Representing the Trauma of Child Soldiers:
Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone* and Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation*

Supervisor: Dr. Philippe Codde

Paper submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of “Master in de Taal- en Letterkunde: Engels”

By Evi Anthonissen

August 2009
Acknowledgements

I first read Ishmael Beah’s memoir *A Long Way Gone: The True Story of a Child Soldier* last year in preparation for an exam. It was included in the reading list of the course “English Literature III: More Recent Period. Literary Witnessing in Cross-Cultural Perspective” which was taught by Dr. Stef Craps. I passed the exam and put the book on one of the shelves of my bookcase, but I could not forget it. I continued thinking about the content of the memoir and during the summer I came up with the idea that maybe I could use the book for my master’s thesis. My supervisor, Dr. Philippe Codde, then pointed out to me that I perhaps could contrast this memoir with a trauma novel. I chose *Beasts of No Nation* by Uzodinma Iweala and after reading this powerful novel, I decided that these two books would form the core of my master’s thesis. I was intrigued by how two completely different styles can both accurately portray the same traumatic experience.

First of all, I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Philippe Codde, for his good advice, for his corrections in the chapters that I sent and for keeping my interest in trauma studies alive with the course “Postmemory and Postmodern: Third Generation Jewish American Trauma Narratives.” I would also like to thank Dr. Stef Craps for kindling my interest in trauma studies and for bringing me into contact with Beah’s memoir. My thanks to my parents for being patient with me and for inventing the rule that students do not have to help in the household. I would especially like to thank my mother for proofreading every chapter and for always keeping me positive by asserting after each part that it was “very good.” My thanks to my boyfriend for listening to me and giving me good advice during the difficult moments. My thanks also to my friends and particularly to those who were writing their master’s thesis as well.
Table of Contents

1. Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 4

2. Theoretical Framework ........................................................................................................... 6
   2.1. Definition .......................................................................................................................... 6
   2.2. Trauma Studies: a Historical Survey ................................................................................ 7
   2.3. Contemporary Trauma Studies ......................................................................................... 13
   2.4. Trauma and Testimony .................................................................................................... 21
   2.5. Literature and Trauma ..................................................................................................... 28

3. Autobiography: Trauma, Truth and Fiction ............................................................................ 30

4. Introduction to Child Soldiers .............................................................................................. 38

5. Ishmael Beah: A Long Way Gone: The True Story of a Child Soldier ............................... 46
   5.1. Introduction ...................................................................................................................... 46
   5.2. A Long Way Gone and LaCapra’s Trauma Theory .......................................................... 47
   5.3. Controversy: Memoir and Truth ....................................................................................... 60
   5.4. Ishmael Beah’s Social Objective ....................................................................................... 64

6. Uzodinma Iweala: Beasts of No Nation ................................................................................ 67
   6.1. Introduction ...................................................................................................................... 67
   6.2. Trauma Fiction and Post-traumatic Techniques ................................................................. 67
   6.3. Agu’s Struggle for His Humanity ..................................................................................... 73
   6.4. The Possibility of Redemption ......................................................................................... 78

7. Conclusion ............................................................................................................................ 81
1. **Introduction**

In my master dissertation, I will discuss two representatives of African trauma literature: *A Long Way Gone: The True Story of a Child Soldier* by Ishmael Beah and *Beasts of No Nation* by Uzodinma Iweala. Even though these two authors use different narrative forms, they both deal with the topic of child soldiers and the traumatic effects of this experience. The two writers also share their desire to bring attention to this problem and to make Western readers understand this terrible and alien experience. According to Madelaine Hron, one has a better chance of accomplishing this goal if one uses a child’s perspective to talk about circumstances that are foreign to Western readers (29). And this is exactly what Beah and Iweala do: Beah’s protagonist is his younger self and Iweala’s is Agu. Both are bright and tender-hearted boys who encounter inhumanity and who are confronted with the darkest depths of their own soul. Hron argues that Western adult readers more readily understand a confusing and problematic situation if it is being explained from a child’s perspective and that they more easily have empathy for a protagonist that is a child than for an adult protagonist (29). She also believes that reading a book with a child’s perspective may kindle in Western readers an interest for other books about the same culture and that it may increase their sympathy for that culture (29). And it is only through reading about and understanding a particular problematic situation, that one may want to help change this situation. That is why Hron concludes her article with a proverb she invented for the third-generation Nigerian writers who use a child’s perspective in their books. Hron was inspired, she says, by the Igbo (an ethnic language in Nigeria) saying *Ora na-azu nwa* which can be translated as “It takes a village to raise a child” (45). For these writers, she then coined the phrase “‘Nwa ndi na na-azu uwa’: it is the children who are educating the global village” (45). It is thus up to the young Ishmael Beah and to Agu to educate the adult Western reader about the plight of child soldiers.
I will investigate in my master dissertation how a trauma novel and a memoir deal with the problem of child soldiers. I will look at the differences and similarities between the two books and I will try to determine which literary narrative form is more adequate to portray this particular traumatic experience. I will begin my master’s thesis with the theoretical background of trauma studies in which I explain, among other things, the history of trauma theory. Next, I will discuss the relation between trauma and autobiographical writing. I will look at some characteristics of narratives written by trauma survivors and I will discuss the role of fiction within these accounts. After that, I will introduce the topic of child soldiers by explaining the reasons that cause children to become soldiers and their life within the army or rebel group. This chapter will enhance one’s knowledge about child soldiers so that one is better able to evaluate the authors’ approach of the subject. I will then analyse both books. In my analysis of Beah’s memoir, I will focus on the application of Dominick LaCapra’s trauma theory and on the discrepancies that can be found in his account. The focus in my analysis of Iweala’s trauma novel, on the other hand, will be on his use of post-traumatic techniques and on Agu’s struggle to keep his humanity. In addition, I will also discuss the objective the two writers have in mind. They both hope that their book will lead to social action and alleviate the plight of child soldiers. In my conclusion, then, I will look at the differences and similarities between these two books and I will try to determine which narrative form (trauma fiction or realistic memoir) is more suitable to portray this particular traumatic experience and which of the two is more socially effective.
2. **Theoretical Framework**

2.1. Definition

Trauma is generally defined as the response to an overwhelming event which precludes cognitive registration in the victim’s mind at the time of its occurrence. Due to the fact that the event is not fully experienced when it happened, it belatedly returns in the form of uncontrolled and repetitive hallucinations, nightmares and other related phenomena. The individual is thus possessed by the traumatic event and its belated repetitions which resist being integrated into his or her consciousness (Caruth, *Trauma* 4-5). One of the most frequent of these uncontrolled repetitions are flashbacks, which are intrusive and recurrent re-enactments of the traumatic event. These flashbacks can consist of images or sensations that the victim associates with the traumatic event or they can give him or her the impression that he or she is experiencing the traumatic event all over again, since flashbacks can take the form of literal visual representations of the event. This exact visual quality can be related, according to Leys, to “the cinematic possibility” of flashbacks which are experienced by the traumatised individual as “exact ‘returns’ or ‘replays’ of the traumatic incident” (241). Most trauma victims also suffer from traumatic nightmares. Like flashbacks, these nightmares can repeat themselves, they can be experienced as if the traumatic event is happening again, and they often consist of exact fragments of the traumatic past (Herman 39). Both flashbacks and nightmares can be evoked by small reminders or “triggers” in everyday life (Vickroy 12). The traumatised individual can thus never be sure that traumatic memories will not appear again in normal circumstances (Herman 37). These visual traumatic memories, in nightmares as well as in flashbacks, can give the trauma victim the impression that he or she is reliving the traumatic event in the present. The feeling of the victim that he or she is “back there reliving the event” can cause the collapse of distance between the past and the present (LaCapra,
“Trauma Studies” 119), which leads to the breakdown of the normal course of life since, for
the trauma victim, it feels as if time stopped at the moment of the traumatic experience
(Herman 37). Another danger of flashbacks and nightmares is the destructive potential
inherent in the repetition of trauma. Incessant repetition of the traumatic event, even years
after the experience, can, as Caruth points out, be retraumatizing itself (Unclaimed 63). A
third response to trauma is numbing, which can begin during or after the traumatic event
(Caruth, Trauma 4). It is a “state of detached calm” in which pain and terror disappear, but it
is not a solution to trauma (Herman 42).

2.2. Trauma Studies: a Historical Survey

Originally, the meaning of trauma derives from the Greek word trauma, which means
“wound.” It thus signifies an external injury to the body. However, the later psychological
usage of the term trauma, as it was first used by Sigmund Freud, Pierre Janet, and their
contemporaries, describes not a bodily wound but a wounding of the mind caused by an
unexpected shock (Caruth, Unclaimed 3-4). Freud defined the traumatic wounding of the
mind as a “widespread rupture or breach in the ego’s protective shield,” which is, as he
explains in Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920), a barrier or a shield that defends the psyche
against external stimuli (Leys 23). This rupture is thus the consequence of a traumatic event
which is, as stated before, not fully experienced by the victim at the moment of its occurrence.
To explain to his contemporaries this refusal of the trauma to be assimilated in the
consciousness, Freud used the example of the train collision:

It may happen that someone gets away, apparently unharmed, from the spot
where he has suffered a shocking accident, for instance a train collision. In the
course of the following weeks, however, he develops a series of grave physical
and motor symptoms, which can be ascribed only to his shock or whatever else happened at the time of the accident. He has developed a “traumatic neurosis.” This appears quite incomprehensible and is therefore a novel fact. The time that elapsed between the accident and the first appearance of the symptoms is called the “incubation period,” a transparent allusion to the pathology of infectious disease. . . . It is the feature which one might term latency. (qtd. in Caruth, Unclaimed 16-17)

The trauma victim seems unharmed as he walks away from the accident, because he did not consciously experience the crash as it happened. After a period of time, however, the repressed traumatic event belatedly returns to haunt the victim. The period between the traumatic event itself and its effects on the traumatised individual, is termed latency by Freud. Cathy Caruth suggests that by using this term, Freud saw trauma as “the successive movement from an event to its repression to its return” (Trauma 7). As will be explained later on, Caruth also draws on the concept of the conscious unavailability of the traumatic event at the time of its occurrence in her theory of trauma. Freud’s initial research was focused on female hysteria, which resulted in the development of his seduction theory. He claimed that repressed memories of sexual abuse during childhood were the cause of hysteria in later life (Leys 4). In this theory, Freud asserted that the abuse during childhood itself was not traumatizing, but that the dialectic of this first event with the delayed memory of it in adult life is. Leys accurately describes this relationship in her study of the genealogy of trauma: “a first event that was not necessarily traumatic because it came too early in the child’s development to be understood and assimilated, and a second event that also was not inherently traumatic but that triggered a memory of the first event that only then was given traumatic meaning and hence repressed” (20). The two separate events are thus not inherently traumatic, but the dialectic between them, together with a period of latency, is. Freud termed this “temporal logic”
Nachträglichkeit, or “deferred action” (Leys 20). To heal the trauma of his patients, Freud proposed to use the cathartic method, a technique in which hypnotism was used to retrieve “the forgotten, dissociated, or repressed recollections by bringing them into consciousness and language” (Leys 4). In 1897, however, Freud had to abandon his seduction theory due to social pressure, since it implied widespread sexual abuse of children. Subsequently, he claimed that the symptoms of female hysteria were caused by “repressed erotic infantile wishes and fantasies” and not by real events (Leys 4). The condition of these women was thus the result of unfulfilled wishes and their symptoms were seen as attempts to achieve wish-fulfilment. After World War I, Freud focused his research on the returning soldiers who were traumatised by their experiences in the war. These men suffered from what was then called “war neurosis” or “shell shock.” However, most people did not recognise the severe psychological problems of these soldiers and they accused them of malingering. They were sent back to the front, and were sometimes even shot if they refused to fight. These shell-shocked soldiers suffered from the same symptoms--such as nightmares and flashback--as did the hysterical women, but Freud realised in Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920) that he could not describe the soldiers’ traumatic nightmares as wish-fulfilment:

Now dreams occurring in traumatic neuroses have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes up in another fright. This astonishes people far too little. . . . Anyone who accepts it as something self-evident that their dreams should put them back at night into the situation that caused them to fall ill has misunderstood the nature of dreams. It would be more in harmony with their nature if they showed the patient pictures from his healthy past or of the cure for which he hopes. (qtd. in Craps)
To explain these nightmares, Freud acknowledged the existence of the death drive, which is a “‘beyond’ of pleasure” and which acts “independently of and often in opposition to the pleasure principle” (Leys 23). In the same book, Freud also elucidated the concept of repetition-compulsion. This concept explains how the mind belatedly tries to prepare itself for the traumatic event that has already occurred by constantly returning to the event in nightmares and flashbacks: “These dreams are endeavouring to master the stimulus retrospectively, by developing the anxiety whose omission was the cause of the traumatic neurosis” (qtd. in Craps). At the original occurrence of the traumatic event, the individual was not prepared for the shock and thus lacked the necessary anxiety, which led to a breach in the protective shield. With these repetitions, the mind seeks to achieve “retrospective mastery” over the traumatic event by developing this anxiety (Whitehead 119). This repetition of the traumatic event has two aspects, which makes it ambivalent. Either the victim can remain caught in this constant repetition, which Freud termed melancholia; or repetition can help the victim achieve catharsis, which Freud called mourning (Whitehead 87). To reach this catharsis, Freud stressed the role of narrative in *Studies on Hysteria* (1895): “*each individual hysterical symptom immediately and permanently disappeared . . . when the patient had described that event in the greatest possible detail and had put the affect into words*” (qtd. in Whitehead 87). One thus has to tell one’s story to complete the process of recovery.

A contemporary of Freud who also stressed the role of narrative in the recovery process is Pierre Janet. Janet described trauma as the confrontation with a shocking and unexpected event which does not fit within “the schemes of prior knowledge” (Caruth, *Trauma* 153). Since the mind cannot integrate the traumatic experience in an existing framework, it stores the memory of it in a different way, which causes it, as van der Kolk and van der Hart explain, to become “dissociated from conscious awareness and voluntary control” (Caruth, *Trauma* 160). The trauma victim cannot consciously retrieve the memory of
the traumatic experience, but, due to the fact that the event was stored in the mind without integration (and without change), the traumatic event returns after a period of time in all its literality in flashbacks and nightmares (Caruth, *Trauma* 153). This unavailability of memory together with the literal return of the traumatic experience refers to the central paradox of trauma, which is that “there is simultaneously too little and too much memory of the event” (Whitehead 140). In his work on trauma, Janet made an important distinction between traumatic memory and narrative memory. Traumatic memory is the memory of a traumatic event that was not fully grasped by the victim at the moment of its occurrence, which implies that it cannot be consciously recalled by the victim when he or she wishes to do so. Since it is not integrated into the mind, this traumatic memory remains inflexible and therefore returns without change in repetitive visual flashbacks, nightmares and re-enactments that can be triggered by external stimuli (Vickroy 12). Whitehead even claims that traumatic memory “replays the past in a mode of exact repetition” (87). As opposed to traumatic memory, narrative memory is available to the individual in the form of a chronological story. The story of the trauma can even vary each time the traumatised individual tells it, because narrative memory is “capable of improvising on the past” (Whitehead 87). For Janet, the recovery from trauma is possible if the victim succeeds in transforming the traumatic memory into narrative memory. This transformation leads to the integration of the traumatic event as a particular moment in the individual’s chronological past, so that its influence on the present diminishes. Or, as Whitehead formulates it, “Where traumatic memory repeats the past without consciousness, narrative memory recognises the past as past” (140). This transformation of traumatic memory into narrative memory, which is a social act since it requires a listener to whom the traumatised individual can tell his or her story, should make it possible for the victim to improvise around the traumatic event and as such bring in some flexibility into his or her account (Whitehead 141). In the therapy he proposed, Janet thus stressed the role of
narrative, since telling one’s story leads to the integration of the traumatic experience into the individual’s normal mental framework so that he or she can understand what happened to him or her in the past.

After World War I, interest in trauma declined and World War II did not change this situation. It was not until the 1970s, when the Vietnam War veterans came back severely traumatised, that trauma regained attention in the medical world. The large number of returning traumatised veterans issued new research into the possible traumatic effects of war and this research led to the acknowledgment of the phenomenon of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)--a new term to indicate what was previously known as shell shock or combat fatigue (Caruth, Trauma 3). The first official diagnosis of PTSD appeared in the year 1980 in the third edition of the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. In this manual, PTSD was defined as “an anxiety disorder with four diagnostic criteria: A. Traumatic event. B. Reexperiences of the event. C. Numbing phenomena. D. Miscellaneous symptoms” (Leys 232). Category A of this definition, the traumatic event, was described in the same edition as “an event that is ‘generally outside the range of usual human experience’ and as involving a ‘recognizable stressor that would evoke significant symptoms of distress in almost everyone’” (Leys 232). This definition of the traumatic event recognised that PTSD was not only caused by war experiences, but also by other traumatic experiences such as rape, child abuse, incest, and natural catastrophes (Caruth, Trauma 3). After this, the interest in trauma studies grew and critics such as Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra received academic recognition.
2.3. Contemporary Trauma Studies

A contemporary theorist of trauma is the aforementioned cultural theorist Cathy Caruth. In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), she mentions a generally accepted definition of trauma, which she describes as “a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event” (4). According to Caruth, this definition of trauma leaves out the fact that the pathology cannot be defined by the traumatic event itself, since it “may or may not be catastrophic, and may not traumatize everyone equally”; and it also cannot be defined as a distortion of that event, because it achieves “its haunting power as a result of distorting personal significances attached to it” (*Trauma* 4). Hence, the event itself does not cause the same trauma in everybody who experiences it. Consequently, Caruth states that “[t]he pathology consists, rather, solely in the structure of its experience or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it” (*Trauma* 4). Caruth thus stresses, as Freud did previously, that the traumatic event is so overwhelming that the mind cannot integrate it at the time of its occurrence, which then leads to the belated return of the trauma in literal re-experiences such as flashbacks and nightmares. Caruth also agrees with Freud’s theory that the breach in the protective shield is caused by the individual’s lack of preparedness for the shocking event. In *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), she claims that the reason for this breach “is not simply . . . the literal threatening of bodily life, but the fact that the threat is recognized as such by the mind one moment too late. The shock of the mind’s relation to the threat of death is thus not the direct experience of the threat, but precisely the missing of this experience, the fact that, not being experienced in time, it has not yet been fully known” (62).
The return of the traumatic event is then, according to Freud’s explanation of repetition-compulsion, an attempt of the mind to belatedly prepare itself for the shocking event and as such try to achieve mastery over it (Caruth, Unclaimed 62).

As explained before, Caruth agrees with Freud’s theory that the traumatic event is not fully known by the victim at the time of its occurrence and that it constantly eludes the victim when he or she deliberately tries to recall it afterwards. Caruth claims that this impossibility of completely grasping the event at the time of its occurrence, is part of the traumatic experience itself: “Central to the very immediacy of this experience, that is, is a gap that carries the force of the event and does so precisely at the expense of simple knowledge and memory. The force of this experience would appear to arise precisely, in other words, in the collapse of its understanding” (Trauma 7). This leads her to conclude that there is an “inherent latency within the experience itself,” since the traumatised individual does not repress or forget the traumatic event afterwards, but because he or she does not consciously experience the event itself as it happens (Trauma 8). The individual is thus dissociated from the event at the time of its occurrence since the experience is so overwhelming that it cannot be registered by the mind.

This notion of dissociation in trauma is accurately described in the work of the psychotherapist Bessel van der Kolk. He tries to explain trauma in a neurobiological way by investigating different brain mechanisms. The conclusion of his study is that the traumatic event is not stored in the mind in the same way as normal memory, but that it is “preserved in the memory with a timeless accuracy that accounts for the long-term and often delayed effects of PTSD” (Leys 7). Van der Kolk argues that traumatic memory is not the same as “declarative” or “narrative” memory, which enables the individual to talk about past events, but that traumatic memory is more like “implicit” or “nondeclarative” memory, which consists of “bodily memories” and which resists “verbal-semantic-linguistic representation”
In *Trauma Culture*, Ann Kaplan explains van der Kolk’s theory about traumatic memory in a very straightforward way. She states that van der Kolk, who sees trauma as a “special form of memory,” argues that the traumatic event has “affect only, not meaning” (34). Since “[o]nly the sensation sector of the brain—the amygdala—is active during the trauma,” the traumatised individual can only feel emotions (34). He or she cannot make sense of the traumatic experience due to the fact that the “meaning-making [sector of the brain] (in the sense of rational thought, cognitive processing), namely, the cerebral cortex, remains shut down because the affect is too much to be registered cognitively in the brain” (34). Not integrated in the normal way, the traumatic event is “etched” or “engraved” in the mind in all its literality, which explains the belated but exact visualizations of the traumatic experience in flashbacks and nightmares. Due to this different way of encoding the trauma in the brain, the traumatic memory is dissociated from normal memory and awareness. Hence, the traumatic memory is cut off from normal consciousness and it is out of reach of voluntary recall. This fact bring us back to the central paradox of trauma: the traumatic event is etched in all its literality in the brain, but it is dissociated from ordinary integration and thus unobtainable for conscious recollection (Leys 239).

Caruth’s conception of trauma as being dissociated from consciousness challenges the theory of recovery from trauma through the process of constructing a linear narrative, since the victim does not consciously experience the traumatic event as it happens, nor can he or she voluntary recall it afterwards. However, Whitehead claims that although Caruth states that trauma “carries the force of a literality which renders it resistant to narrative structure and linear temporalities” (5), her work seems to suggest that trauma can be presented in a narrative, but only in “a literary form which departs from conventional linear sequence” (6). This experimental literary form should then be a narrative structure which “does not succumb to closure and coherence, but retains within itself the traces of traumatic disruption and
discontinuity” (Whitehead 142). The reader is thus not presented with an uncomplicated linear and closed narrative, but with an experimental narrative that defies straightforward understanding and interpretation.

The historian Dominick LaCapra, a contemporary of Cathy Caruth, is also interested in trauma studies. According to LaCapra, a traumatised individual can react to the trauma in three different ways: denial (or disavowal), acting-out or working-through. The first category, denial, can range “from simple, flat-out denial to intricate and subtle modes of evasion” (Craps). Even though he also acknowledges denial as a category, LaCapra focuses primarily on the distinction between the other two categories, namely acting-out and working-through. In Writing History, Writing Trauma (2001), LaCapra defines acting-out as a situation “in which one is haunted or possessed by the past and performatively caught up in the compulsive repetition of traumatic scenes—scenes in which the past returns and the future is blocked or fatalistically caught up in a melancholic feedback loop. In acting out, tenses implode, and it is as if one were back there in the past reliving the traumatic scene” (21). The victim thus uncontrollably relives the past to such an extent that he or she is actually haunted by his or her traumatic past. These re-experiences can seem so real for the traumatised individual that it “feels as if one were back there reliving the event,” which leads to the collapse of the distance between past and present (LaCapra, “Trauma Studies” 119). Acting out this “past that will not pass away” does not only cause this confusion between past and present but it also “threatens to block the future” (LaCapra, “Trauma Studies” 124). In Writing History, Writing Trauma, LaCapra also gives a definition of working-through: “Working through is an articulatory practice: to the extent one works through trauma (as well as transferential relations in general), one is able to distinguish between past and present and to recall in memory that something happened to one (or one’s people) back then while realizing that one is living here and now with openings to the future” (21-22). Working-through helps the victim to take a
critical distance from the traumatic event and thus to make a distinction between the traumatic past and the present, by realising that the traumatic event happened in the past. Hence, he or she can live and act in the present and have a future.

It is important to note that LaCapra does not consider acting-out and working-through as opposed to each other, nor are they two subsequent parts of a linear development towards recovery from trauma. In Representing the Holocaust (1994), he emphasises that “the relation between acting-out and working-through should not be seen in terms of a from/to relationship in which the latter is presented as the dialectical transcendence of the former. I have noted that, particularly in cases of trauma, acting-out may be necessary and perhaps never fully overcome” (205). Acting-out thus may be an indispensable precondition for working through trauma. LaCapra also notes that working-through “does not mean total redemption of the past or healing its traumatic wounds” (“Trauma Studies” 119). He does not believe that trauma can be completely overcome and therefore refuses “the phantasm of total mastery, full ego-identity, ‘totalitarian’ social integration, and radically positive transcendence (whether poetic or political)” (qtd. in Codde 56). Working-through can never totally overcome the traumatic past and its after-effects, it can only offer partial closure to the victim. Nevertheless, working-through is an important reaction to traumatic experience since it helps the victim to continue his or her normal life by integrating the traumatic event instead of forgetting of exorcising it (Codde 56). LaCapra warns, however, that even if the victim reaches this state of working-through, it is “not achieved once and for all” and a relapse into acting-out or even into denial is always possible (Writing 70). LaCapra also acknowledges that not all trauma victims try to achieve the state of working-through and that some even valorise the painful repetitions of the traumatic event, especially if “leaving it seems to mean betraying lost loved ones who were consumed by it” (Writing 70). He explains this “resistance to working-through” as a result of the fact that working-through is often interpreted by trauma victims “both as total
transcendence of trauma and as a betrayal of it” (“Trauma Studies” 122). These trauma victims believe that if they try to work through their trauma, which would imply a letting go of the traumatic repetitions, they might forget what happened and even deny the traumatic event itself (Codde 56). As explained before, this stands in opposition to LaCapra’s understanding of the concept of working-through since he stresses the integration of the traumatic event in normal life and not the overcoming or the forgetting of it.

To be able to work through trauma, LaCapra also emphasises the importance of narrative. He especially stresses “the role of literary texts in representing trauma, arguing that writing necessarily implies some distance from trauma and is an inherently curative process” (Whitehead 87). In “Trauma Studies,” LaCapra describes how narrative can help the traumatised individual to work through trauma in such a way that he or she has a future again:

I have already indicated that working-through need not be understood to imply the integration or transformation of past trauma into a seamless narrative memory and total meaning or knowledge. Narrative at best helps one not to change the past through a dubious rewriting of history but to work through posttraumatic symptoms in the present in a manner that opens possible futures. It also enables one to recount events and perhaps to evoke experience, typically through nonlinear movements that allow trauma to register in language and its hesitations, indirections, pauses, and silences. And, particularly by bearing witness and giving testimony, narrative may help performatively to create openings in existence that did not exist before. (121-122)

It is important to note that LaCapra does not believe that a traditional linear narrative can lead to a successful working-through, but rather opts for postmodern techniques in literature since they can more accurately describe the traumatic experience. These postmodern techniques
present the reader with the experience of trauma through, among other things, the use of fragmentation, language, hesitations, and non-linearity. I will return to these postmodern techniques later on.

With respect to the reader’s reaction to a traumatic narrative, LaCapra distinguishes between a vicarious and a virtual experience of trauma. LaCapra defines the vicarious experience of trauma as an experience in which “one perhaps unconsciously identifies with the victim, becomes a surrogate victim, and lives the event in an imaginary way that, in extreme cases, may lead to confusion about one’s participation in the actual events” (“Trauma Studies” 125). The reader thus over-identifies with the victim to the point that the reader feels no distance anymore between the self and the victim and it can go even so far that the reader becomes a “surrogate victim who appropriates the victim’s voice or suffering” (“Trauma Studies” 135). As opposed to the vicarious, the virtual experience is an experience in which “one may imaginatively put oneself in the victim’s position while respecting the difference between self and other and recognizing that one cannot take the victim’s place or speak in the victim’s voice” (LaCapra, “Trauma Studies” 125). The reader affectively feels for the victim, but he or she recognises and respects the difference between the self and the victim.

LaCapra’s distinction between vicarious and virtual experience of trauma can be related to the difference between identification and empathy. Empathy can be linked to the virtual experience of trauma because empathy “combines a rapport or bond with the other person with an affirmation of otherness and it emphasises the importance of ‘cognition and critical analysis’” (Whitehead 8-9). Identification, however, “fails to recognise such limits and the receiver of testimony succumbs to a secondary trauma” and it is therefore associated with the vicarious experience (9). LaCapra warns against over-identification and instead proposes the concept of empathic unsettlement, a response which he considers as “desirable or even necessary for a certain form of understanding that is constitutively limited but significant”
Anthonissen Evi

(“Trauma Studies” 125). In the same essay, LaCapra emphasises the close connection between empathic unsettlement on the one hand and empathy and a virtual experience of trauma on the other:

Desirable empathy, I would suggest, involves not self-sufficient, projective or incorporative identification but what might be termed empathic unsettlement in the face of traumatic limit events, their perpetrators, and their victims. . . . And it involves virtual not vicarious experience—that is to say, experience in which one puts oneself in the other’s position without taking the place of—or speaking for—the other or becoming a surrogate victim who appropriates the victim’s voice or suffering. Instead affective involvement in, and response to, the other comes with respect for the otherness of the other, which is obliterated in identification that may be attended by appropriative or extremely intrusive behavior . . . Affective involvement, I am suggesting, takes (or should take) the form of empathic unsettlement—or rather various forms of empathic unsettlement that differ with respect to victims, perpetrators, and the multiple ambiguous figures in Primo Levi’s gray zone. (135-136)

Empathic unsettlement thus produces in the reader respect for the otherness of the victim and, at the same time, it evokes an emotional response, which is an appropriate amount of empathy without the danger of over-identification. As LaCapra also mentions, there are different forms of empathic unsettlement for the victims, the perpetrators and the other figures which belong to Primo Levi’s gray zone, such as bystanders and those who are both perpetrator and victim.

Empathic unsettlement is an important notion for the writers and readers of traumatic fiction. According to Vickroy, LaCapra favours literary texts that “take reader through a process of working through trauma and put readers into a critical as well as empathic mode”
These literary texts thus fend off the danger of over-identification, since the reader does not solely feel for the victim; and they invoke empathic unsettlement in the reader, because he or she also critically thinks about the events in the narrative. A result of this critical distance, LaCapra claims, is the fact that “empathic unsettlement poses a barrier to closure in discourse and places in jeopardy harmonizing or spiritually uplifting accounts of extreme events from which we attempt to derive reassurance or a benefit” (Writing 41-42). If there is empathic unsettlement, the text does not offer complete closure because the reader continues to think critically about it, during the act of reading and afterwards (which can even lead to social action). These texts stand in opposition to texts that end in complete harmony in which the reader easily sympathises and sometimes even over-identifies with the victim, without thinking critically about the events in the text.

2.4. Trauma and Testimony

Trauma critics agree that the victim has to talk about the traumatic experience in order to achieve some form of recovery and healing. At the same time, trauma critics are also in agreement on the view of trauma as that which cannot be integrated into the victim’s mind since he or she did not experience it fully at the time of its occurrence. This constitutes a central paradox of trauma studies: the victim has to testify about the traumatic event to be able to recover from trauma, but he or she does not have access to the core of this event. Is testimony then truly possible? In Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub stress the need of survivors to talk about the traumatic experience, despite the fact that he or she did not truly witness the experience as it occurred. Laub claims that precisely due to this impossibility of integrating trauma, “[t]he victim’s narrative—the very process of bearing witness to massive
trauma—does indeed begin with someone who testifies to an absence, to an event that has not yet come into existence, in spite of the overwhelming and compelling nature of the reality of its occurrence” (57). The victim does not really know the event and therefore he or she has to construct a narrative for a listener, since it is, according to Laub, the place where “the ‘knowing’ of the event is given birth to” (57). For Laub, “the ‘knowing’ of the event” is a central precondition for being able to repossess one’s life after a traumatic experience. To be able to live on, the victim thus has to create a narrative about the event, even if this narrative may not be historically accurate. In Testimony, he states: “The survivors did not only need to survive so that they could tell their story; they also needed to tell their story in order to survive. There is, in each survivor, an imperative need to tell and thus to come to know one’s story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself. One has to know one’s buried truth in order to be able to live one’s life” (78). Survival and telling are bound together in the traumatised individual, or, as Terrence Des Pres formulates it, “Survival and bearing witness become reciprocal acts” (qtd. in Felman and Laub 117). Telling one’s traumatic past to a listener is thus crucial in the process of recovery from trauma since it is, for Laub, the only way to really know and understand what happened in the past.

As stated before, there is a general consensus in the field of trauma studies on the role of narrative and telling in the healing of trauma. If one can construct a narrative about the traumatic experience, critics believe, then one can integrate it into the normal framework and give it a fixed place in the chronology of one’s life. Some critics, such as Judith Herman, consider talking about the traumatic event as an absolute precondition for the healing of trauma victims. In Trauma and Recovery, she states that “[r]emembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims” (1). Even though some trauma victims want to deny the traumatic event, one must recognise it and talk about it. According to Herman, the
reconstruction of the traumatic experience in a narrative “actually transforms the traumatic memory, so that it can be integrated into the survivor’s life story” (175). She also stresses that the traumatised individual should explore in the narrative his or her life before the traumatic event in order to “restore a sense of continuity with the past” (176). This provides the trauma victim with “a context within which the particular meaning of the trauma can be understood” (176). For many trauma victims, it is important not only to talk about their traumatic experiences but also to write down their stories, since the act of writing can have therapeutic value. Henke called this scriptotherapy, which is “the process of writing out and writing through traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic reenactment” (qtd. in Vickroy 19-20). By writing out one’s story, one can try to work through trauma and achieve catharsis. As a result of this therapeutic process, the trauma victim can reclaim the traumatic event and hence repossess one’s life (Felman and Laub 69). Trauma survivors do not only testify on behalf of themselves, but they also speak for those who cannot testify anymore. They feel a certain responsibility to the dead, so that neither they nor the traumatic event itself will ever be forgotten. Elie Wiesel, a survivor of the Holocaust, says that, in his writing, he wants to remain faithful to those who did not survive the Holocaust:

This sentiment moves all survivors: they owe nothing to anyone, but everything to the dead.

I owe them my roots and memory. I am duty-bound to serve as their emissary, transmitting the history of their disappearance, even if it disturbs, even if it brings pain. Not to do so would be to betray them . . . And since I feel incapable of communicating their cry by shouting, I simply look at them. I see them and I write . . . (qtd. in Felman and Laub 116)

The witness is the only one who can testify, even if he or she is rather reluctant to do it. “If someone else could have written my stories,” Elie Wiesel states, “I would not have written
them. I have written them in order to testify. And this is the origin of the loneliness that can be
glimpsed in each of my sentences, in each of my silences” (qtd. in Felman and Laub 3). The
fact that only the witness can testify, is what Felman calls “the burden of the witness” (3).
This is a very solitary burden, since nobody else can accomplish the task of testifying about
what the witness experienced. This burden thus places the witness in solitude, but to actually
testify, one paradoxically has to emerge out of this solitude and “speak for others and to
others” (Felman and Laub 3). To testify, one has to make a connection with the dead, in
whose place he or she speaks, and with the living, so that they will not forget the traumatic
event or so that they can change an ongoing atrocity.

In his or her testimony, the witness thus also appeals to those who have never
experienced trauma. According to Felman, the responsibility of the witness is to testify about
the traumatic experience so that it will not be forgotten. She claims that “[t]o testify is thus
not merely to narrate but to commit oneself, and to commit the narrative, to others: to take
responsibility—in speech—for history or for the truth of an occurrence, for something which,
by definition, goes beyond the personal, in having general (nonpersonal) validity and
consequences” (204). Some trauma victims realise that talking and writing about trauma does
not only have effect in their personal lives, but that it also can have a political and social
effect. They “recognize a political or religious dimension in their misfortune and discover that
they can transform the meaning of their personal tragedy by making it the basis for social
action” (Herman 207). In their texts, they try to raise public awareness by explaining and
educating people about past traumatic events (e.g. slavery), “everyday” traumatic experiences
(e.g. rape), and continuing atrocities (e.g. ongoing civil wars). The trauma survivor sees
himself or herself as “a storyteller with a mission” and he or she hopes that telling his or her
story will not only be “a personally reconstitutive act” but also “a socially reconstitutive act”
(Tal 121). Herman stresses that trauma survivors can also turn their own trauma into “a gift to
others” because their texts can help other people who are struggling with a traumatic experience as well (207). They can urge these other victims to start talking and hence recover from their trauma. Helping others can have positive effects on trauma victims since it can make them “feel connected to a power larger than themselves” and it can help them to emerge from the isolation of trauma (Herman 208).

As said before, the trauma victim does not have full knowledge of the traumatic event. If the survivor then wants to testify about it, his or her testimony can only be “composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference” (Felman and Laub 5). Since the survivor has access only to pieces of the traumatic event, his or her testimony will consist of fragments and will not present a coherent story. Hence, the testimony of a traumatic experience will inevitably contain “inaccuracies and distortions of memory” (Whitehead 30). Elie Wiesel confirms this inevitable fact when he writes, “No witness is capable of recounting everything from start to finish anyway. God alone knows the whole story” (qtd. in Whitehead 30). Another obstacle to talking about trauma, is the fact that trauma resists representation and normal chronology and defies the limitations of language since it is located outside our normal frameworks. In The Limits of Autobiography, Leigh Gilmore discusses how the critics deal with language and trauma. She says that most critics generally consider trauma “as the unrepresentable to assert that trauma is beyond language in some crucial way, that language fails in the face of trauma, and that trauma mocks language and confronts it with its insufficiency” (6). At the same time, however, “language,” she states, “is pressed forward as that which can heal the survivor of trauma” (6). This refers back to the central dialectic of talking about trauma without having access to it. This dialectic then is present in testimony of trauma survivors who “often tell their stories in a highly emotional,
contradictory, and fragmented manner which undermines their credibility” (Herman 1). The survivor’s testimony thus mainly consists of fragments and contradictory information. Despite the complexities and paradoxes that exist in talking about trauma, critics still agree that testimonies of survivors “remain fundamentally accurate” (Whitehead 30). Historical facts are always available, but they are the only ones who can talk about how it feels to live through a traumatic event and their testimonies are therefore extremely valuable (Codde 54).

As stated before, Dori Laub is one of the critics who promote narrative as the way to reach recovery from trauma. In his work, he also advocates the necessity of an empathic listener who hears the trauma survivor’s testimony. This testimony is not a monologue, “there needs to be a bonding, the intimate and total presence of an other—in the position of one who hears” so that the testimony can have a healing potential (Felman and Laub 70). The trauma victim has to be able to say “you.” Laub warns that if nobody really hears or listens to the victim’s testimony, “the telling might itself be lived as a return of the trauma—a re-experiencing of the event itself” (67). The trauma victim then re-lives the event, which does not bring relief but only “further retraumatization” (67). An empathic listener is thus essential in the recovery process. As explained before, Laub claims that, for the trauma victim, “the ‘knowing’ of the event is given birth to” in the emergence of a narrative which is being heard (57). The listener is thus part of this “creation of knowledge de novo,” because he or she is “the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time” (57). Laub even calls the listener the “enabler of the testimony—the one who triggers its initiation, as well as the guardian of its process and of its momentum” (58). The listener not only invites the testimony, but he or she also has to protect it and guide the trauma victim through it. By being so involved in the testimony, the listener even partially experiences the trauma of the victim (57). The hearer must nonetheless be aware that he or she “does not become the victim—he preserves his own separate place, position and perspective” (58). This refers to Whitehead’s
Anthonissen Evi 27

concept of the listener’s “dual responsibility:” one has “to receive the testimony but also [has] to avoid appropriating the story as his or her own” (7). The receiver of a testimony also has a responsibility in the real world. The speaker informs the listener about a particular traumatic experience and hopes that this knowledge will lead to social action on the listener’s part. According to Nance, the goal of testimonial narratives “is not only to educate readers about injustice, but to persuade those readers to act” (19). Writers of testimonial narratives hence not only participate in social action by making their personal narratives political, but they also awaken in their readers a need to take responsibility.

In considering narrative as part of the process toward healing, one must keep in mind two things: some survivors do not want to talk and the process of recovery is never completed. Some survivors thus do not want to talk about their trauma, because they do not want to give up the precision of the flashbacks or they feel that they might deny the experience and betray those who did not survive the traumatic event if they translate their experiences into language. In Trauma: Explorations in Memory, Caruth explains that “[t]o cure oneself—whether by drugs or the telling of one’s story or both—seems to many survivors to imply the giving-up of an important reality, or the dilution of a special truth into the reassuring terms of therapy” (vii). Caruth gives an excellent example when she quotes a Vietnam veteran who says, “I do not want to take drugs for my nightmares, because I must remain a memorial to my dead friends” (qtd. in Trauma vii). One may also not forget that if the trauma victim decides to talk about his or her traumatic experience, he or she can only reach partial recovery. In Trauma and Recovery, Herman states, “Resolution of the trauma is never final; recovery is never complete. The impact of a traumatic event continues to reverberate throughout the survivor’s lifecycle” (211). A traumatic experience thus has an “endless impact on a life” (Caruth, Unclaimed 7). The trauma victim can try to work through his or her trauma, but he or she can never forget it and will keep struggling with it. The
trauma survivor can either try to repress the trauma or can try to work through it, but he or she must realise that in both cases the traumatic event “invariably plays a decisive formative role in who one comes to be, and in how one comes to live one’s life” (Felman and Laub 86). The trauma thus remains a central part of the victim’s future life since it helps shape his or her personality and actions.

2.5. Literature and Trauma

The interest in trauma has grown in the last decades, and this is also apparent in the emergence of the trauma novel--written by trauma survivors as well as authors who have never experienced trauma. These trauma writers understand that trauma is not easily represented in a realistic narrative, because trauma defies representation and chronology. Therefore, ever more writers start exploring trauma and its after-effects in experimental fiction. LaCapra, Caruth and others even consider literature (and art) as “a prime, if not the privileged, place for giving voice to trauma as well as symbolically exploring the role of excess” (LaCapra, Writing 190). Since they believe that trauma cannot be described in a conventional linear and realistic narrative structure, writers often turn to “traumatic writing or post-traumatic writing in closest proximity to trauma” (LaCapra, Writing 23). These modern and experimental forms of writing may include “the feeling of keeping faith with trauma in a manner that leads to a compulsive preoccupation with aporia, an endlessly melancholic, impossible mourning, and a resistance to working through” (23). To remain faithful to the experience of trauma, writers of experimental accounts thus often mimic the effects of trauma in the form and in the story. Even though it is very difficult to accurately represent a real traumatic experience and its after-effects in a narrative, Whitehead argues that “literary fiction offers the flexibility and the freedom to be able to articulate the resistance and impact of
trauma” (87). She claims that the experimental forms of post-traumatic writing “offer the contemporary novelist a promising vehicle for communicating the unreality of trauma while still remaining faithful to the facts of history” (87). According to her then, the writer, whether he or she is a trauma survivor or not, can explore in literary fiction a real traumatic experience while writing an experimental narrative that mimics trauma in its form. Typical of these trauma narratives are the modern and postmodern techniques these the writers use. These techniques include fragmentation, repetition, nonlinearity, disruption of chronology, textual gaps, silences, resistance to coherence and closure, unreliable or multiple narrator(s), et cetera. Most of these techniques are based on the symptoms from which real trauma survivors suffer when they have PTSD, e.g. repetition in the trauma novel refers to the insistent return in real life of the traumatic experience in flashbacks and nightmares (Granofsky 10). By using these experimental techniques, trauma writers want to show their readers the disorienting effects of a traumatic experience and the difficulties of communicating it. These writers do not want to write coherent and hopeful narratives about trauma that are easily understood; they want to confront readers with fictional narratives that “take the form of a challenge to the categories of understanding which we use to assimilate new experiences” (Granofsky 21). They want to give their readers a similar disorienting feeling as that which real trauma survivors experience. The writer does not take the reader’s hand and guides him or her through the narrative, but the reader actively has to try to make sense of the story with the little and often contradictory information he or she receives from the narrator and from characters. “Readers,” Vickroy states, “are often oriented and receive information via a character’s/narrator’s memory and consciousness, engaging readers to reconstruct the past, along with the often unwilling characters” (11). It is thus very difficult for the reader to reconstruct and understand the traumatic event and its effects when he or she does not have full knowledge of what really happened—a situation similar to that of the trauma victim.
Vickroy concludes, “[N]o reader can apprehend trauma completely through narrative” (11). By using modern and postmodern techniques and by resisting full knowledge, trauma writers “acknowledge ambivalence and doubts about successful retelling” of a traumatic experience (Vickroy 11). Nevertheless, they try to re-create this experience in their trauma novels, because they want readers “to understand the difficulty of living with traumatic memories” (Vickroy xii). In their fiction, trauma writers thus want to make readers aware of the problems trauma survivors have to deal with and of the obstacles and difficulties that exist in communicating trauma.

3. **Autobiography: Trauma, Truth and Fiction**

As stated before, trauma victims as well as those who have not experienced trauma can take trauma as the subject of their autobiographical or fictional narrative. In *Worlds of Hurt*, Kalí Tal stresses the distinction between the literature of survivors and that of non-survivors since they each start writing their books with a different intention and background. Keeping this distinction in mind, she coins the concept “literature of trauma.” This concept, she states, “is defined by the identity of its author. Literature of trauma holds at its center the reconstruction and recuperation of the traumatic experience, but it is also actively engaged in an ongoing dialogue with the writings and representations of nontraumatized authors. It comprises a marginal literature similar to that produced by feminist, African-American, and queer writers” (17). In her discussion of the narratives of the Vietnam War, Tal claims that there exist “literatures (rather than a literature) of the Vietnam War” (116). With this assertion, she attacks those critics who compare writings of veterans and nonveterans on the
same terms. The distinction between these literatures of survivors and non-survivors lies, according to Tal, in the different intentions and objectives of the writers:

War literature by nonveterans can be critiqued in the same manner as other genre literatures. These works are the products of the authors’ urge to tell a story, make a point, create an aesthetic experience, to move people in a particular way. Nonveteran literature is, in short, the product of a literary decision. . . .

For combat veterans, however, the personal investment of the author is immense. Re-telling the war in a memoir or describing it in a novel does not merely involve the development of alternative national myths through the manipulation of plot and literary technique, but the necessary rebuilding of shattered personal myths. (116-117)

The nonveteran can decide to write a novel about the Vietnam War, while the veteran almost has to since it helps him to re-piece his “shattered self” and reach healing (138). Tal states, “Literature of trauma is written from the need to tell and retell the story of the traumatic experience, to make it real both to the victim and to the community” (137). For trauma survivors, writing their story then serves as a “validation and cathartic vehicle” (137). Their narratives are crucial in the lives of the traumatised authors, and because of this, Tal asserts, critics should not read these stories solely from the point of view of literary criticism but they should “move into the realms of psychology and sociology, acknowledging the specific effects of trauma on the process of narration” (117). Tal thus supports a multidisciplinary approach to trauma.

Most trauma survivors turn to autobiography and memoir to describe their personal traumatic experiences because they want to testify about it in a way that is comprehensible to
their readers (Granofsky 54). They thus do not use all the experimental techniques which are sometimes found in fictional trauma narratives and which complicate the act of reading. In *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*, Laurie Vickroy claims that nevertheless similarities do exist between testimonial narratives and fictional trauma narratives. The characteristics that John Beverley defines as typical of testimonial narratives, Vickroy asserts, can also be applied to fictional trauma narratives. Beverley describes a testimonial narrative as “‘a literary simulacrum of oral narrative’ that seeks to create a truth effect, a feeling of lived experience, and expresses a ‘problematic collective social situation’ through a representative individual” (Vickroy xii). The difference between these two forms of narrative is then why and how the writer wants to tell his story and what the reader expects from it. When a reader reads a memoir or autobiography, he or she believes that the text represents the truth, that it is based on verifiable facts, while at the same time realising that some details might not be one hundred percent correct (Miller 538). This understanding is what Philippe Lejeune in 1975 called “the autobiographical pact.” Later on, in *Signes de vie: Le pacte autobiographique 2*, he gave an updated definition of this concept: “The autobiographical pact is the engagement that an author takes to narrate his life directly (her life, or a part of it, an aspect of it) in a spirit of truth” (qtd. in Miller 538). The writer thus promises to write “in a spirit of truth” and this promise creates certain expectations in the reader who believes that he or she will be reading the whole truth. In the same volume, Lejeune observes that the writer’s relation to the truth constitutes the difference between fiction and nonfiction: “If you, reader, judge that the autobiographer hides or alters a part of the truth, you might think that he is lying. On the other hand, it’s impossible to say that a novelist lies” (qtd. in Miller 539). This quote ties in with the readers’ assumption that autobiographies contain the truth and if this is proven false, readers feel cheated and think that the whole text is a lie. About this expectation of readers, Paul John Eakin states, “We readily accept the presence of autobiographical
elements in fiction . . . The presence of fiction in autobiography, on the other hand, tends to make us uneasy, for we instinctively feel that autobiography is—or ought to be—precisely not-fiction. We want autobiography to be true” (9). Autobiography in fiction is accepted but fiction in autobiography diminishes the prestige of the whole text. Eakin, however, recognises that an autobiographer is always both an artist and a historian since his or her work negotiates “a narrative passage between the freedoms of imaginative creation on the one hand and the constraints of biographical fact on the other” (3). An autobiography is thus never truth alone, it always incorporates fiction. “The presence of fiction in autobiography,” Eakin asserts, “is not something to wish away, to rationalize, to apologize for, as so many writers and readers of autobiography persist in suggesting, for it is as reasonable to assume that all autobiography has some fiction in it as it is to recognize that all fiction is in some sense necessarily autobiographical” (10). More and more writers of autobiographies start realising that memory is fallible and that they need their imagination to recreate past experiences. This awareness led to the recognition of autobiography as the combination of “an art of memory and an art of the imagination” (Eakin 5-6). Memory and imagination are so intertwined in the autobiographical text that it becomes impossible to distinguish them from one another (Eakin 6). In her study of trauma narratives, Leigh Gilmore also asks the difficult question “Where does autobiography end and fiction begin in an autobiographical novel?” (45). Like Eakin, she acknowledges that fiction and autobiography may “reach into each other” or “even require each other” and that it is very difficult to draw a dividing line between fact and fiction (45). In trauma narratives of survivors, the relationship between fact and fiction becomes even more complicated since the traumatic event was not experienced as it occurred and was only later remembered. And this memory of the traumatic event is never complete because, as Primo Levi observes, “[h]uman memory is a marvellous but fallacious instrument” (qtd. in Whitehead 30). The survivor cannot, Elie Wiesel points out, recount the whole story and therefore has to imagine parts of
his or her past (Whitehead 30). To conclude, fiction and imagination are inescapable in
autobiography.

In an autobiography, the writer presents a personal experience in order to achieve
public attention and social action. Due to this intermingling of private and public life, the
autobiography becomes the subject of public scrutiny and judgement (Gilmore 4). This
sometimes leads to the accusation that the autobiographer is holding things back or that he or
she is even lying about past events. An accurate example of this situation is the controversy
that exists about Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú’s *testimonio* *I, Rigoberta
Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (1982). In her autobiography, which was widely
read and celebrated, she discusses the social injustice she and her family experienced in
Guatemala. In 1999, however, the American anthropologist David Stoll attacked her story in
his book *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*. In this book, he claims
that Menchú’s testimonial narrative contained various inaccuracies and misrepresentations,
including false deaths of family members. Stoll’s book ultimately led to an international
debate between defenders and opponents of Menchú that discussed Menchú’s text as well as
Stoll’s research methods (Nance 3–4). The fact that their texts become the object of intense
investigation can have serious consequences for trauma survivors. One of these consequences,
according to Gilmore, is that “the risk of being accused of lying . . . threatens the writer into
continued silence” (3). As said before, social action is very important for trauma survivors
and silence precisely prevents this social action. Nance states that being accused of lying can
also prevent social action on the reader’s part. The reader has to have confidence in the
survivor and has to believe in the truth of his or her account in order to take part in social
action. Consequently, “being caught in a lie” can become “a costly mistake” because it will
make the reader less inclined to act (31).
In her discussion of the deliberative testimonio, Nance offers the writers of testimonial narratives a possible alternative so that they might elude the critique that they are not speaking the truth. She asserts that the writer must be honest and that he or she must confess that he or she simply does not know everything and that memory is fallible. The “difficulty of obtaining and/or recalling reliable information” may even be explicitly represented in these testimonial texts (32). The author does not claim that he or she possesses the truth, but rather insists on “the provisionality of all versions of the truth, including one’s own” (38). This type of testimonial narrative, according to Nance, “would appear to ask both less and more of its readers—less in terms of uncritical trust in speakers’ truth claims, and more in terms of critical thinking and action” (38). Since the reader can not completely rely on the author’s version of the past, he or she must think more critically about what really happened and this will lead, Nance hopes, to an increased amount of social action. This provisionality of the truth is also apparent in the style of the deliberative testimonio which appears “imperfect and human, characterized by retardations, delays, slippages, diversions, unfinished arguments, partial proposals, competing claims, jarring and strange juxtapositions, fissures, gaps, and peripeteias” (45). These authors also “admit to their readers what they themselves don’t know, don’t understand, bet upon, get wrong, fail to uphold, cannot hold onto, must ignore or partition off, fear, hate, and sometimes rage about” (45). They assert that they are human and that they too can get it wrong and as such it is much harder to criticise the inaccuracies in their narratives. Many critics also accept errors and distortions in testimonies, arguing that the testimonies themselves “remain fundamentally accurate” (Whitehead 30). Or, as the Holocaust critic Lawrence Langer states, “the essence and substance of Holocaust testimonies takes priority over inconsistencies or contradictions in their detail” (Whitehead 31). A trauma survivor writes about how he or she experienced the traumatic past, and this story might not be completely true due to the unreliability of one’s memory, but it is truthful (Whitehead 47).
Trauma critics and trauma survivors agree that it is very difficult to talk about a traumatic experience, especially if one has to translate this experience in a comprehensible and realistic autobiography. Gilmore even argues that the representation of trauma in autobiography is “theoretically impossible: How can the exploration of trauma and the burden it imposes on memory be representative? How can the experience of a survivor of trauma stand for many? How can one tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, when facts, truth, and memory combine in the representation of trauma to undermine rather than strengthen representativeness?” (19). With respect to Holocaust testimonies, the philosopher (and second-generation survivor) Sarah Kofman coined the concept of “smothered words” to describe the simultaneous impossibility and need to talk about the Holocaust. Holocaust survivors assert their inability to translate their experiences into words, but at the same time they feel the need and duty to testify about it, “which would in fact reshape the events into a comprehensible narrative” (Eaglestone 81). Kofman states, “If no story is possible after Auschwitz, there remains, nonetheless, a duty to speak, to speak endlessly for those who could not speak because to the very end they wanted to safeguard true speech against betrayal. To speak in order to bear witness. But how? How can testimony escape the idyllic law of the story?” (qtd. in Eaglestone 81). The testimonies of Holocaust survivors then, Eaglestone claims, “are ‘smothered words,’ which both ‘say’ and ‘unsay’ the events” (81). Even though they testify about it, they keep asserting the profound incomprehensibility of the Holocaust. Eaglestone opposes these Holocaust testimonies to African trauma narratives, which are the focus of my master’s thesis. He argues that these African trauma texts refuse the incomprehensibility of traumatic experiences (81). In these African trauma narratives, Eaglestone states, “there is a real sense that there can be comprehension, that a story must be told and can and should be grasped by others in the West” (82). These writers want to present their stories in comprehensible narratives so that it can be understood by Western readers who
never experienced anything similar. These authors often address the West in their narratives because they hope that Western people will undertake social action. Their trauma narratives are therefore rather straightforward, without too much post-traumatic techniques, since they know that “[s]tyles and structures that increase the difficulty of reading” will reduce the amount of readers and consequently of social action (Nance 89). And social action is, precisely, very crucial for writers of African trauma narratives, since “there is,” Eaglestone observes, “also a more burning political need” (82). Many traumatic events and atrocities are still happening in Africa and the trauma survivor therefore has to testify about these traumatic experiences because “[w]ithout anyone grasping them, perhaps nothing can be done” (Eaglestone 82). These African trauma narratives are “not simply affective works,” but “they are also aimed explicitly at pricking Western conscience” and that is why Eaglestone calls these narratives forms of “engaged literature” (82). African trauma authors express the belief that a traumatic experience can be turned into a comprehensible and straightforward narrative so that this narrative can reach a great many people who can put an end to an ongoing atrocity. Due to its explicit social goal, contemporary African trauma narratives, I would like to suggest, can be related to autobiographical slave narratives of the nineteenth century. According to Toni Morrison, the writers of these slave narratives had two things they wanted to say: “One: ‘This is my historical life—my singular, special example that is personal, but that also represents the race.’ Two: ‘I write this text to persuade other people—you, the reader, who is probably not black—that we are human beings worthy of God’s grace and the immediate abandonment of slavery’” (66). The ex-slave thus wrote a personal narrative that stood for many other slaves as well and he or she tried to persuade the white reader, who does not know what slavery feels like, to put an end to this social injustice. This situation is similar to that of contemporary African trauma authors who also represent many others with the same background and who also appeal to Western readers, those who never lived through anything
similar, in order to achieve social change. Having social action as their goal, ex-slaves made sure that their accounts did not scare off readers and they therefore did not describe all the horrendous physical and mental abuse from which they suffered. “In shaping the experience to make it palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it,” Morrison argues, “they were silent about many things, and they ‘forgot’ many other things” (70). This preoccupation with the readers’ opinion returns, I believe, in the African trauma authors’ insistence on the communicability of a traumatic experience and in their use of comprehensible narratives. Both slave narratives and African trauma narratives are thus forms of engaged literature: they want to end a social injustice by accurately describing it and its traumatic consequences but at the same time they have to try not to alienate the reader whose help they need in the struggle for social change.

4. Introduction to Child Soldiers

The existence of child soldiers is not only an African, but a global problem. It is also not a recent problem, since boys under the age of 18 also fought in wars such as World War I, and the Civil War in the United States, which was sometimes called “the boys’ war” (Rosen 5). Various studies dealing with child soldiering estimate that “there are approximately three hundred thousand child soldiers at any point in time” (Wessells, Child Soldiers 9). One should keep in mind that the number three hundred thousand is only an estimation, since it is very difficult to acquire hard facts about child soldiers. Various obstacles thwart the obtainment of an exact figure: many commanders of non-state organizations successfully cloak the number of child soldiers they have in their ranks, the date of birth of some children is not known or not accurate, armed conflict causes mass displacements and confusion which impedes
accurate registration, et cetera (Wessells, *Child Soldiers* 8). Although most people think that only rebellious organisations use children in combat, governments as well recruit children on a large scale. Not surprisingly, these countries that signed a treaty against the use of child soldiering also try to hide the actual number of child soldiers who serve for them. The group “child soldiers” is not only composed of teenage boys who participate in the actual fighting, which is the standard image of child soldiers, but it also includes girls, young children, and those who fulfil other roles in the armed force. Michael Wessells, who stresses this diversity, therefore follows the definition which was set forth by the United Nation Children’s Fund: a child soldier is

_any person under 18 years of age who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters, messengers, and those accompanying such groups, other than purely as family members. Girls recruited for sexual purposes and forced marriage are included in this definition. It does not, therefore, only refer to a child who is carrying or has carried arms._ (qtd. in Wessells, *Child Soldiers* 7)

This definition thus emphasises the “highly diverse category” of child soldiers, but it is a Western definition and consequently not always applicable to the local African context (Wessells, *Child Soldiers* 7). In non-Western societies, the notions of “child” and “childhood” have a different cultural interpretation. Some of these societies regard a person “as an adult once he or she has completed the culturally scripted initiation ceremony or rite of passage into manhood or womanhood” (Wessells, *Child Soldiers* 5). These rites of passage are usually completed at the age of 14. Boys of 16 are thus considered as young adults and some societies therefore do not have problems with the sight of these boys carrying guns (Wessells, *Child Soldiers* 5). In accordance with these cultural differences concerning “child” and “childhood,” David Francis argues that “the tasks performed by child soldiers are the ‘new face’ of
traditional child labour practices across much of Africa‖ (217). In Africa, children of poor families are expected to help out their parents by doing domestic chores or other economic activities that bring in some extra money. Child soldiering in a war context is then regarded as a form of this culturally accepted child labour, especially since some armed forces pay the child soldiers for their services. After talking to former commanders and ex-child soldiers, Francis concludes that “there was a general consensus that the diverse support roles performed by children [in the armed force], excluding sexual slavery, were accepted as normal and expected domestic-economic-related activities performed by children” (217). Due to these cultural differences, it is very hard to construct a definite and all-including policy on the problem of child soldiering.

Civil wars are becoming more widespread than international wars and this situation brings with it various implications for children since the war comes to their homes and becomes a part of their daily life (Wessells, Child Soldiers 43). This makes it easier for commanders to recruit children. These commanders often prefer children for the “[c]onvenience, low cost, and impunity” (Wessells, Child Soldiers 33). Composing half of the population, children are available in large numbers in war zones where adult men are becoming more and more scarce and they are easily replaced. Child soldiers are also very cheap since most of them are not paid and those who do get money, receive very little. Furthermore, commanders know that they run very little risk of actually being punished after the war for using children as soldiers (Wessells, Child Soldiers 33-34). They are often not prosecuted because of “the fear by African governments of setting dangerous precedents, since they are also culpable of recruitment and use of child soldiers” (Francis 208). Children are also often preferred because they are “easy to manipulate, obedient and easy to train” (Francis 216). Child soldiers are so manipulated or terrorised that they obey all orders, even if their orders are to function as cannon fodder or to go on a suicide mission. The abundance of
civil wars is probably due to the proliferation of cheap light weapons or small arms, which "enables the arming of factions, creating a context ripe for armed conflict" (Wessells, *Child Soldiers* 19). These light weapons such as machine guns or the AK-47 assault rifle are easily handled by children and as such they become very effective and deadly fighters (Wessells, *Child Soldiers* 18-19).

Most people think that all child soldiers have been abducted by rebels, but Michael Wessells stresses in his book *Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection* that these children can also be conscious actors who deliberately choose to participate in the armed conflict. These child soldiers are then not "passive pawns in armed conflict," since they can "find meaning and identity" in the struggle in which they are involved (Wessells, "Child Soldiers, Peace Education" 365). Wessells distinguishes between two types of recruitment: forced and unforced recruitment. The three forms of forced recruitment or coercion are abduction, press ganging and recruitment by quota (*Child Soldiers* 37-42). Press ganging is a form of group abduction that consists of soldiers rounding up all the youths in marketplaces, in schools, and in other places. If soldiers use the tactic of recruitment by quota, they threaten to attack a village if they are not given a particular number of children to join their armed force. The village leaders are then faced with "the impossible choice of sacrificing children or sacrificing the entire village" and they usually decide on the first option (Wessells, *Child Soldiers* 41). Keeping in mind that every child responds differently to the same situation, Wessells also identifies various reasons for unforced recruitment and emphasises that these motives often interact in the child’s decision to join. (*Child Soldiers* 43-56). The reasons why children voluntarily join armed forces frequently have to do with their family and their social situation: they are from a poor or abusive family, they are separated from their parents or they are orphaned and seek a surrogate family, they are lured with the promise that they will receive money to support their family (which often proves to be a lie), et cetera. Many children also
enlist in an armed group because they want avenge the death of family members or because they agree with the ideology the group defends. Having been powerless all their lives, a large number of children join because the war experience promises excitement and power. When they carry a gun, these children feel that they have power and that they receive respect from adults, a feeling they have never felt before. War also destroys the whole social infrastructure, such as schools and hospitals, which causes a lack of basic provisions in the community. Children therefore join an armed force “because the armed group provides the only hope of food, medical support, or protection from further attack” (Wessells, Child Soldiers 47). A Congolese child soldier exemplifies this situation: “I heard that the rebels at least were eating. So, I joined them” (qtd. in Abbas 39). The future for children in war zones is very bleak and consequently they see the army “as the only ‘way-out’ of a no-hope situation” (Francis 213). If joining the army provides for these children “their best hope of survival and protection,” one then might wonder if their enlistment is really a voluntary choice (Wessells, Child Soldiers 43). Francis claims that “what may appear as ‘voluntary’ recruitment is only a form of lack of any alternative” (214).

Once they are inside the armed force, the children receive a “training” which often consists of terrorising and manipulating them. Wessells states, “Typically the training agenda is not to develop military or survival skills but to break children’s will and to achieve high levels of dominance and control” (Child Soldiers 58). The commanders want to ensure total obedience. This training often includes “[f]orced participation in killing . . . to harden new child recruits to violence and make the horrific seem normal” (Wessells, Child Soldiers 59). It is the beginning of “the process of desensitizing them to violence and the suffering of others” (Abbas 40). This process ultimately leads to the transformation of many child soldiers “into killing machines” with no sense of right and wrong, who are often “feared more than adult ones, precisely because of the horrifying cruelty of which they are capable” (Abbas 40).
These children are thus at the same time perpetrators of horrendous crimes and victims of abusive and cruel commanders. Before engaging into battle, child combatants are often forced to take drugs. These drugs create “a deadly mixture of fearlessness and uncontrolled violence” (Wessells, Child Soldiers 77). It comes as no surprise then that villagers are terrified of these drugged up child soldiers who are extremely violent and who “lack a full sense of their own mortality” (Wessells, “Child Soldiers, Peace Education” 364). To make child soldiers even more dependent upon the armed group, they are completely isolated from their family and their former lives. Some of these children even have to kill someone of their own family or village when they are recruited to make sure that they have nowhere to go if they try to escape (Wessells, “Child Soldiers, Peace Education” 364). The longer these children remain with an armed force, the more they start to “internalize the values and behaviors of the armed group” (Wessells, Child Soldiers 71). They actively shed their civilian identity by breaking with their previous civilian lives and redefining themselves as soldiers. Child combatants often actively construct these new soldier identities by assuming “a ‘combat name’ based on the qualities they exhibit in combat” and which often refers to Western war films (Wessells, Child Soldiers 83). These children accept the morals of the armed group and some even “learn to enjoy killing” (Wessells, Child Soldiers 83). For some of these children, the army even becomes their surrogate family. They are completely dependent upon it and often do not want to leave it when they have an opportunity to return to civilian life.

If children escape or are rescued from the armed force, a long and difficult process of reintegration awaits them. This process is very difficult since these child soldiers are severely traumatised and only know aggression and violence, but also because they often do not receive any help. Former child soldiers are often stigmatised and shunned by their community. The community members remember what the child sometimes had to do to one of his or her own villagers when he or she was recruited or they “fear living next door to
someone formerly known as ‘Rambo’” (Wessells, *Child Soldiers* 84). They do not always believe that the child can leave behind the morals of the armed force and truly re-adapt to civilian life. Stigmatisation is thus one of the major problems for the reintegration of former child soldiers. Ex-child soldiers who live in countries where the armed conflict is continuing are in permanent danger of re-recruitment, but even in countries where there is peace, former child soldiers are not always helped and protected. Francis emphasises that “civil war peace settlements have shown a markedly lukewarm approach to the rehabilitation and reintegration of former child soldiers” (209). These settlements include disarmament and demobilisation of child soldiers, but they do not incorporate guidelines on “the social and psychological reintegration” of ex-child soldiers (Francis 209). These countries think that former child soldiers are “permanently damaged” and “beyond redemption” and they therefore treat former child soldiers as a “lost generation” (Francis 209). They see these children as “born assassins” who cannot be helped (Wessells, “Child Soldiers” 37). Wessells, however, after visiting an Interim Care Center (ICC) in Sierra Leone, does believe in “human resilience and potential for change” (“Child Soldiers” 39). He stresses that there is always hope for former child soldiers and that children are much more resilient than one would think. For Wessells, the healing process begins in ICCs which are “transitional spaces where children live for two weeks to six months or longer . . . while their families are located and preparations [are] made for family reunification” (*Child Soldiers* 159). These ICCs provide “basic health services” as well as “psychological support” (*Child Soldiers* 159). It is thus the place where the individual healing of the child begins. Wessells emphasises that individual healing is not enough, there is also a need for collective healing if the child is to be successfully rehabilitated. War destroys whole communities and collective healing is thus “a social process of repairing relationships, building social trust, and rebuilding the physical environment in a manner that enables people to act as communities, meet basic needs, and perform their culturally scripted roles”
(Wessells, *Child Soldiers* 138). There has to be a community first before a former child soldier can safely return to his or her family. Healing is thus “a reciprocal process of self-transformation and social transformation, leading to improved relations between child soldiers and communities” (Wessells, *Child Soldiers* 201). This bond between former child soldiers and the community is further strengthened if these children are willing to undergo a traditional spiritual healing. During these rituals, child soldiers are cleansed from “the spiritual impurities acquired during the war” (Wessells, *Child Soldier* 194). These rituals also contribute to communal healing because “[l]ocal people view spiritual pollution as a collective threat” (*Child Soldiers* 194). They thus cleanse the former child soldiers and as such they “restore harmony between the living community and the ancestors” (*Child Soldiers* 194). Spiritual healing alone, of course, does not provide a better future for these children. Ex-child soldiers themselves “identify education as one of their top priorities, because having an education expands their life opportunities and creates hope for the future” (Wessells, *Child Soldiers* 206). These children are also very eager to learn vocational skills so that they can earn an income and gain respect from others. (Wessells, *Child Soldiers* 203). Education as well as vocational skills are of major importance for these former child soldiers because it provides hope for a better future and because it is a way to leave behind their soldier identity and adopt a civilian one (Wessells, *Child Soldiers* 204).
5. **Ishmael Beah: A Long Way Gone: The True Story of a Child Soldier**

5.1. Introduction

*A Long Way Gone: The True Story of a Child Soldier* is a memoir written by former child soldier Ishmael Beah. In this memoir, Beah describes the civil war that destroyed his mother country Sierra Leone between 1991 and 2002 and how it affected his life in various ways. Beah’s story begins with the attack of the rebels of the RUF (Revolutionary United Front) on his village Mogbwemo in 1993 which leads to the separation from his family and which causes the twelve-year old Beah to wander, alone or with a group of boys, around the countryside for months. After learning that his family has been killed by the rebels, Beah decides to join the government army at the age of 13 in search of protection and food. In the army, the child Ishmael transforms into a ruthless and drug-addicted child soldier who only wants to avenge the deaths of his loved ones. Beah leaves the army two years later when he is placed in the rehabilitation centre Benin Home. In this centre, Beah slowly learns how to work through his trauma and how to come to terms with his past. Beah even finds an uncle whom he had never seen before and he goes to live with him and his family in Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone. Unfortunately, the war catches up with Beah as rebels and soldiers enter Freetown in 1997 and overthrow the President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah. For Beah, this situation “was beginning to be too familiar” (*A Long Way Gone* 204). Realising his limited options, Beah decides to flee to New York: “I had to leave, because I was afraid that if I stayed in Freetown any longer, I was going to end up being a soldier again or my former army friends would kill me if I refused” (*A Long Way Gone* 209). He succeeds in executing his
Anthonissen Evi

plan and finds a new mother in Laura Simms, a professional storyteller whom he met during a U.N. conference about child soldiers in 1996.

**A Long Way Gone** essentially deals with Ishmael Beah’s trauma and his attempts to work through it and the book is therefore a good representative of African trauma literature. In the following sections, I will discuss how Dominick LaCapra’s trauma theory can be applied to Beah’s experience, the dispute about the veracity of his account and the objective Beah had in mind when he wrote the book.

5.2. **A Long Way Gone and LaCapra’s Trauma Theory**

When Beah is roaming the countryside, he is traumatised by all the terrible things he sees and by the stories he hears about atrocities that rebels and soldiers have committed. After seeing a mother rocking her dead baby, Beah says, “The image of that woman and her baby plagued my mind as we walked back to Mattru Jong. I barely noticed the journey, and when I drank water I didn’t feel any relief even though I knew I was thirsty” (**A Long Way Gone** 14). According to LaCapra, a trauma victim acts out his or her trauma when he or she suffers from vivid and compulsive flashbacks and nightmares because the traumatic experience has not yet been integrated into his or her life. During his months as a refugee, Beah is stuck in this stage of acting-out. He comes across many horrendous scenes and he is unable to forget these sights since they keep popping up in flashbacks and nightmares against his will:

> I had passed through burnt villages where dead bodies of men, women, and children of all ages were scattered like leaves on the ground after a storm. . . . I had seen heads cut off by machetes, smashed by cement bricks, and rivers filled with so much blood that the water had ceased flowing. Each time my mind replayed these scenes, I increased my pace. Sometimes I closed my eyes
Anthonissen Evi 48

hard to avoid thinking, but the eye of my mind refused to be closed and continued to plague me with images. (*A Long Way Gone* 49)

Beah tries to stop thinking about these traumatic scenes by busying himself with other things, which is, according to Herman, a common practice among trauma survivors (46). He even tries to resist falling asleep because he fears that “my suppressed thoughts would appear in my dreams” (*A Long Way Gone* 52). He fails miserably, however, since he cannot control his flashbacks and nightmares. Beah’s trauma also manifests itself in his severe migraines. During these headaches, Beah sees in his “mind’s eye . . . sparks of flame, flashes of scenes I had witnessed, and the agonizing voices of children and women would come alive in my head” (*A Long Way Gone* 103).

During his time in the army, Ishmael Beah is in the stage that LaCapra calls “denial.” Beah denies the traumatic effect these war experiences have on him. The most traumatic experience of his two years as a child soldier is his first contact with actual combat. During this scene, Beah unconsciously turns to numbing as a defence mechanism. Beah describes his first mission and the way it affects in him in the following passage:

I lay there with my gun pointed in front of me, unable to shoot. My index finger had become numb. The forest had begun to spin. I felt as if the ground had turned upside down and I was going to fall off, so I clutched the base of a tree with one hand. I couldn’t think, but I could hear the sounds of the guns far away in the distance and the cries of people dying in pain. I had begun to fall into some sort of nightmare. . . . The gunshots faded in my head, and it was as if my heart had stopped and the whole world had come to a standstill. I covered [Josiah’s] eyes with my fingers and pulled him from the tree stump. His backbone had been shattered. I placed him flat on the ground and picked up my
gun. I did not realize that I had stood up to take Josiah off the tree stump. I felt someone tugging at my foot. It was the corporal; he was saying something that I couldn’t understand. His mouth moved and he looked terrified. He pulled me down, and as I hit the ground, I felt my brain shaking in my skull again and my deafness disappeared. (A Long Way Gone 117-118)

After that first day of fighting, Beah states: “I went for supper that night, but was unable to eat. I only drank water and felt nothing. As I walked back to my tent, I stumbled into a cement wall. My knee bled, but I didn’t feel a thing. . . . Nothing happened in my head. It was void, and I stared at the roof of the tent until I was miraculously able to doze off” (A Long Way Gone 120). This event marks for Beah the beginning of his transformation into a vicious child soldier since he “had no problem shooting my gun” after this first mission (A Long Way Gone 120). Later on, he claims that this experience “triggered something inside me that I didn’t understand, and made me lose compassion for others. I lost my real being. I lost my sense of self. After crossing that line, I was not a normal kid. I was a traumatized kid. I became completely unaware of the dangerous and crooked road that my life was taking” (“When Good Comes From Bad”). The drugs he is fed on a daily basis also contribute to the numbing of his emotions and to his transformation into a fierce killer (Enough Rope). The drugs numb him to such an extent that he does not even feel pain when he is shot in the foot: “I remember feeling a tingle in my spine, but I was too drugged to really feel the pain, even though my foot had begun to swell” (A Long Way Gone 157). In addition, his life in the army is structured in such a way that the child soldiers never have time to think about what they are forced to do. In an interview with Andrew Denton, Beah states that

there was never a time to really think, slow down and be able to sit, reflect anything. There was no time to second guess. The commanders made it in such a way that you had no time to sit by yourself or if we’re in the war front we’re
in attacking a town or village, we’re bringing some things we have looted to the base, we were doing drugs, or we were watching a war film or we were having a killing exhibition or we were, you know, shooting the guns to test them or there was always some form of violence going on. There was never a time to reflect or to think about something else you know. (Enough Rope)

Beah is thus in complete denial of his trauma during his whole time in the army. Even his migraines, which were emblematic of his acting out of his trauma during his months as a refugee, “stopped as my daily activities were replaced with more soldierly things” (A Long Way Gone 121). This life as a soldier becomes his only reality and Beah does not perceive it as traumatic: “The idea of death didn’t cross my mind at all and killing had become as easy as drinking water. My mind had not only snapped during the first killing, it had also stopped making remorseful records, or so it seemed” (A Long Way Gone 122). Denial, however, is not a good mechanism to try to cope with trauma and the trauma victim cannot escape its effects, even if he or she succeeds in temporarily repressing the trauma. Beah denies his trauma during his war years, but it nevertheless comes back during his rehabilitation process: “In fact, most of the horrible events that I went through didn’t affect me until after I was taken out of the army and put into a psycho-social therapy home years later” (Beah, “When Good Comes From Bad”).

After two years of fighting, Beah is chosen by his lieutenant to participate in a rehabilitation process at Benin Home. It is in this therapy home that his unintegrated trauma comes back to haunt him. According to Alissa Swango, Beah does not only suffer from “physical withdrawal from the drugs,” but also from “emotional withdrawal from the people to whom he’d become attached.” The army had become his family and he unwillingly had to leave them in order to be rehabilitated. During rehabilitation, Beah, as well as the other boys, has various flashbacks and nightmares: “But at night some of us would wake up from
nightmares, sweating, screaming, and punching our own heads to drive out the images that continued to torment us even when we were no longer asleep” (A Long Way Gone 148). He is thus acting out his trauma that he denied during his war years. Beah’s nightmares are at times so vivid that he even “couldn’t tell whether I had had a dream or not” (A Long Way Gone 165). One of Beah’s recurrent nightmares is that “a faceless gunman had tied me up and begun to slit my throat with the zigzag edge of his bayonet. I would feel the pain that the knife inflicted as the man sawed my neck. I’d wake up sweating and throwing punches in the air” (A Long Way Gone 149). Beah also has flashbacks that confront him with the atrocities he committed: “I tried to think about my childhood days, but it was impossible, as I began getting flashbacks of the first time I slit a man’s throat. The scene kept surfacing in my memory like lightning on a dark rainy night, and each time it happened, I heard a sharp cry in my head that made my spine hurt” (A Long Way Gone 160). Another symptom of the stage of acting-out is that trauma survivors have hallucinations in which they can make no distinction anymore between reality and what they imagine:

Whenever I turned on the tap water, all I could see was blood gushing out. I would stare at it until it looked like water before drinking or taking a shower. Boys sometimes ran out of the hall screaming, “The rebels are coming.” Other times, the younger boys sat by rocks weeping and telling us that the rocks were their dead families. Then there were those instances when we would ambush the staff members, tie them up, and interrogate them about the whereabouts of their squad, where they got their supplies of arms and ammunition, drugs, and food. (A Long Way Gone 145)

In the centre, the boys are very aggressive and they resort to violence to vent their frustration at having to leave their squad behind and having to listen to civilians. They attack people who live next to the centre as well as the staff members and “[w]hen there was no one else to fight,
the boys fought one another” (Abbas 42). “We began to fight each other day and night,” Beah recalls. “We would fight for hours in between meals, for no reason at all” (A Long Way Gone 139). Beah’s migraines also resurface again during his time at Benin Home. “My head began to hurt,” Beah notes the first night at the centre (A Long Way Gone 137). During his withdrawal process, Beah’s “migraines had returned with a vengeance. It was as if a blacksmith had an anvil in my head” (A Long Way Gone 140). These flashbacks, nightmares, and other symptoms of trauma only appear belatedly in the rehabilitation centre because the boys finally have time to reflect about their past experiences. Beah eloquently describes this process: “But we were still traumatized and now that we had time to think, the fastened mantle of our war memories slowly began to open” (A Long Way Gone 145). Even though these memories are painful, Beah understands that he has to come to terms with them in order to remember his life before the war and to be able to live on in the present: “The war memories had formed a barrier that I had to break in order to think about any moment in my life before the war” (A Long Way Gone 149). He knows that acting-out is a necessary stage in trying to cope with trauma. It is noteworthy that the reader learns more about Beah’s war experiences in these flashbacks during his rehabilitation process than when he describes his soldier’s life in the book. “In this way,” Eaglestone claims, “the text echoes the accounts of trauma that stress that the events are not experienced as they happen but only afterwards, in fragmentary and broken ways, as the self struggles to work through and reintegrate itself” (83). Not only does Beah himself experience these traumatic events belatedly, he also echoes this process in the structure of his account so that the reader has a better understanding of trauma. The reader goes through a similar process as Beah since he or she only belatedly knows what Beah has gone through in his war years.

In Benin Home, Beah slowly learns how to work through his trauma. To achieve this stage of working-through, LaCapra promotes narrative as a way of coping with trauma
because it helps the trauma victim to understand and come to terms with what happened to him or her. At the rehabilitation centre, Beah gradually starts telling his story to the nurse Esther. She thus becomes his necessary first listener, his “other,” who enables Beah to talk about his past (Felman and Laub 70). According to Herman, trauma survivors often feel excessive guilt and she therefore stresses the need for a listener who can help to reduce this guilt by simply listening to the survivor without blaming him or her for the occurrence of a traumatic experience (68). And this is exactly what Esther does for Beah. She listens to the atrocities he committed without blaming him: “I only liked talking to her because I felt that she didn’t judge me for what I had been a part of; she looked at me with the same inviting eyes and welcoming smile that said I was a child” (A Long Way Gone 166). She makes him realise that he is still a child and that the army did not destroy his whole childhood. By talking to Esther, Beah realises that his life as a soldier was not normal and instead of boasting about how tough he was as a soldier, he “began to cringe at the gruesome details” (A Long Way Gone 166). He eventually starts trusting Esther and she even succeeds in convincing him that he is not responsible for what happened to him: “None of these things are your fault,’ she would always say sternly at the end of every conversation. Even though I had heard that phrase from every staff member—and frankly I had always hated it—I began that day to believe it. It was the genuine tone in Esther’s voice that made the phrase finally begin to sink into my mind and heart” (A Long Way Gone 165-166). Beah finally believes that it is not his fault and this alleviates part of his guilt and enhances the process of working through his trauma. Beah thus achieves a certain degree of working-through, but he realises that he will never be completely healed and that his traumatic experiences will always be a part of him. He will never be able to leave his trauma behind because a traumatic experience, Dori Laub notes, “invariably plays a decisive formative role in who one comes to be, and in how one comes to live one’s life” (Felman and Laub 86). In the book, there is a chapter about his
current life in New York in which Beah shows the reader that he could not leave his trauma behind by leaving Sierra Leone: “I tried to think about my new life in New York City, where I had been for over a month. But my mind wandered across the Atlantic Ocean back to Sierra Leone” (A Long Way Gone 19). In the same chapter, Beah recognises that his traumatic experience had a decisive impact on his life when he says that he sometimes wished he “could wash away [these painful memories], even though I am aware that they are an important part of what my life is; who I am now” (A Long Way Gone 19). In an interview later on, he claims that he has learned to live with his memories and nightmares “because my life before the war, during the war and after the war all makes me who I am today -- whether I like it or not” (Guthmann). While living with his uncle, Beah still suffers from nightmares as well as from flashbacks. These flashbacks, which can occur in every situation, are caused by “‘triggers’ or associative conditions” (Vickroy 12). The trauma survivor sees something that reminds him or her of the traumatic experience and he or she is then cast back to this event. This happens to Beah when he visits a nightclub in Freetown with his cousin Allie: “A memory of a town we had attacked during a school dance had been triggered. I could hear the terrified cries of teachers and students, could see the blood cover the dance floor. Allie tapped me on the shoulder and brought me back to the present” (A Long Way Gone 184). Even now, Beah still experiences these flashbacks since “the faces of people on the street will sometimes remind him of people he killed and the very bad days of his youth” (Luscombe, Grossman, and Crumley). He claims that he lives in “three worlds: my dreams, and the experiences of my new life, which trigger memories from the past” (A Long Way Gone 20).

In order to come to terms with and work through trauma, trauma theorists have often stressed the role of narrative, and especially written narrative. Sophia Richman, who promotes all forms of “creative transformation of trauma” as effective for self-healing, asserts that “writing is particularly well suited for the integration of cognitive and emotional aspects of
self (Lepore & Smyth, 2002), especially when it is autobiographical. . . . In my experience, memoir writing especially lends itself to the restoration of a sense of continuity that was disrupted by trauma” (644). Writing his memoir was thus also a part of Beah’s working-through process. Revisiting his past was not an easy process for Beah because sometimes he “had to rewrite and re-traumatize myself over and over” (Guthmann). Nevertheless, writing the book “also became a form of therapy for me, which I didn’t expect. When I finished I knew that I had gone through something that had lightened some of my burden. In terms of putting it behind me, I don’t think I could ever forget what happened, but I’ve just learned to transform my experiences into something positive” (O’Reilly 6). Beah indeed turns his traumatic experiences into a positive narrative by focussing more on the effects of war than on his years as a child soldier. His time at the rehabilitation centre where he regains his humanity receives more attention in the book than his years in the army where he is transformed into a killing machine. He offers hope to those who have been or are in the same situation and he is optimistic about the future of former child soldiers. He firmly believes in the rehabilitation of ex-child soldiers and names himself as living proof: “‘We can be rehabilitated,’ I would emphasize, and point to myself as an example. I would always tell people that I believe children have the resilience to outlive their sufferings, if given a chance” (A Long Way Gone 169). At the same time, however, Beah also recognises that he was lucky and that the reintegration of former child soldiers often fails due to several problems (Ishmael Beah). The most poignant example of this failure is Mambu, a boy who was also rehabilitated in Benin Home, but who ended up going “back to the front lines, because his family refused to take him in” (A Long Way Gone 180).

Another important concept in LaCapra’s trauma theory is the notion of empathic unsettlement. Empathic unsettlement promotes the virtual experience on the part of the reader: he or she affectively feels for the trauma victim but this empathy does not turn into over-
identification. In *A Long Way Gone*, it is very difficult to identify with the protagonist since Beah is an ambiguous figure who is both victim and perpetrator at the same time. According to Tal, this vague situation is due to the combat conditions in which the soldier is “both victim and victimizer; dealing pain as well as receiving and experiencing it” (138). This ambiguity destroys the notion that there are good guys and bad guys in war. Having been in this ambiguous situation, Beah states, “During the context of war everyone becomes the bad guy. There are no good guys because war forces you to do inhuman things. It never goes the way you think it will. It always brings out the worst in you. It stays with you for the rest of your life” (O’Reilly 7-8). Beah even claims that in the context of war you not only “dehumanise other people in order to kill them,” but that “you also dehumanise yourself” (O’Reilly 5). In the scenes in which Beah describes the atrocities he committed during his time as a child soldier, it becomes very hard for the reader to sympathise with him. He becomes a ruthless killing machine during these years, a journey which he claims is easy in comparison to the rehabilitation process (O’Reilly 6). During the short training they receive, the army superiors try to indoctrinate the child soldiers and try to instil hatred for the rebels into them by constantly repeating the same sentence: “Visualize the enemy, the rebels who killed your parents, your family, and those who are responsible for everything that has happened to you” (*A Long Way Gone* 112). This line has an immediate impact on Beah and at the end of the first day of training he is ready for revenge: “I could become angry, yes, begin to visualize scenarios of shooting or stabbing a rebel. ‘The rebels are responsible for everything that has happened to you.’ I imagined capturing several rebels at once, locking them inside a house, sprinkling gasoline on it, and tossing a match. We watch it burn and I laugh” (*A Long Way Gone* 113). In the army, Beah sheds his civilian identity and adopts a new soldier identity. This transition is marked by the burning of his rap cassettes (*A Long Way Gone* 110). These cassettes proved Beah’s innocence to the suspicious people of the various villages he
encountered while roaming the country, and they are therefore the symbol of his childhood. The destruction of the cassettes thus symbolises the destruction of Beah’s childhood. Beah unwillingly becomes a child soldier, but he quickly finds a sense of meaning in his new army life: “I stood there holding my gun and felt special because I was part of something that took me seriously and I was not running from anyone anymore” (A Long Way Gone 124). As it is the only reality he knows, Beah transforms into a cruel child soldier who completely depends on his squad and who kills without having remorse: “My squad was my family, my gun was my provider and protector, and my rule was to kill or be killed. The extent of my thoughts didn’t go much beyond that. We had been fighting for over two years, and killing had become a daily activity. I felt no pity for anyone. My childhood had gone by without my knowing, and it seemed as if my heart had frozen” (A Long Way Gone 126). According to Herman, Beah’s reliance upon his squad is normal in a war situation since soldiers from the same combat group often develop “a shared fantasy that their mutual loyalty and devotion can protect them from harm. They come to fear separation from one another more than they fear death” (62). In the book, Beah does not protect himself, but shows the reader his darkest innermost being. He could have lied by portraying himself as an unwilling child soldier who did not want to be part of the army. Instead, Beah describes his real thoughts and feelings and states that he enjoyed being part of his squad and that he did not want to leave this life behind. He does not only depict the atrocities, but also how he feels about them. An example of this is when he participates in a contest in which the winner is the one whose prisoner dies first: “I didn’t feel a thing for him, didn’t think that much about what I was doing. I just waited for the corporal’s order. The prisoner was simply another rebel who was responsible for the death of my family, as I had come to truly believe. The corporal gave the signal with a pistol shot and I grabbed the man’s head and slit his throat in one fluid motion” (A Long Way Gone 124-125). Beah thus shows the reader that he really was a ruthless child soldier, and this makes it very hard
for the reader to sympathise with him. As a reader, you know that he is a victim, but at the same time you see him as a cruel perpetrator who does terrible things and with whom you cannot identify. If Beah had described himself as a reluctant child soldier, he would have received more empathy from the reader, but Beah knows that that is not the reality of a child soldier’s situation. It is admirable that he did not spare himself in order to portray the real plight of child soldiers. Even though the depiction of various atrocities and his feelings about them might distress himself and the reader, it helps the reader to understand the reality of child soldiers and as such real solutions to this problem can be developed. Today, Beah himself is also more disgusted by what he was than by what he did: “The thing that causes me to wince most is when I remember all the really bad stuff we did that I laughed at. You wonder how anyone with a soul could do that” (Luscombe, Grossman, and Crumley). It becomes even more difficult for the reader to identify with Beah when he is transported to Benin Home. When he is taken out of the army, Beah becomes very angry because he does not want to leave his squad: “What was happening? . . . Why had the lieutenant decided to give us up to these civilians? We thought that we were part of the war until the end. The squad had been our family. Now we were being taken away, just like that, without any explanation” (A Long Way Gone 129-130). The fact that Beah does not want to leave the army is quite a surprise for the reader. Our common belief is that child soldiers would be happy to leave the war behind, but Beah proves that this is not the case. Child soldiers often do not want to leave the war because they have become so attached to their squad and their soldier life. In Benin Home, Beah and the other boys are very aggressive towards the staff members. Beah says that “we would throw bowls, spoons, food, and benches at them. We would chase them out of the dining hall and beat them up” (A Long Way Gone 138). For the reader, this is the most disturbing part since you cannot understand the boys’ violence towards these people who want to help them. You realise that these boys had to commit atrocities in
the war because they had no other choice, but it is at Benin Home that you see how brainwashed these children really are. Having been soldiers, the boys believe that there is a “stark difference” between soldiers and civilians (Enough Rope). They therefore cannot cope with being “told what to do by civilians” because “[a] few days earlier, we could have decided whether they would live or die” (A Long Way Gone 138). Nevertheless, the staff members do not give up on them and the boys slowly start appreciating them. Beah now calls these workers “truly heroic” (Luscombe, Grossman, and Crumley). It is also very difficult for the reader to identify with Beah because the experience he describes is so alien to the common reader. Most readers of this book will probably not even know anyone who has been a child soldier. But by representing this extreme experience from within, Beah tries to give the reader a better understanding of the plight of child soldiers. According to Vickroy, “trauma narrativists immerse us in individual experiences of terror, arbitrary rules, and psychic breakdown so that we might begin to appreciate these situations” (34). Beah thus exposes his innermost being so that the Western reader might begin to understand the reality of child soldiers. What is also unsettling for the reader is that the book shows how a normal boy who fears violence can be quite easily transformed into a ruthless killing machine. It suggests that this dehumanisation can happen to anyone and this was precisely Beah’s intention: “One thing that I want people to know is that what happened to Sierra Leone was very difficult, but I don’t want people to think that only in Africa, or Asia or Latin America, are people capable of losing their humanity. Everyone has that capacity. It’s part of our nature. We can lose it, and we can regain it” (Ishmael Beah). Everyone can become dehumanised in the “right” circumstances.
5.3. Controversy: Memoir and Truth

The dispute about the veracity of *A Long Way Gone* started in January 2008 when *The Australian* discovered various inaccuracies in Beah’s account. It all began when an Australian mining engineer named Bob Lloyd was relocated to the Sierra Rutile mine, a mine which is close to Mogbwemo. When he told his employees that he had read *A Long Way Gone*, one of them claimed that he was Beah’s father. Beah, however, asserts that his family died in a rebel attack. *The Australian*, when they found out about it, set about investigating this contradiction and they discovered that the man who claimed to be Beah’s father is only a relative. They confirmed that Beah is indeed an orphan, but during their investigations, the journalists of *The Australian* found other discrepancies in Beah’s story. The first and most significant inaccuracy they discovered involves the date of the attack on Mogbwemo and thus also the start of Beah’s life as a refugee and child soldier. Beah claims that rebels attacked his village in January 1993, but the people *The Australian* interviewed who lived in the same village insist that the attack happened in January 1995. This “would mean Beah would have been not 12 but 14 at the time of the mine attack, and not 13 but possibly 15 when he was eventually forced into the Sierra Leone army” (Gare). In the same article, Shelley Gare, one of the journalists of *The Australian*, then concludes that because of the fact that Beah was rehabilitated in January 1996 and because he claims that he was a refugee for about 10 months, Beah could not have spent two years in the army but rather two or three months. After this discovery, *The Australian* published a series of articles about *A Long Way Gone* which dealt with other strange discrepancies. These include the deadly fight at the rehabilitation centre, about which they could not find any evidence, and the inaccurate map at the beginning of the book. In a statement following these articles, Beah stands by his story. He claims that *The Australian* based its reports on the fact that the rebels closed down the Sierra Rutile Mine in 1995 and that the attack which he describes in his book was one of the
various sporadic attacks of the rebels during 1993 and 1994: “My story, as I remember it and wrote it, began in 1993 . . . there were rebels in my region, my village, and my life in 1993. They attacked throughout 1993 and 1994 before closing down the mine” (“Ishmael Beah’s Statement to the Press”). “I was right about my family,” Beah asserts. “I am right about my story. This is not something one gets wrong. . . . Sad to say, my story is all true” (“Ishmael Beah’s Statement to the Press”). To explain to the reader why he was still able to recall so many details of his past life while writing the book, Beah states in A Long Way Gone that “[t]o this day, I have an excellent photographic memory that enables me to remember details of the day-to-day moments of my life, indelibly” (51). According to Graham Rayman, this was a “major tactical mistake” because when critics started raising questions about his account, Beah “had less room to maneuver than if he’s simply said he’d done his best to remember things as accurately as possible.” Due to his claim that he has a photographic memory, Beah cannot call in the normal fallacies of the human memory as an argument in the dispute.

The truth of what really happened in Beah’s life and whether or not he (consciously) changed parts of his story will never be known, but one might wonder how these inaccuracies slipped into his account. Studying autobiography and trauma narratives and the element of fiction that is present in both, Leigh Gilmore states:

People make things up for a variety of reasons. Some fall within the domain of memory, some seem specific to trauma, and many point to some relation between the two. Are the mechanisms by which we remember similar to the ones that permit (or compel) us to forget? Is memory simply faulty, like a machine that breaks down from time to time, or does it fail because it must? Sometimes people augment memory by allowing context to supply missing information, sometimes the invented version is how they remember an
experience, sometimes another’s memories become one’s own because they make a kind of symbolic sense that what really happened fails to provide. More controversially, perhaps, people invent because telling a story a particular way makes it “better.” Most controversial is the perennial claim that fiction offers truths that fact cannot. (47)

Peter Wilson, a journalist of *The Australian*, believes that Beah embellished his story to make it more gruesome so that he would receive more attention and that he “then got locked into it” (Rayman). Similarly, Neil Boothby, an expert on child soldiers, thinks it is “possible that Beah may have exaggerated his account at the prompting of aid workers and others—recognizing that the worse the story, the more assistance he would receive” (Rayman). Boothby notes that child refugees are often encouraged by different people “to tell the sensational stories” since “[t]he system is set up to reward sensational stories” (Rayman).

If Beah had wanted to make his story as spectacular as possible, however, he could have focussed more on his war experiences. The focus of the book is on his rehabilitation process and this makes the book less sensational than if it had dealt primarily with his life as a soldier. A more innocent explanation of the inaccuracies is that Beah went through a very traumatic experience and that this trauma complicates Beah’s act of testifying about his past because, as all trauma critics agree, a trauma survivor does not consciously experience the traumatic event while it is happening. As a result, he or she cannot remember it like normal occurrences later on. One should also not forget that Beah was still a child when he was confronted with a traumatic experience, that there was no structure in his life at that point and that he was constantly given drugs. All of this had an effect on Beah’s memory. Another former child soldier testifies that “[a] lot of us do not know our own childhoods,” because “[w]e were fed drugs all the time and we were very, very young...when you lose your family there is nobody to tell you things like your age” (Nelson 6). The inaccuracies in his story could thus just be
part of how he remembers his childhood. This would mean that Beah did not embellish his story on purpose but that he wrote his story how he remembers it, while his memory has its fallacies (even though he does not want to admit that).

As I already discussed in the chapter “Autobiography: Trauma, Truth and Fiction,” readers expect the truth in a memoir and if faults are discovered in it, they feel cheated and think that the whole text is a lie. I have also noted that critics do accept that fiction is always present in autobiographical writing and that this does not invalidate the whole story.

Nevertheless, in this case, various people have problems with the fact that Beah may not represent the truth and they might have applied too much scrutiny on the book. An example of this scrutiny is the questions that people have raised around Beah’s claim that he was shot three times in his foot. Janice Harayda, an editor, finds this scene quite peculiar because she believes that “such wounds [would] cause lasting injury—at the least, a permanent limp” (Rayman). Rayman then contacted Vincent DiMaio, an expert on gunshot wounds, who says that Beah’s account is unlikely “but not medically impossible.” DiMaio also tells Rayman that “it’s common for wounded soldiers to believe that they’ve been shot when, in fact, they were actually hit with shrapnel.” Beah thus might have been hit with shrapnel while believing that real bullets entered his foot, but this actually does not matter. One may also not forget that Beah was so drugged during this attack that he even hardly felt any pain and thus did not experience it consciously. The discrepancy between his experience (a bullet) and possible reality (shrapnel) makes no difference for the effectiveness of the account. But this controversy might make other trauma survivors refrain from writing their stories for fear of being accused of lying (Gilmore 3). The journalists’ quest for the truth is understandable. However, it may not keep trauma survivors from writing their stories because “witness accounts are valuable not only (or not primarily) for a historical reconstruction of fact but rather for a reconstruction of experienced history” (Codde 54). The first objective of
autobiographical trauma narratives is not to give “a historical reconstruction of fact” but “an empathetic understanding of what it was like” (Codde 53). And this is precisely what Beah does: “*He did not write a history of the whole war, he wrote about his experiences*” (Beah, “Ishmael Beah’s Statement to the Press”).

Despite the controversy, all parties agree that Beah went through a terrible experience and that he made an immense contribution to making people aware of the problem of child soldiers with this book and with the ensuing speeches he is giving around the world. That is also the reason why Boothby never openly attacked Beah even though he has his doubts about his memoir. “I’ve refrained from any sort of comment or criticism because I would hate to see something like this undermine the human-rights momentum,” he told Rayman. “[Beah’s] a very courageous, very eloquent spokesman.” Due to the effectiveness of his account, a lot of people are prepared to accept the inaccuracies as typical of the memoir genre. Primus St. John, a professor of English, asserts that “[g]etting everything perfectly accurate is not exactly the point in memoir. That’s an interestingly naïve perception of the genre. After all, fiction tells truth as well” (Rayman). He is thus “willing to accept some measure of error in a powerfully told tale” (Rayman). After all, St. John concludes, “[h]ell is hell, no matter how long you were in it” (Rayman).

5.4. Ishmael Beah’s Social Objective

Even though writing his story helped Ishmael Beah to work through his trauma, he did not have this goal in mind when he started writing it. He primarily wrote it for other child soldiers who are not as lucky as him and to bring attention to their situation. His book is therefore dedicated “*to all the children of Sierra Leone who were robbed of their childhoods*” (*A Long Way Gone*). Beah desires that “his story serve as the specific that illuminates the
universal, acting as a conduit into the lives of the estimated 30,000 or so child soldiers now recovering from their experiences in Sierra Leone” (O’Reilly 4). Being one of the few child soldiers who was able to escape completely from war, Beah feels that he has a mission to illuminate the plight of these child soldiers. According to Aberbach, some trauma survivors testify about their experiences because they perceive it “as the purpose for which he has been granted life” (21). They feel that they stayed alive for a reason. They survived so that they could tell the stories of the people who died and could help in changing an ongoing situation. And this is precisely what Beah is trying to do: he tells his own story and those of others, and hopes that this will lead to social action. Writing about his past was not easy for Beah because it confronted him with the terrible things he did but he believes that his self-sacrifice is only “a small price to pay to expose what continues to happen to children all over the world” (O’Reilly 3). Beah’s willingness to go through a difficult experience in order to save others is also clear in the story he incorporated at the end of the book. This story, which was told to the children in his village, is about a hunter who tries to kill a monkey but just before he pulls the trigger, the monkey says, “If you shoot me, your mother will die, and if you don’t, your father will die” (A Long Way Gone 217). The children are then asked what they would do in the hunter’s place. This creates a dilemma for the children and they never find an acceptable solution. Beah, however, tells the reader that he did have an answer: “I concluded to myself that if I were the hunter, I would shoot the monkey so that it would no longer have the chance to put other hunters in the same predicament” (A Long Way Gone 218).

Being a typical African trauma narrative, A Long Way Gone is aimed at the West, and especially at the US (Eaglestone 83-84). Beah wants to make the Western reader, a reader who has never experienced a civil war, understand the situation of child soldiers because he or she can help these children. This is also why African trauma narratives, in opposition to other trauma narratives, assert that trauma can be communicated and that it can be understood by
others who never experienced anything like it (Eaglestone 82). If the reader cannot grasp the trauma, then he or she cannot help. And this social action is crucial in African trauma narratives because they often deal with ongoing atrocities (Eaglestone 84). Beah thus believes that his traumatic experience is communicable and hopes that he can play a role in putting an end to the continuing practice of child soldiering by informing Western readers about it.

Beah’s aim is also apparent in the formal characteristics of the book. Beah does not use the post-traumatic style but instead he describes his trauma in a more realistic way. He does incorporate flashbacks and nightmares in his narrative but these are often announced: “It happened one night after I had fallen asleep while reading the lyrics of a song. . . . But that night I had a nightmare that was different from the ones I had been having” (A Long Way Gone 164). Post-traumatic techniques complicate the act of reading, and therefore often attract fewer readers, and this is precisely why Beah does not use them. He wants to make his trauma understandable and “reach as many readers as possible” and he knows that “[s]tyles and structures that increase the difficulty of reading will interfere with this goal” (Nance 89).

Beah does not want to scare off his readers who can help child soldiers by using experimental techniques. This is similar to the former slaves who did not incorporate gruesome details in their narratives so that they would not alienate their readers. Beah also slowly builds up the narrative. He does not start his story with his war experiences but first explains to the reader his previous life, how the war entered his life, and what caused him to become a child soldier.

Beah’s focus on social action becomes perhaps most apparent after reading his story. At the end of his book, Beah has included information about the civil war in Sierra Leone, about child soldiers and about Amnesty International and other charity organisations, including websites where people can make a donation. The reader is thus immediately told why and how he or she can help (former) child soldiers who are not as lucky as Beah.
6. **Uzodinma Iweala: Beasts of No Nation**

6.1. **Introduction**

*Beasts of No Nation* is a novel written by Uzodinma Iweala, an author who divides his time between America and Nigeria. The novel’s protagonist is Agu, a young boy who lives in an unnamed country with his father, his mother and his sister. He has an idyllic childhood until the war comes to his village. His mother and sister are rescued by the U.N., but the men stay behind to defend the village. After seeing his father being killed, Agu is forced to become a child soldier in a rebel group. During his time as a rebel, Agu has to commit various atrocities and he himself is sexually abused by the Commandant. Agu does not want to be a soldier and he constantly struggles with the morality of what he is being forced to do while trying to keep his own humanity. Ultimately, Agu escapes from the war and starts the long process of trying to work through his traumatic experiences.

Iweala’s novel primarily focuses on Agu’s inner moral struggle and not on the atrocities he and his companions commit (Deutsch). Because of this, Deutsch claims, the book does not turn into “mere social commentary.” In the following sections, I will discuss the formal techniques Iweala uses, Agu’s attempt to keep his humanity, and the possibility of redemption.

6.2. **Trauma Fiction and Post-traumatic Techniques**

Born in America, Uzodinma Iweala has never experienced civil war himself and he therefore turns to trauma fiction to discuss the topic of child soldiers. The fact that Iweala has not been a child soldier does not hinder his attempt to write about this traumatic experience because “fiction,” LaCapra states, “may well explore the traumatic” (“Trauma Studies” 132).
Thom Geier even claims that fiction is more suitable to describe this particular traumatic experience since “the tools of nonfiction are frankly inadequate to convey the enormity and moral complexity of a life like Agu’s.” He thus sees fiction as the only narrative form in which one can deal with such an enormous topic. Iweala himself asserts that fiction permits him “to take liberties, leaps of imagination that help to tell the story” (Child Soldiers). In fiction, the writer thus has more freedom to explore a particular situation because he or she does not have to represent a faithful reproduction of the facts (Child Soldiers). Iweala’s unwillingness to stick to the constraints of nonfiction is also apparent in his choice of an unnamed country as the setting of his novel. “Having the book set in an unspecified place and historical period,” Iweala says, “allowed me a lot more leeway and freedom to explore” (Page 27). Nevertheless, there are indications that Iweala is really talking about Nigeria. These include the fact that Iweala’s family is from Nigeria and the title of the book which probably refers to the song “Beasts of No Nation” by the Nigerian Afrobeat musician Fela Kuti (Eaglestone 80). By keeping the setting indeterminate, however, the book also implicitly refers to other countries where civil wars have erupted and where child soldiers are being used (Hawley 22). According to Main, this indeterminacy increases the horror of the book because “Beasts of No Nation equates to beasts of all nations” (67). Agu and his fellow soldiers thus symbolise all child soldiers that were or are part of a war.

At the formal level, Iweala uses some post-traumatic techniques in his novel to partly mimic the effects of trauma. First of all, Iweala’s book does not have a conventional linear sequence. The reader is immediately thrown into the action since the story starts when the rebels find Agu, who was in hiding, and force him to join them. The beginning is thus quite confusing for the reader (who is also not yet adapted to the particular language Iweala uses):

It is starting like this. I am feeling itch like insect is crawling on my skin, and then my head is just starting to tingle right between my eye, and then I am
wanting to sneeze because my nose is itching, and then air is just blowing into my ear and I am hearing so many thing: the clicking of insect, the sound of truck grumbling like one kind of animal, and then the sound of somebody shouting TAKE YOUR POSITION RIGHT NOW! QUICK! QUICK QUICK! MOVE WITH SPEED! MOVE FAST OH! in voice that is just touching my body like knife. (Beasts 1)

The novel thus “begins in medias res” with the rebel attack, but it “then flashes backwards to cover the past” while also describing Agu’s war experiences (Eaglestone 83). This contradiction between Agu’s memories of his idyllic childhood and his contemporary war reality further increases the horror and darkness of the story (Iweala, Uzodinma). These flashbacks sometimes pop up without warning but they are also often announced by Agu who states that these memories come back to him when he closes his eyes: “Behind my eye I am seeing how one day, the younger children began to be growing thinner” (Beasts 75). Agu also suffers from hallucinations in which he sometimes conflates his memories of his life before the war with his memories of the atrocities he committed:

We are opening the door of this house into room with sunlight that is having many window with all of the glass gone. I am knowing immediately that this place is school because I am seeing bench, and table, and blackboard . . .

Suddenly, I am standing here in this room but I am also standing in my classroom in the shadow, in the corner like what is happening when you are talking too much or if you are not doing your lesson proper. I am seeing all of the face I am knowing from home all sitting there and doing work and then I am looking at the woman who is writing lesson on the board. She is stepping like she is having limp but her body is looking like Mistress Gloria. She is writing, I will not kill, I will not kill. I will not kill, and everybody is writing in
their book, I will not kill, I will not kill excepting me because I am not having book. Then the teacher is turning around and looking at me and I am fearing because she is having the face of that woman I am killing with blood everywhere on her face and in her eye. She is saying to me, are you not understanding our lesson, even while she is walking to me with one sharp machete that is shining like the river is shining. When she is coming near to me, all of the face of the child are only the girl that they are using anyhow, that Strika is killing. I am starting to want to scream.

AGU!

I am hearing my name and then everything is map and I am standing inside the world looking at Commandant just looking at me. I am saying, yes Sah! Yes Sah! I am shouting and standing tenshun and trying to look like I am prouding and strong. (Beasts 129-130)

The abandoned school they are using as a shelter thus triggers in Agu a memory of the school he went to before the war and a memory of one of his killings. Another post-traumatic literary technique is the use of repetition (Whitehead 86). Words and phrases are often repeated in the book: “there is just blood, blood, blood” (Beasts 26). This repetition is a result, according to Iweala, of the influence of the oral storytelling tradition on the African novel (Uzodinma).

Another characteristic of this oral influence is the run-on sentences and the dialogues which are often not clearly separated from the portrayal of a particular situation. This can confuse the reader because it heightens the pace of reading in such a way that the reader sometimes has to stop and reread a passage in order to fully grasp what is going on in that particular passage.

The most striking feature of Iweala’s narrative is the language, which is his own adaptation of the pidgin English people speak in Nigeria (Iweala, Uzodinma). This particular
language causes some difficulties for the reader the first few pages, but he or she quickly adapts to it and realises that this is the only way Agu can speak. It is his voice. Iweala himself asserts that “[i]t was the only way that Agu could speak. The only way that I could get him to tell his story” (Verissimo). It was thus the character that created this particular language (Verissimo). Madelaine Hron claims that there is also a lack of language in this novel. According to her, this lack of language is connected to the author’s exploration of “a child’s ability to articulate or respond to the terror and trauma of war” (40). In the most traumatic and violent moments, Agu is unable to speak because he is so traumatised and terrified (40). When Agu first encounters the rebels, he is attacked by Strika in such a way that he cannot even scream: “I am trying to scream, but he is knocking the air from my chest and then slapping my mouth” (Beasts 3) (Hron 40). In the same scene, the Commandant asks him his name, but Agu is so terrorised that he is unable to speak: “I am nodding to him again but word is not able to be coming from my mouth” (Beasts 9) (40). Hron believes that Agu’s silence is a result of the traumatic experiences he is confronted with and argues that “extreme pain destroys language itself” (40). She also points out two other traumatic instances in which Agu remains silent (40). The first one is when Agu has to commit his first murder. He states that “in my head I am shouting NO! NO! NO! but my mouth is not moving and I am not saying anything” (Beasts 23). The sexual abuse by the Commandant is the second instance in which Agu is “not saying anything at all” (Beasts 103). The symbol of the lack of language due to trauma, however, is Strika, Agu’s best friend in the rebel group. Having gone through a traumatic experience, Strika is always completely silent (Hron 40). Since he cannot talk about his trauma, Strika draws a picture in the sand so that Agu knows what has happened to him:

Over and over again he is drawing the same picture of man and woman with no head because their head is rolling away on the ground. Strika, I am calling to him, and he is looking up at me. No noise from him. He is not saying anything,
I am telling myself. Since I am becoming soldier, I am never hearing the sound of his voice, but now, I am knowing now what is his problem. His picture is telling me that he is not making one noise since they are killing his parent. (Beasts 46)

Via the picture, Strika communicates about the murder of his parents and later on also about the Commandant who rapes him. Even though Agu remains silent at violent moments, he is able to communicate about his situation in his own unique language. Hron calls this “rotten English” due to its many solecisms but also claims that these mistakes “poignantly reproduce the problematic, if not incommunicable, worldview of the child soldier” (41). The grammatically incorrect sentences, the mixing of the verb forms, the inaccurate use of the plural words, the writing errors and other solecisms thus all contribute in trying to represent the traumatic reality of child soldiers. The language mimics the confusion that is typical of trauma and as such the reader experiences a similar feeling of disorientation. A striking feature of his language is the almost continuous use of the present progressive which seems to suggest that all actions are “continuously ongoing, interminable” (Hron 41). Noah Deutsch argues that the use of the present tense also “gives the narration an immediacy that heightens the impact of the language and the urgency of the story.” By using the present tense, Iweala thus resists closure for his narrative. Agu’s story cannot be told in the past tense because children are still being used in war situations.

Even though Iweala uses some post-traumatic techniques in his novel, he is a representative of African trauma literature and therefore believes that trauma is communicable. He needs to believe this because, like other African trauma narratives, his objective is to inform Western readers about an alien experience. Iweala himself claims that “[t]here needs to be more information about Africa available to the public in the Western world” (Uzodinma). And according to Iweala, stories are the most powerful means to
accomplish that goal: “[Propaganda] doesn’t appeal to people and doesn’t change things. Stories do. Stories are more effective and stories are fun and entertaining. That is what I want to write because that has a subtle way of addressing people’s concerns and issues with a particular social or political happening” (Verissimo). Iweala’s social intent is also apparent in his dedication: “For those who have suffered” (Beasts). This dedication, however, seems to put the problems of child soldiers in the past and this is not the case because many children are still suffering (Main 68). Despite Iweala’s good intentions, his novel might not have the social effect he aspires. First of all, Iweala’s formal techniques will probably not attract many readers who are not accustomed to reading trauma fiction. The at times confusing narrative and the language might scare them off. In addition, the unnamed setting might also turn out to be an obstacle in accomplishing his goal. Whitehead states that “[t]he loss of specificity . . . potentially undermines the possibility for transformative social and political engagement” (27). The country Agu is fighting in is not specified and because of this the reader’s urge to help might be lessened. If a book presents the reader with a problematic situation in a real country, then the reader feels as if he or she has a bond with that country and he or she will therefore be more inclined to help solve these problems. By keeping the setting unnamed, Iweala does have more freedom to explore the problem of child soldiers but this freedom might hinder his social objective.

6.3. Agu’s Struggle for His Humanity

Even though Beasts of No Nation is a difficult and grim novel, the reader can easily empathise with Agu because he or she is presented with Agu’s thoughts and feelings and also sees how he is struggling with the morality of what he is being forced to do. According to Hron, Iweala’s use of a distinct language and of a child’s perspective even causes the reader
to “viscerally [experience] Agu’s victimization, trauma, or remorse” (40). The reader thus feels a great emotional involvement in Agu’s story. This emotional reaction, Simon Baker claims, is the result of literature itself:

Still more impressive is Iweala’s ability to maintain not only our sympathy but our affection for his central character. How can Agu be as touching on the final page as he is on the first? It’s something that couldn’t happen easily in real life: we will overlook certain things, but massacres? Only in art can so much be demanded - and given. Iweala shows Agu acting out the worst atrocities imaginable, but still we rush to forgive him.

In art, one can lay bare the deepest and darkest secrets of a character’s conscience without losing the reader’s empathy. Overall, it is thus easier to empathise with the fictional Agu who is troubled by the atrocities he is forced to commit than with the real Ishmael Beah who revelled in his cruelty during his time in the army.

It is clear in the novel that Agu has no intention of joining a rebel group when he first comes in contact with the war. When he encounters the rebels, however, he is presented with what Lawrence Langer calls a “choiceless choice” (Whitehead 34):

Commandant is sucking in his lip and touching my face softly softly. He is taking my hand and pulling me onto my feet. Do you want to be soldier, he is asking me in soft voice. Do you know what that is meaning?

I am thinking of before war when I am in the town with my mother and I am seeing men walking with brand-new uniform and shiny sword holding gun and shouting left right, left right, behind trumpet and drum, like how they are doing on parade and so I am nodding my head yes. . . .
What am I supposed to be doing?

So I am joining. Just like that. I am soldier. (Beasts 13)

Even though the Commandant asks Agu if he wants to be a soldier, everyone knows that declining his offer would mean death. Being forced to join, the reader immediately feels sorry for Agu. As soon as he becomes a rebel, the tender-hearted Agu is already worrying about what it would be like to kill a person. Luftenant warns him that he should not think about it because otherwise his “head is turning to the inside of rotten fruit,” Commandant claims “it is like falling in love” and “[t]hey are all saying, stop worrying. Stop worrying. Soon it will be your own turn and then you will know what it is feeling like to be killing somebody. Then they are laughing at me and spitting on the ground near my feets” (Beasts 15).

When he is compelled to commit his first murder, Agu is repelled by the thought of killing someone and he fears that he will go to Hell for it. “I am standing in my place,” Agu says, “and I am just fearing. I am not wanting to be killing anybody today. I am not ever wanting to be killing anybody” (Beasts 22). Nevertheless, Agu has to murder a man and when he hits him the first time with the machete, he feels “like electricity is running through my whole body” (Beasts 25). This first blow stirs something inside him and he relentlessly keeps hitting the man until he is dead:

He is annoying me and I am bringing the machete up and down and up and down hearing KPWUDA KPWUDA every time and seeing just pink while I am hearing the laughing KEHI, KEHI, KEHI all around me. . . .

I am vomiting everywhere. I cannot be stopping myself. Commandant is saying it is like falling in love, but I am not knowing what that is meaning. I am feeling hammer knocking in my head and chest. My nose and mouth is
itching. I am seeing all of the colour everywhere and my belly is feeling empty.

I am growing hard between my leg. Is this like falling in love? (Beasts 26)

Agu continuously struggles with what he is being forced to do and he therefore craves for gun juice (a type of drug) so that “I am not having to think as much anymore” (Beasts 55). This gun juice also turns him into a vicious child soldier who wants to kill: “I am liking the sound of knife chopping KPWUDA, KPWUDA on her head and how the blood is just splashing on my hand and my face and my feets” (Beasts 63). When the drugs are waning, however, Agu wonders how he can combine his contradictory desires of wanting to be a good boy and wanting to be a good soldier who follows all orders. He tries to convince himself that he is “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” (Beasts 29). Violence in a war situation, Whitehead states, always has a “profoundly troubling nature” and it makes one ask if “the act of killing in war [is] a necessary act or is it an act of murder?” (21). Agu thus tries to ease his mind with the thought that he is not a bad boy but only a good soldier who is following orders.

Even though Luftenant already warned him that he should not think about what he is doing, Agu does start thinking about it and this causes his mind to become “rotten like the inside of fruit” (Beasts 108) (Sethi). Agu worries that he might lose his humanity in this war and claims that he is “fearing that I am not knowing myself anymore” (Beasts 165). He starts wondering if maybe he is an animal or even a devil: “But they are only screaming like Devil is coming for them. I am not Devil. I am not bad boy. I am not bad boy. Devil is not blessing me and I am not going to hell. But still I am thinking maybe Devil born me and that is why I am doing all of this” (Beasts 59). Nevertheless, Agu succeeds in keeping his own humanity in this confusing and cruel war situation because, Deutsch states, he “does not give himself over to the beast within.” “But it is not Devil that is borning me,” Agu asserts, “I am having father
and mother and I am coming from them” (Beasts 60). Deutsch also argues that Agu’s struggle for his humanity can be related to the quote from Une Saison en Enfer by Rimbaud which Iweala incorporated at the beginning of the book. Deutsch claims that Rimbaud’s life was quite similar to that of Agu: “orphaned in wartime, caught up in a rebel movement, but most importantly, a person who in his writing constantly struggled to reconcile his bad acts with an enduring sense of his own humanity.” With this quote, Deutsch argues, Iweala hopes that “his depiction of Agu’s psychological conflict” will “not be confined to Africa or the modern problem of child warriors there,” but that it will go “beyond its modern subject matter.”

Agu unwillingly became a rebel and he remains reluctant during his whole time in the rebel group. He constantly tells the reader that he wants to leave the war behind and become a refugee, but he also knows that Commandant will never let him go. Nevertheless, Agu keeps hoping that he might be able to run away from the war until he sees a map of his country. He realises at that point that the war is spread throughout the whole country and that increases the hopelessness of his situation: “I am looking at this pin and that pin and thinking, if I am to run away where can I be running to? Where can I be running to? War is everywhere” (Beasts 129). A few days later, when Luftenant is dying due to a stab wound, Agu states, “I am fearing because I am seeing that the only way not to be fighting is to die. I am not wanting to die” (Beasts 143). Agu believes that he only has two options: war or death.

It is quite easy for the reader to sympathise with Agu because Iweala depicts him as a tender-hearted and Christian boy who is constantly struggling with what he is being forced to do. Agu does commit atrocities, but it is always apparent in the novel that he does these things because he is being forced to do them or because he has become fierce due to the drugs. When Agu then has time to think about it, he tells the reader that he does not want to do all these things and that he desperately wants to leave this war behind. Understanding that he is more a victim than a perpetrator, the reader readily empathises with Agu.
6.4. The Possibility of Redemption

Agu believes that only death can release him from the war but this is fortunately not the case. Rambo, one of the rebels, kills the Commandant and leads the others away from the front lines. “COME ON! COME ON,” Rambo shouts to the other rebels after the murder, “QUICK QUICK QUICK! MOVE FAST OH! MOVE WITH SPEED! HOME HOME! WE ARE GOING HOME!” (Beasts 153). This seems a rather easy solution to the Commandant’s oppression and Agu also wonders why they did not think of it before: “Commandant is dead. It was so easy to be killing him. Why we are not doing it before I am not knowing, but I am not wanting to think about that right now. I am tiring too much” (Beasts 155). After Strika dies, Agu decides to leave the group and he finds shelter in a rehabilitation centre.

In this rehabilitation centre, Agu meets Amy, a white American woman who wants to help Agu by listening to his story. “She is telling me to speak speak speak,” Agu says (Beasts 175). Having been through an “experience which in its nature defies articulation,” however, he “does not want to speak” and only silence remains (Sethi). Agu does not want to talk to Amy since “I am like old man and she is like small girl because I am fighting in war and she is not even knowing what war is” (Beasts 175). He thus feels that she will never understand what he has been through. According to Herman, this is a common sentiment among combat veterans. She states that a war veteran is often isolated “by his special status as an initiate in the cult of war. He imagines that no civilian, certainly no woman or child, can comprehend his confrontation with evil and death” (66). As a result of his war experiences, Agu thinks of himself as an old man and he claims at several points in the text that the war destroyed his childhood: “All we are knowing is that, before the war we are children and now we are not” (Beasts 46). The war also lessened Agu’s faith in God (Brown 48). He has become more sceptical and when the priest asserts that “God is still alive in this place,” Agu says, “I do not know if I am believing him, but I am liking to hear it” (Beasts 174-175). And the Bible, which
used to be his favourite book, “the one that is holding all of the other book up” (Beasts 31), is now merely being used “to be holding my drawing down on my desk so the fan is not throwing them everywhere” (Beasts 174). Despite his terrible past, Agu firmly believes that he will have a positive future. He wants to go to university and become a Doctor or Engineer. Even when he was still in the rebel group, Agu already affirmed that he had a future and that he wanted to be a 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” (Beasts 94).

The novel’s conclusion questions whether these former child soldiers can be rehabilitated and whether redemption is possible (Hron 40). The book makes one doubt if Agu really can work through his trauma since it is so enormous: “I am seeing more terrible thing than ten thousand men and I am doing more terrible thing than twenty thousand men” (Beasts 176). “Macbeth is not the only one,” Nicholas Tucker eloquently writes, “in blood stepp’d in so far as to wonder whether there now might be any possibility of turning back.” Agu also believes that due to these atrocities “he has grown beyond the world of adulthood, and entered into the realm of the monstrous” (Hron 43). Hron observes that Agu no longer refers to himself as human, but that he calls himself “some sort of beast or devil” (Beasts 176) or even “this thing” (Beasts 177) (43). He thus sees himself as an animal or an object, but will he ever be able to turn back into a human being? Iweala already gives an answer to this question by incorporating the myth of the Dance of the Ox and Leopard in his novel (Hron 43). This myth is about twin brothers who can change into any animal form. One day, the brothers metamorphose into a different animal: one becomes an ox and the other a leopard. Because they do not recognise each other, the brothers fight and both are mortally wounded. While they lay dying, the brothers change back into their human form and realise that they have killed each other. Hron also observes that Agu calls himself a leopard when they are on their way to attack a village a few pages before the explanation of this myth (Beasts 56) and that in
Igbo, an ethnic language of Nigeria, “‘Agu’ means ‘leopard’” (43). Hron concludes that “[b]y referring to this myth, then, Iweala seems to suggest that once humans transform into beasts, into killers, there is no possibility of redemption” (43). Agu has turned into a beast and there is no going back. The last line of the novel, however, implies that some form of redemption is possible: “I am all of this thing, but I am also having mother once, and she is loving me” (Beasts 177). Even though he has committed terrible atrocities that caused him to become a beast or a thing, Agu nevertheless asserts that he has a mother who still loves him and will always love him. The use of the present tense in this sentence is, according to Brown, “hard to read without great pain” because Agu does not know what happened to his mother and because he will probably never see her again (48). Agu thus lost his humanity in the war and he might never be able to regain it, but the last sentence does offer a glimmer of hope for Agu’s future.
7. **Conclusion**

In my master’s thesis, I discussed the African trauma narratives *A Long Way Gone: The True Story of a Child Soldier* by Ishmael Beah and *Beasts of No Nation* by Uzodinma Iweala. These two books both have child soldiers as a topic and they try to bring this problematic situation to Western attention so that Western readers can understand this alien experience and help change it. To accomplish this social objective, Beah and Iweala firmly believe that trauma is communicable and that it can be grasped by someone who has never experienced anything similar in his or her life. This is in opposition to trauma narratives of Holocaust survivors who stress the incomprehensibility of trauma and turn to “smothered words” to solve the contradiction between their need to tell their story about the Holocaust and the impossibility of talking about it (Eaglestone 81). This discrepancy between these two types of trauma narrative, is due to the fact that African trauma narratives often deal with scandalous situations that are still continuing (Eaglestone 84). They want to encourage their readers to participate in social action, but the readers, of course, first need to understand these traumatic experiences before they will act. Because child soldiers are still being recruited in various countries, Beah and Iweala want to make this traumatic experience understandable for their Western readers but they use different means to achieve their goal: Beah turns to realism and Iweala to fiction.

Even though the writers use different narrative forms, there are similarities between the two books. Both protagonists, Agu and the child Ishmael Beah, are conscripted into the army against their will. They basically only had a choice between participating in the war and death. During their time in the war, Agu and Beah do not know why they are fighting. They do not know the cause of the war or the possible political ideology behind it, but they nevertheless risk their lives. When Beah first sees the democratically elected president Tejan
Kabbah in Freetown, he even claims that he “had never heard of this man” (A Long Way Gone 188). Even though he is part of the government army, he has no clue for whom or for what he is fighting. While Beah incorporates historical information at the end of his narrative, Iweala does not include historical facts in his novel. Like Agu, the reader is similarly at a loss. Both protagonists also share a deep-rooted hatred for the enemies who murdered their family members. In A Long Way Gone, it is clear that the rebels indeed killed Beah’s family, but this is not the case in Beasts of No Nation. Although Agu thinks that the army killed his father and he therefore hates all army soldiers, this is not certain and it could be that rebels murdered his father. Beah and Iweala both focus their narratives on the inner life of their respective protagonists instead of depicting all horrors and atrocities that are typical of a war situation. Iweala accomplishes this by highlighting Agu’s inner struggle while he is still participating in the war. Beah, on the other hand, does not pay much attention in this book to the war years themselves but rather focuses on his time as a refugee before the war and on his difficult process of trying to work through his trauma after the war.

A Long Way Gone and Beasts of No Nation both deal with the topic of child soldiers, but their approach to this subject and their description of this traumatic experience is rather different. While Agu is horrified by what he is being forced to do, Beah enjoys his time in the army. He admits to the reader that he truly was a vicious and ruthless child soldier who killed without remorse and who did not want to leave his squad behind. This brutal honesty makes it harder for the reader to empathise with Beah. It is easier to have sympathy for someone who commits atrocities because he is forced to do them than for someone who revels in them. As opposed to Agu, who is a more clear-cut victim, Beah is an ambiguous figure who is at the same time a victim and a perpetrator. Not only is their experience of the war different, they also escape from the war in very different ways. UNICEF rescues Beah from the army, but he does not want to leave behind his squad and his army life and he becomes very angry. Agu,
Anthonissen Evi

on the other hand, is constantly thinking about escaping and he is ultimately saved from the war by Rambo’s murder of the Commandant. After that, he walks away from the rest of his rebel group without looking back and without any problems. This seems quite an easy solution and maybe not very realistic. Child soldiers cannot simply walk away from their squad and they frequently, like Beah, do not want to leave at all. Most of these children are either rescued by relief organisations such as UNICEF or released by their commanders when the war ends. These two books also differ in their discussion of the future of these former child soldiers and the possibility of redemption. By elaborately describing his own process of working through his traumatic experiences, Beah incorporates an optimistic message in his book. He believes that former child soldiers can have a positive future. Iweala’s book, however, does not give a clear statement. It is only in the last chapter that Iweala describes Agu’s time in a rehabilitation centre and in this chapter Iweala gives no definite answer to the question whether Agu will ever be able to work through his trauma. At various points in the text, Agu indicates that his trauma is maybe too big to cope with, but the last line of the novel does seem to offer some hope. John C. Hawley wonders if Starbucks maybe chose Beah’s book to sell in their stores instead of Iweala’s “because Beah doesn’t leave the reader hanging: he shows that a kind of ‘reformation’ from having been a killer as a child has actually apparently taken place in his own case. For Iweala’s character, one is left wondering if a recuperation form the horrors is, perhaps, more than one might be able to expect” (23).

As said before, Beah and Iweala use a different narrative form and different formal techniques to discuss the topic of child soldiers. Beah has written a memoir about his real experiences which is fairly easy to read. He turns to realism rather than to post-traumatic techniques because this will attract more readers and as such he hopes to achieve the social objective he had in mind when he started writing the book. Since his book describes a real story of someone who has been confronted with an ongoing problematic situation, readers
will also feel more inclined to do something about this. Nevertheless, writing a memoir also has its downsides. The most important of these is that a memoir can never represent the past exactly how it was because human memory undoubtedly has its fallacies--especially if someone has gone through a traumatic experience. The writer then (unconsciously) makes things up in order to fill in the blanks. Some people, however, do not accept the presence of fiction in a memoir and they believe that one mistake invalidates the whole story. The discovery of an error in a memoir can have serious consequences because it not only hinders the goal of social action the writer had in mind but it can also make other trauma survivors refrain from writing down their stories. Because he writes fiction, Iweala, on the other hand, does not have to worry about the accuracy of his facts. He thus has more freedom to explore a certain topic. To discuss this particular traumatic experience, Iweala turns to post-traumatic techniques. These techniques, as opposed to realism, more accurately describe for the reader how it feels to go through a traumatic experience. They mimic the effects of trauma so that the reader goes through a similar experience. An example of one of the techniques Iweala uses, is the incorporation of his particular language and of confusing time shifts. This language and these shifts disorientate the readers and their confusion mimics the confusion Agu feels during his time in the war. He does not know what is going on and the readers are similarly at a loss. Even though trauma fiction more accurately portrays trauma, it increases the difficulty of reading and as such attracts fewer readers. This difficulty, in addition to the lack of specificity and the fact that the story is invented, thus hinders the social goal Iweala had in mind. Trauma fiction and realistic memoir both have their positive and negative sides. Iweala more accurately describes trauma and mimics its effects, which causes the reader to experience a similar process and gives him or her a better understanding of how disturbing such an experience really is. Beah’s memoir, however, speaks more to the reader and his book will probably encourage more readers to participate in trying to change the problematic
situation of child soldiers. I believe that trauma fiction is better able to represent a traumatic experience, but that in this particular case, since the recruitment of child soldiers is still continuing, a realistic memoir seems preferable because it is more effective in achieving the social objective.
Works Cited


<http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayFulltext?type=1&fid=1012492&jid=MOA
&volumeId=45&issueId=02&aid=1012488>.


Geier, Thom. Rev. of Beasts of No Nation, by Uzodinma Iweala. Entertainment Weekly 4


Gilmore, Leigh. The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony. Ithaca: Cornell


Granofsky, Ronald. The Trauma Novel: Contemporary Symbolic Depiction of Collective


Guthmann, Edward. “Once a drugged child soldier, Beah reclaims his soul.” SFGate 27 Feb.


Hawley, John C. “Biafra as Heritage and Symbol: Adichie, Mbachu, and Iweala.” Research in

ehost/pdf?vid=2&hid=9&sid=88f2fc0b-2d86-48bc-9d55-fa5f08bb90ff%40sessionmgr11>.


Hron, Madelaine. “Ora na-azu nwa: The Figure of the Child in Third-Generation Nigerian


<http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdf?vid=2&hid=9&sid=6cf3964a-acf3-490d-a9c7-
b1e91919d2e2%40sessionmgr4>. 


