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Swords into Words: Transformational War Literature for Young People

Young People and War

Born in the early 1960s in the United Kingdom, I entered the world at a relatively stable and peaceful time in British history. My parents, however, grew up in the thick of World War II and their stories of the Blitz, interrupted schooling, rationing, compulsory evacuations, and loved ones lost in combat are with me still.

On September 3rd 1939, my father, aged eight, was playing outside in the late summer sunshine, sporting a cowboy holster and spud-gun on a leather belt. The next door neighbors invited his family to hear an important announcement by Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain on their prized radio. It was the British Declaration of War. Just over a year later, an air-raid siren sounded and, as my father hurried to a communal shelter, the bright sunlight was soon obscured by planes emblazoned with swastikas. My father's family lived near Portsmouth, home to a large naval base and a regular target for bombing raids by the Luftwaffe. Over 10,000 incendiary bombs fell in a single night destroying nearby houses and my father's elementary school. As if the enemy attacks were not enough, terrifying noises from anti-aircraft "ack-ack" guns tore the sky apart, and search lights from barrage balloons crisscrossed the dismal night.

Every member of my father's family was involved in World War II. My father's father, born in 1881, had served throughout the Great War in Flanders and spent

22 years in the artillery before working as a gate policeman at an ordnance depot. My father's mother and elder sister both went into nursing, tending to wounded civilians and soldiers. Dad's two brothers both served in the navy—Arthur, the eldest, made the greatest sacrifice just before his twenty-first birthday, going down with 1,300 other Portsmouth men, when the *HMS Hood* was sunk by the German battleship *Bismarck* in 1941. Surely rattled by the trauma of so much war, my father's father had "an accident" cleaning his service revolver and died while my father was home for the Christmas holidays in 1943.

Although members of my family told stories about war, I was protected from the horrors they endured. My knowledge came largely from history books that underplayed the terror of war and never gave insights into a child's experiences. Platitudinous narratives and stiff-upper-lip rhetoric never made me feel interested in, or affected by war. Filled with facts about the Crusades, Napoleonic Wars, the Boer War, and the two World Wars, my history books seemed irrelevant, despite the mounting nuclear armament across the globe and the continued British "presence" in Northern Ireland. I could not connect the causes and effects to my own life. Besides, since Britain was invariably on the side of good and ultimate victory, what was there for me to learn?

In "The Author's Responsibility: Telling the Truth about War" (2006), Marc Aronson, a writer of historical nonfiction for young adults, addressed the paucity of war literature for adolescents, attributing it to a misguided belief in the publishing world that, because war is "bad," it had better remain secret to avoid being glorified. He noted, however, that boys

crave fighting, crave combat, crave heroism in battle. And, as I have discovered in writing nonfiction books about American and British history—war is fascinating to research, exciting to write about, and is, often enough, the essential turning point of both personal and national histories. We simply cannot be true to the past, to the present, or to our readers, and silence war. (36-37)

If not intentionally hypocritical, the silences around war are puzzling given the numbers of young people affected by war. The 2005 United Nations' report from the Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict gives a startling summary of the data. In the previous decade, 2 million children were killed and 6 million were permanently disabled in warfare. Millions of other children were directly affected by war in other ways: hundreds of thousands

of youths were recruited as soldiers and tens of thousands of girls were subjected to rape and other forms of sexual violence. In a two-year period from 2003-2005, fourteen million children were forcibly displaced within and outside their home countries, many orphaned and without access to food, shelter, medical attention and education. A worrying trend is noted in the most recent report on Children and Armed Conflict (2011): a large rise in the use of children as suicide bombers, a paradoxical term given that many of them, as young as eight and often disabled, do not know what they are doing.

Youths suffer terribly from long-term war trauma. A report published by the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children in 2000, found that involvement in armed conflict leads to a variety of psychosocial behaviors in children and adolescents, including withdrawal, isolation, anger, and rebellion. Owing to their cognitive maturity, adolescents are at increased risk. Ironically, their ability to understand situations and predict consequences makes it more difficult for them to use fantasy, denial or coping strategies to survive emotionally. Adolescents who have been forced to commit atrocities or who have been brutalized through serial torture and rape may be in greatest need of psychosocial care. Yet those providing protection and assistance often neglect the needs of adolescents because of their adult-like behavior and appearance. Elizabeth Rubin's article, "Our Children Are Killing Us," published in 1998 in *The New Yorker*, powerfully underscores the dangers of neglecting such trauma:

The goals of the trauma centers are modest...Group therapy, game playing, reenactments of life in the bush, traditional dancing, drawing are all designed to teach kids to forget...Many children who did escape never passed through the trauma centers. A counselor...told me about a boy who escaped from the LRA [Lord's Resistance Army] and went straight home. Shortly after his return, he was sitting under a tree, and his sister was grinding maize. He got up, hacked her to death with an axe and went back and sat under the tree...For every mother who told me, "Our own soldiers are killing our own children," there was another who said, "Our children are killing us." (56)

In light of what is happening in the real world, silencing discussion about war with youths and neglecting the traumas that young people experience as a result of combat seems delusional and dangerous. Yet, my initial arsenal against violence with my own sons was built upon censorship. I joined other well-intentioned peace-

loving mothers who banned toy guns and GI Joes, and in our television-less home, we did not view coverage of 9/11 or the wars with Afghanistan and Iraq. This did nothing, however, to reduce my sons' interest in weapons or battle; indeed, their response was to transform sticks into swords, rocks into grenades, and Legos into guns. On the day that my younger son lobbed a large piece of concrete at his elder brother during a back yard play battle I knew it was time to rethink the toy-weapon prohibition. Exuberantly taking up Lightsabers and plastic swords, my boys were spared visits to the emergency room, and we started to talk about conflict more openly.

By 2005, with the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq in full swing, my children, aged six and eight and both strong readers, were easily decoding newspaper headlines for themselves—"Iraq weapons assessment 'dead wrong,' Bush told," "Soldier found guilty in Abu Ghraib abuse," "U.S. military death toll in Iraq hits 2,000"¹—and began asking serious questions: Why are we at war? Will the war ever end? What's wrong with torturing the enemy? Will we have to fight?

I wondered how young people living away from the front lines learn about conflict these days. What might their social studies texts be teaching them? My sons' school district was using *History Alive!* with elementary and middle school students, published by Teachers' Curriculum Institute. In *History Alive! America's Past* (2003), students are instructed to "appreciate" how events during the Industrial Revolution up to the year 2000 "have affected your own life" (9). But a sole page is allotted to World War I, another to World War II and one more to the Cold War. These brief summaries do not explain what war was like for those who lived through them, or help us make connections to current times. On the page devoted to WWII, the final sentence portends, "From now on, the United States would remain involved in events all around the world" (211), but we never learn what these events are. There are no references to the Korean War, the Cuban Missile Crisis, or to the United States' involvement to prevent Soviet expansion in Central America and the Caribbean. The Vietnam War is reduced to a single sentence. How can students appreciate events they know nothing about?

It seems that even history texts intended for high school students do little to enlighten readers about the subject of war. James Loewen, a historian who surveyed twelve leading high school American history books in *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (1996), found that most were marred by rote patriotism and rhetoric, misinformation and even lies. Though much of the content of history texts is about war, the narratives were strangely devoid of conflict and suspense, usually giving one unquestioning perspective and

excluding the voices and experiences of minorities, women and children. Loewen shows how history textbooks avoid dealing with specific human suffering. The “sights, the sounds, and the feelings of the Vietnam era” (247), for example, were excluded from the books he surveyed. Devoid of widely available primary sources—controversial photographs, anti-war songs, and the words of those who fought—the textbooks also sidestepped any human interpretations of the war, using bland and detached phrases like “war broke out in South Vietnam” (249). Loewen’s research resonates with Walt Whitman’s prediction in *Specimen Days*: “The real war will never get in the books” (80).

Many adolescents today undoubtedly feel that they know about war through gaming. The results of a survey, “Teens, Video Gaming and Civics,” published by the Pew Internet & American Life Project in 2008, found that 97% of teenagers aged twelve to seventeen in the United States play computer, web, portable or console games. Of those surveyed, 32% played games rated as “M” for mature or “AO” for adults only, described by the Entertainment Software Rating Board as containing: “Graphic and realistic-looking depictions of physical conflict...[with] extreme and/or realistic blood, gore, weapons and depictions of human injury and death.” Many games glorify violence and trivialize war. In his review of *Mortal Kombat*, video game journalist, Jeff Gerstmann, praises the game’s “fantastic fun” that will appeal to players who want to see “guys kill each other in gruesome and often hilarious ways.”² Unlike history textbooks where the human toll of war is often underplayed, war video games act to sensationalize violence and dehumanize the enemy. For example, in a scene from the first-person shooter game *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (rated M), civilians at a Moscow airport are gunned down and players earn points for shooting them as they try to crawl away.

History textbooks and video games keep us ignorant about the realities of war in very different ways but to the same end. Neither medium explains what military life is like, how one might be affected by taking the life of another human being, what one would experience as a wounded veteran, or helps us to consider the humanity of the enemy. Could war literature be a better medium for teaching us about the complex realities of war? In her book *War and Peace Literature for Children and Young Adults* (1993), Virginia Walter observes that most American Civil War books for young adults only communicate a pro-Union perspective, and literature by British authors who grew up during the Second World War tends to be shrouded in nostalgia. Nonetheless, Harold Keith’s novel, *Rifles for Watie* (1957), helps us understand the Civil War through a young Confederate soldier’s eyes, and *The Machine Gunners* (1976) by British author Robert Westhall explores

the increasingly complex feelings of adolescent boys who hope to join an attack against German bombers, using a machine gun from a downed Nazi plane. But their dreams of adventure and heroism and their outright hatred of Germans become tempered first with doubts, and then with genuine concern for a wounded enemy pilot.

A brief survey of the best young adult war literature might begin with some well known fiction. Ester Forbes' *Johnny Tremain* (1943) successfully brought revolutionary Boston to life, in part, because Forbes lived and wrote through WWII. Accepting the Newbery Medal for *Johnny Tremain* in 1944, Forbes clearly connected issues in the two wars, "boys were conscious of what they were fighting for...they believed [it] was worth more than their own lives" (267). In *Under the Blood-Red Sun* (1994), Graham Salisbury emphasizes the consequences of the Second World War in the United States. Chronicling the struggles of Tomi, a Japanese-American boy, and his family who live in Hawaii, readers learn how their lives change in the aftermath of the attack on Pearl Harbor. We live through Tomi's ups and downs; and can't help but feel compassion for the Japanese-American family experiencing great hardship, racism and violence in the madness of war. Walter Dean Myers' *Fallen Angels* (1988) depicts the Vietnam War through Richie Perry, an African-American adolescent who, unable to afford his dream of going to college, enlists in the army. On the front lines, Richie Perry struggles with the horrors of armed combat, he also starts questioning why he and other black troops are given the most dangerous assignments. Among the few collections of realistic war literature for young readers is *Shattered: Stories of Children and War* (2002) edited by Jennifer Armstrong. This anthology of short stories explores the effects of war on youths in different conflicts around the world, including Germany, Palestine, Venezuela, Afghanistan and the United States.

Significant works of nonfiction dealing with war through the voices of young people include, most notably, *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*, which was first published in English in 1952. Accounts from those who have been directly touched by war teach young readers about the chaos, misery and the human cost of armed conflict. Jim Murphy used such accounts—the journals, letters and memoirs of young men—to document the realities of conflict in *The Boys' War: Confederate and Union Soldiers Talk about the Civil War* (1990). Contributing to "The Author's Responsibility," Murphy explained that he was determined to confront any romanticism, and he rejected advice from his editor not to be overly graphic. He wanted readers to "muck through the mud and blood and waste that is the inevitable consequence of battle" (41). Journalist, Roger Rosenblatt, traveled

to different war zones to interview children in Northern Ireland, the Middle East and Southeast Asia about their experiences of war attitudes toward the enemy in *Children of War* (1983). Deborah Ellis interviewed and photographed the children of Canadian and American soldiers deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan in *Off to War* (2008), uncovering the costs that children from military families pay when parents go off to war.

Good war literature—fiction and nonfiction— can help students form literary bonds with and develop empathy for people caught in the horrors of war. Reading helps us humanize the enemy, gain deeper cultural understandings, and discover how lives are painfully and permanently changed by war. Within the genre of young adult war literature, there has been a surge of first person narratives (sometimes transcribed) from youths who have actually lived through recent armed combat. I call these “front line narratives” because they report on lives lived in the midst of battle. Whether it’s a direct line of militia fire in Africa or a bomb-rattled living room in Bagdad, these young voices speak directly from war. Considered here are four such books from around the world—a collection of narratives from youths living in Colombia, an adolescent’s diary from Iraq, and memoirs from two youths who lived through the civil war in Sierra Leone. I believe the real voices of young people living through war may teach other adolescents the most powerful lessons about war and peace.

Front Line Narratives

Out of War: True Stories from the Front Lines of the Children’s Movement for Peace in Colombia by Sara Cameron with UNICEF (2001) Grade 7+ ³

Colombia has the highest homicide rate in the world. Massacres, assassinations, kidnappings and social “cleansings” have become normalized in a civil war raging over five decades. In 1998, author Sara Cameron travelled to this South American nation on behalf of UNICEF to write a report on the Children’s Movement for Peace in Colombia that would later be presented to the Nobel Committee. Nominated three times for the Nobel Peace Prize, this coalition of young Colombians is working to break the cycle of violence. In 1996, supported by civic and religious leaders, it organized the Children’s Mandate, a referendum on children’s “rights to peace.” Over two million children voted, sending a powerful message to their government and all adults in Colombia.

In *Out of War*, nine leaders within the Children’s Movement, aged 15 to 18, share their haunting stories with Cameron. ⁴ Their candid accounts about the war and their efforts toward peace are specific to Colombia, yet, they teach universal truths.

Somewhat privileged Juan Elias, for example, felt he knew all about war after witnessing a man shot dead on his street, the extortion of his parents for “protection” services, and kidnappings, torture, and massacres in his neighborhood. At fifteen, Elias involved himself in peace work and attended a UNICEF-sponsored meeting that laid the groundwork for the Children’s Mandate. But soon afterwards his father and cousin were assassinated in his father’s dental office, and only at this point does Elias truly understand how war works: “I knew what it felt like to want to fight. I realized that no matter how much you want peace, you take a step towards violence when war hits you personally”(7). Herminsul was just seven when his family was forced by dozens of armed men to leave their home in the mountains. His father, who beat the children for “anything and everything”(139), soon turned to drink and taking out his rage on the family. Aged just ten, Herminsul had to work to support his family and buy school supplies. He started working as a street vendor selling peas at the dangerous Corabastos market, arriving at four in the morning and getting off work at eleven to change and go to school:

Some mornings the “vultures”⁵ fell on the street sellers in massive groups. They ran down the street in a terrifying gang, stealing from us and shoving us about. Not long ago a five-year-old girl was killed when the vultures were on the rampage. The street sellers assumed the vultures had killed her and went on the attack, armed with bottles and rocks. The smaller merchants came in on the side of the vultures, the big merchants sided with the street sellers, and a miniature “war of Corabastos” broke out. (150)

In contrast to his world where the “poorest and the weakest always lost” (146), Herminsul valued school and an arts workshop where he became a public speaker for children’s rights. He was chosen by the movement to receive the Grand Order for Social Solidarity from the Spanish government presented by Queen Sofia in Spain.

In addition to the personal narratives, the book includes an introduction that briefly describes Colombian civil war and its consequences, and a resources list to learn more about the Children’s Movement for Peace.

Thura's Diary: My Life in Wartime Iraq
by Thura Al-Windawi (2004) Grade 6+

Thura Al-Windawi, the eldest of three sisters in a middle class Shia Muslim family, was nineteen when the war against Iraq started on March 20, 2003. Having lived for many years in fear and secrecy under the regime of Saddam Hussein, deprived by sanctions of many essentials like medicines and schoolbooks, her family now endures the noxious fumes from anti-aircraft oil fires, rumbling B52s, bombing raids, as well as regular power outages and water shortages in their house choked with dust. Procuring needles and insulin for Aula, Thura's younger sister, and refrigerating her medicine, becomes a constant concern for the family as they barricade themselves in their Bagdad home, then evacuate, making the long, dangerous drive to rural Al-Jadida. Authentic details about the effects of the conflict on Thura's family and friends bring the reality of war home to the reader:

A friend of ours had half his house destroyed in the bombing, and couldn't find anyone to help him get his relatives' bodies to a hospital. He filmed them using his video camera, and then buried them himself in the garden in the hope that one day someone will be able to come and move them.
(45)

Keeping the diary "as a way of controlling the chaos" (vi), Thura's down-to-earth entries document the tense days leading up to the U.S. and Britain's shock-and-awe attack on Iraq, a ravaged Bagdad, and the panicked and lawless aftermath of war. A post-script describes her reaction to Saddam Hussein's capture:

...I never thought he would be found in a hole in the ground!..Saddam was hiding like a rat. I heard that he did not even fight the Americans when they captured him. He just gave up. Was this the man who had been telling us to fight to the death? (128-130)

Thura's narrative illuminates the complexities and contradictions of the conflict. For example, Thura lived in the United Kingdom with her family while her father, Mouayad, studied for his doctorate in the mid 1980s, and the family values the rights of women. But Mouayad also worked for the Ba'athist government whose militia, the Fedaeen, publicly beheaded young women in the streets. Further, as the U.S. and Britain hope to promote "freedom" and "democracy" in Iraq, life gets increasingly dangerous for women and girls who are forced to stay inside and wear

traditional clothing. Religious zealots are once again questioning women's rights to education.

Thura ends up getting more freedom than she has ever known. Her diary catches the attention of British journalists who film her, and her story spreads. She is offered and accepts a scholarship to continue her pharmacological studies at the University of Pennsylvania.

The Bite of the Mango

by Mariatu Kamara with Susan McClelland (2008) Grade 8+

This disturbing memoir documents the life of a young girl who grows up abruptly in the midst of the brutal civil war in Sierra Leone. Mariatu Kamara's village, Magborou, is lively and close-knit, but food is scarce and families are too poor to school their children. Female circumcision and polygamy are traditional, as is communal living. Life changes irrevocably when war ignites and armed rebels, many no older than twelve-year-old Mariatu, attack her village. Forcing her to witness the atrocities, the rebels then chop off Mariatu's hands, jeering that she will not be able to vote for "the President." But Mariatu does not know what a president is or does.

The book's title and cover illustration of hands offering a mango reflect a pivotal scene: a man, caught in the crossfire, takes pity on the near-dying Mariatu stumbling through the blood-stained bush. He gives her a mango, directs her to the hospital, and encourages her to look forward rather than back. "It's the *only* place to go, my sweet child" (49), he implores.

After basic treatment at a rudimentary hospital in Freetown that reeks of "blood, vomit, and sweat" (62), Mariatu moves to Aberdeen, a refugee camp for amputees, where she encounters other youths and together they beg, share food and even put on plays about war and peace. Victor, the theater troupe organizer, encourages the young people to express their lived experiences and their pain through acting:

In addition to the play on HIV/AIDS, we worked on a new skit about forgiveness and reconciliation. We enacted a scene from the war in which some of the youth played victims and others played the boy soldiers... [who] pretended to cut off their victims' hands and then to burn down the village. (118-119)

Mariatu's real-life disorientation is mirrored at times by tangible gaps in the narrative, particularly concerning her sexual assault and bewildering relocation

in Canada. These gaps also suggest that co-writer Susan McClelland has carefully avoided the major pitfalls of ghost writing— those intrusions into and interpretations of another person’s story. This book is testament to the truth that in tumultuous times we depend upon each other to uphold each other’s stories.

***A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*
by Ishmael Beah (2007) Grades 8+**

To extend thinking about the Sierra Leone civil war and for a male perspective on the complex causes that compel children to take up and put down arms, *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* is a natural companion to *The Bite of the Mango*. Growing up in Mogbwemo, a mining town some eighty miles from Freetown, Ishmael Beah had always thought that war belonged to a faraway land, the BBC news and Rambo movies. But then malnourished refugees from afar start passing through Mogbwemo with stories of murdered relatives and torched homes. Surely their accounts are exaggerated?

In January of 1993, as Beah, his brother and a friend prepare for their talent show in the nearby town of Mattru Jong, they discover that war is literally in their back yards. During their practice of hip-hop moves and rap songs, rebel soldiers have attacked Mogbwemo and families have fled amid gunfire. Roaming a land transformed by violence, the boys search for family members. Trying to avoid ambushes and being mistaken for rebels themselves, they soon learn how hunger, fear and ignorance work in unison to undermine their humanity and peace. Beah, a slight and gentle boy of twelve at the outset, is increasingly terrorized by the atrocities. Upon finding the burning house where his family is rumored to have taken shelter, he sees unidentifiable charred corpses. We feel Beah’s desperation harden him:

My entire body went into shock...I fell to the ground, holding my face...I felt as if my eyes were growing too big for their sockets...I screamed at the top of my lungs and began to cry...punching and kicking with all my might into the weak walls that continued to burn. I had lost my sense of touch. My hands and feet punched and kicked the burning walls, but I couldn’t feel a thing. (95)

By age thirteen, Beah is captured by the government army and recruited as a soldier. Brainwashed, hopped-up on drugs and wielding a Kalashnikov rifle, Beah finds that he, too, is capable of monstrous acts. His riveting narrative lets us see war

through the eyes of a child soldier—a boy who is constantly incited to avenge the loss of his own family by killing again and again.

Against all the odds, Beah is removed from the army at the age of fifteen. Randomly picked for rehabilitation, he is taken to Freetown by UNICEF and representatives from other NGOs. His painful accounts of recovery are as mesmerizing as his war experiences. Beah escapes a life driven by retribution and finds he has the fortitude to speak out against war. Chosen to present at the United Nations about his experiences, Beah is eventually offered asylum and education in the United States. He graduated from Oberlin College with a degree in political science in 2004. He is a member of Human Rights Watch promoting children's rights.

History, Intertextuality, and Creativity

Despite their immensely complex and unique situations, overarching themes emerge from these narratives. Firstly, we discover that war never simply breaks out— it is driven by a history and culture of violence. Each text gives us some background to the war, helping us appreciate the complex issues from a range of perspectives. In *Out of War*, for example, we learn that Colombia's conflicting political forces, large scale guerilla movements, drug barons, "self defense" groups established by wealthy landowners, gangs, and paramilitary death squads have each contributed to the country's violent *status quo* where huge chasms exist between rich and poor and between rural and urban populations. Drugs and guns are widely available in this South American nation where the judicial system seems to have been usurped by revenge and where family scores are "settled" by domestic violence. Thura Al-Windawi also refers to violence and oppressions experienced by typical Iraqi citizens prior to the bombing of Bagdad during the Iran-Iraq War, the Gulf War, and Saddam Hussein's repressive regime that prompts strict U.N.-imposed sanctions. *A Long Way Gone* contains a full chronology that helps us understand how Sierra Leone's tragic history of slavery, colonization, and the plundering of natural resources fanned the flames of recent conflict, government corruption, and weakened resistance to warring neighbors. Endnotes in *The Bite of the Mango* emphasize how violence lingers long after a war is officially over.

Women and children have been hit especially hard by the war...Many women are subjected to ongoing sexual, emotional, and physical abuse, largely a result of poverty brought on by large-scale unemployment. Men, unable to support their families from agriculture or other jobs, are

alienated and angry. Children, particularly girls, often endure rape at the hands of older men, and are frequently forced into early marriages. (213)

Violence, we learn, never happens in isolation. It is written in our histories and will likely influence our futures. As Antonio reminds us in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, "What's past is prologue" (II. i. 254).

These personal narratives also reveal how much our experiences of conflict are framed by cultural expressions of violence. In his 2006 article, "Killing at Close Range: A Study in Intertextuality," Jeffrey Fischer proposes that human experiences of battle are not simply documented in texts, but that the texts themselves will influence future texts about combat and even future human experiences of war. Discussing three different texts that deal with killing the enemy at close range, Fischer states that:

...there is no such thing as "raw experience": we are acculturated to have certain kinds of experience by the education, the upbringing, [and] the cultural climate we live in. To put it yet another way: perhaps we act out scripts in our lives; we live in stories. (28)

Literature and art were the scripts for war—and peace—in all four personal narratives. In *The Bite of the Mango* and *A Long Way Gone*, there are several references to Rambo movies. Foreign songs and words like "Rambo" and "killer" become the war cries of young rebel soldiers as they rape, maim and murder members of Kamara's family and other villagers. Captured and recruited with over thirty other boys between the ages of seven and sixteen by the governmental army, Beah's military training consists of using a full range of weaponry, a steady stream of marijuana and *brown brown*—cocaine cut with gunpowder— and nightly viewings of movies including *Rambo: First Blood*, *Rambo II*, and *Commando*. Beah writes, "We all wanted to be like Rambo; we couldn't wait to implement his techniques" (121). The very title "*First Blood*" connotes entitlement to retribution. In a critical scene in the movie, Rambo screams that the police "drew first blood," justifying his own violence. This is a perfect script for Lieutenant Jabati and his officers who demand the new recruits look at the bodies of people hacked to death and avenge the murders of their families by killing rebel soldiers. They are convinced that brutal revenge is morally just. Dissatisfied with the pitch of the boys' rage during practice with bayonets at a banana farm, they are admonished by a corporal:

Is that how you stab someone who had killed your family?...This is how I would do it...I first stab him in the stomach, then the neck, then his heart, and I will cut it out, show it to him, and then pluck his eyes out. Remember, he probably killed your parents worse. (112)

Though the term may be current, *intertextuality* has undoubtedly influenced our ideas about and actions during war for eons. In an eerily quiet moment in *A Long Way Gone*, Lieutenant Jabati reads Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and asks Beah if he has heard of it. Beah, who has a remarkable ear for language, knows the play well and begins to recite Caesar's speech to Calpurnia along with Jabati: "Cowards die many times before their deaths" (104). Afterwards, the lieutenant retreats into a stern silence and Beah tiptoes away. This famous speech (not quoted in its entirety in the text) is crucial to understanding how Jabati views his role in the war. In essence, Caesar states that one should not fear death when it lies in fate's hands. It ends with a trite, axiomatic couplet—"Seeing that death, a necessary end, Will come when it will come" (II.ii.37). Recalling Helen Vendler's premise in *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, Jeffrey Fischer notes Shakespeare's strategy of turning the speaker to a *consensus gentium*, transitioning toward the proverbial at moments of utter despair. Like Caesar, Jabati seems to believe that war is fated, beyond his control. With nothing to say from the heart to Beah, he repeats Shakespeare's well-worn adage to console himself.

In *Thura's Diary*, in a land where books are in a limited supply because of sanctions, where satellite TV has been proscribed by Saddam's dictatorship, and where the National Library packed with ancient manuscripts has been burnt to a cinder, we might wonder how texts might still inscribe our actions. Indeed, barricaded for days in their Bagdad home in an increasingly conservative Iraq, all Thura and her sisters can do is watch old Disney videos of *The Little Mermaid* and *Snow White* that the family acquired while living in the United Kingdom. Considering the isolation, silencing and danger that these fictional female characters endure, and the sacrifices they have to make, one can't help but see these as the definitive script for these girls in wartime Iraq.

Movements towards peace, organizations that demand amnesty and justice and individual acts of courage that are documented in culturally mediated ways can also be powerfully transformative. In *Out of War*, impressed by watching a film about war-torn Mozambique where seventy thousand children voted for their rights in an election, Juan Elias is inspired to involve himself in organizing an election for children in Colombia. Another member of the Children's Movement

for Peace, Maritza, is influenced by Michael Jackson's 1987 hit recording, *Bad*, a song based upon a true event where street kids in New York bully a boy. Using the track, Maritza choreographs a dance routine for children showing two gangs becoming friends through music. In place of violent confrontations they challenge each other with their style and moves.

Another theme that merits exploration across these texts is that physical vigor does not make our narrators formidable. Indeed, we cannot help notice their physical debilities. Ishmael Beah is small and slender, most of the youths in *Out of War* are malnourished and have endured terrible abuse, Thura Al-Windawi's movement is greatly restricted inside her Bagdad home, and Mariatu Kamara has lost her hands. Rather, it is the great creativity of these youngsters that helps them summon the courage to work for peace in the most challenging of circumstances.

Beah's resilience seems directly connected to his love for language, music and dance. He communicates with different tribes and across age groups in Sierra Leone, and distracts people from violence through dance and song. Readers sense impending danger when symbols of Beah's talents, his cassettes, are thrown onto a fire by a soldier charged with burning the old belongings of the new recruits. The tapes represent the last vestige of Beah's innocence, creativity and humanity, and he starts to cry when they melt. A few pages later, he grips his assault rifle for comfort, like the other boys "holding our guns as if they were the only thing that gave us strength" (117). And so Beah's killing career begins.

Two years' later, at the Freetown hospital, Beah's rehabilitation does not go well: enforced detoxification makes him angry, disruptive and violent. War memories flood his mind and migraines prevent him from sleeping. Beah is befriended by nurse Ester who finds a way to get him to open up—a Walkman and cassettes of Run-D.M.C. and Bob Marley. Only when he is back in touch with his strengths, can Beah's rehabilitation begin in earnest. A little later he writes a hip-hop play about the redemption of a former child soldier and is asked to be the spokesperson for the rehabilitation center.

Readers appreciate Mariatu Kamara's amazing interpersonal skills early on. Captured by rebels who have tortured and murdered many villagers, she tries to appeal to her captors' humanity just as a trained crisis negotiator might do:

I am the same age as you. You speak Temne. So you might be from around here. We would have been cousins, had we lived in the same village. Maybe we can be friends." (40)

Though Mariatu's communicative skills cannot save her hands, they help her find some inner calm and allow her to speak up for peace. She talks with journalists visiting the amputee camp and joins a theater group that performs plays, skits and dances about war, forgiveness and reconciliation. Mariatu uses her interpersonal and artistic skills to advocate for social change. After gaining asylum and formal education in Canada, it is not surprising to learn that she has become a spokesperson for UNICEF, set up her own foundation for women and children in Sierra Leone, and is studying to become a counselor. "I may not have hands, but I have a voice" Mariatu writes (211).

Having led a somewhat cloistered life under the tyranny of Saddam Hussein, Thura Al-Windawi is strikingly reflective and able to see the humanity of the other. She dreams of visiting the United States, not for revenge, "but to study and live and love like anyone else...and see the families of American soldiers killed in Iraq and those who are still fighting too, to offer my condolences" (120).

In *Out of War*, the artistic skills among the Peace Movement members grab our attention. They all use play, art, story, dance and music as they counsel youths whose lives have been shattered by war. Wilfrido, for example, from the age of seven, has worked from four to six every morning selling snacks in the *barrio* before school to help his impoverished mother. Permanently disabled from working a construction job at the age of eleven, Wilfrido narrowly avoids being recruited by the army and other armed groups. Instead he joins a program called the Return to Happiness where he trains in play therapy and begins working with displaced children, some of whom have witnessed the torture and murder of their parents. Wilfrido is skilled at entertaining children and getting them to open up to him. If he can get them playing like children again, Wilfrido knows they "can begin that return to happiness" (166).

Conclusion

With remarkable creative strengths these youths are re-inscribing future generations with new narratives, narratives of peace. We are reminded of Colombian musician, César López, who transforms guns into guitars called *escopetarra*, actually refashioning assault rifles into electric guitars, teaching youths to make music not war.⁶ We are reminded of the Book of Isaiah, where swords are beaten into plowshares. These young sufferers of war transformed their guns and swords into words, using their voices to testify to war's horrors and call passionately for peace.

Even in times of apparent peace, most adolescents will deal with some form of violence, be this at home, in streets, on school turf, or in cyber space. They need books that help them understand conflict and resolution as they grapple with adult issues and face complex choices. Although there are a number of excellent works of fiction and nonfiction, nothing can be as compelling to young readers as the personal narratives of young people living on the front lines. Their uncensored voices expose the direct and indirect effects of conflict on young people, and put a human face on the abstract social problem of war, contradicting so much propaganda and prejudice. Knowing the true horrors of war and the luxury of tranquility, the voices of youth may be our greatest inspiration to make peace.

Notes

1. Headlines from USA Today, 3/31/2005, New York Times, 5/ 17/2005, and USA Today, 10/26/2005.
2. Gerstmann, Jeff. "Mortal Kombat Review." Giant Bomb. n.d. Web. 10 Oct. 2011.
3. Suggested age-level for classroom use.
4. Age when interviewed.
5. The "vultures" are security guards paid by smaller merchants in the market to abuse and discourage the street sellers who undercut their prices.
6. Learn more about the inventor of the Escopetarra in "César López: Guns into Guitars." Cultures of Resistance. n.d. Web. 10 Oct. 2011.

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