilege and power unavailable to them in normative society in order to reintegrate into a community that is both unstable and judgmental of its own citizens for their involvement in warfare (Katz). If predominantly Western organizations and authority were to confront the compounded liminality of the child soldier’s existence, they may be able to better address the obstacles in reintegrating those who knowingly and willingly choose to commit violence against their fellow community members. Conversely, it may assist in better equipping communities to re-absorb former child soldiers and entrust them with civic responsibility. I believe this abject-focused research should logically extend to a gendered space, where the female child soldier’s relation to the abject could be a tripartite investigation. It would be prudent to consider first her gender role in Freudian psychosexual development, then her material proximity to the abject in combat, and finally the compounded marginalization she faces in the village environment; her gender inevitably altering the latter two considerations. I believe a more gendered framework could expand this understanding of the deject in illuminating ways.

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