An Unknown Soldier in an Unknown War: Joshua Dysart’s *Unknown Soldier* Issue #2

by Desmond White | in Articles | Thu, 19 December 2013

*Unknown Soldier* #2
Writer – Joshua Dysart
Art – Alberto Ponticelli
Vertigo/DC Comics
January, 2009

Or maybe this is an African story after all. At least, Afrocentric. In the last article I wanted to hit on the eternal themes that encompass multicultural literature, and how Dysart’s *Unknown Soldier* deals with that discourse in its first issue. But by doing so I may have eliminated the potency of what can also be seen as an intelligent (and action-packed) address to African studies.
While I still believe the previous article to be relevant, upon reflection I have not granted the work the serious textual reading that it deserves. Yes, Dysart is a Caucasian male writer, but he’s not an ethno-chauvinist. By calling the work non-African I’ve ignored the signs signifying Afrocentric literacy and revealed my own academic bias — that a cultural work is not authentic unless created by a citizen of that culture.

This falls in line with the anthropological theory that speaking for a culture will inevitably lead to false homogeneity, or worse, its denigration. As Edward Said’s Orientalism points out, an Eurocentric system of representation, which manifested in persistent depictions of the Middle East as “inferior” and “feminized,” helped justify colonization (Said). According to Richard Slotkin, an Euro-American depiction of Native Americans as barbaric, primal monsters led to a justification for genocide and forced migration to what were basically open-air ghettos (Slotkin).

While analyzing the savagery of Dysart’s Unknown Soldier, I hoped to avoid any conterminous associations as to instead focus on literary merit. But an Afrocentric literature should not be discarded based on the biological background of its author.

So let’s not cheapen Dysart’s voice anymore. As Dr. Molefi Kete Asante writes, “to teach from an African American perspective does not mean one has to be an African American; it means that one must attempt to understand the centric position of the African American people” (Asante). As we can see, Dysart’s Unknown Soldier gives Uganda that African...
agency, transforming it into a subject as opposed to an object. In fact, that is the entire point of Moses’ being. In the beginning, he says that “he is Africa” and that Africa must solve its own problems. Then he becomes an embodiment of Uganda, albeit a tragic one that has become overwhelmed by violence. Western cultural imperialism is not the focus here. Any Western influence is used as an extension of Africa, not the other way around.

Let’s continue, shall we? Unknown Soldier #2 continues the Haunted House arc, which will complete on #6. As we will see, a very real and heart-breaking depiction of children are at the forefront of Dysart’s Unknown Soldier. Acting as a more mature property, the mini-series deconstructs the idea of childhood as happy bliss by saturating the Acholi children in brutal violence and sexuality. The critic might denounce these depictions as over-exaggerated and biased, but unfortunately, the data conducted by countless nonprofit organizations and news outlets working in the northern Uganda region closely aligns with Dysart. In 2002, the setting of Unknown Soldier #2, there existed a sub-group of Ugandan children whom were child soldiers. There existed a sub-group of nightly commuters known in the United States as the Invisible Children. There existed hundreds of thousands of orphans, the consequence of disease, famine, and war.

If Moses, in his fictional Uganda, wants to transform the many African peoples into one African people, then he will have to dissolve these children sub-groups and transform them into the citizens of a civil continent. They are the slaves for whom he fights (although sometimes with very little patience).
The orphaned hero is a recurring trope through the annals of literature. Typically, the orphan is put through a harrowing journey where riddles must be solved, birth sakes discovered, wild animals tamed, swords pulled from stones, and prophesies completed. As a result, and this could be seen as the didactic intention of these works, the abandoned child develops a resilient, cunning, and altruistic nature (Nodelman). Be clever, they say, and be good. That's how you grow up properly.

The archetype occurs in contemporary fiction such as Pullman's *His Dark Materials* and Rowling's *Harry Potter*. It occurs in Shakespeare, most noticeably in *The Winter’s Tale*. And the archetype shows its ancient heritage in Arthurian legend, in Assyrian folklore, in Biblical scripture, in Greek and Persian myth.

Historically, however, the abandoned child hasn’t done so well. Children have been enslaved, prostituted, conscripted, sold, stolen, and forced into manual labor. They’ve been completely vulnerable to poverty, self-interest, sexual deviancy, and countless danger (Burnstein). Recall the orphan trains, a welfare program that shipped street urchins to rural America to become indentured servants. Recall the mid-19th century turning cradles established outside French foundling homes, where mothers would abandon their children in hatches that functioned similarly to the blue USPS collection boxes we use today (Newton). There are famous fictions where children are locked away into attics, but in reality that form of neglect usually ends in the child’s death (such as in the infamous Osaka abandonment case of 2010). Furthermore, many cultures have had a social custom for exposing an infant to the wilderness as a form of infanticide. This was so common that many stories have evolved from that concept, with the children being raised by wild animals, pastoral peoples, or Egyptian royalty (Schweder). Once, even Monarch butterflies.

Sadly, the realistic consequences of an abandoned child are not often depicted in literature, or in media.

That’s not the case with Dysart's *Unknown Soldier*, which was published sometime after international media focused on the northern war in Uganda. In the 2000s, the defining characteristic that held international attention on the war was its abandoned children. An
initial resource for this attention were the raw first-hand accounts in the *Invisible Children: Rough Cut*, a 2006 documentary by amateur film-makers Jason Russell, Bobby Bailey and Lauren Poole. Suddenly, the world was being exposed to the horrifying reality that children were being abducted, tortured, and conscripted into a grassroots terrorist group. Especially evocative were accounts of children forced to murder parents or siblings as part of a ritualistic initiation.

Media attention also unveiled a sub-group of Ugandan children known as the nightly commuters, sometimes figuratively referred to as the Invisible Children. Every night, tens of thousands of children would travel from their homes to hide in large urban areas or Internally Displaced Person camps (Lunde). The reason? To avoid involuntary recruitment.

Unsurprisingly, Dysart has the nightly commuters discover a comatose (and corpse-like) Moses. After all, to a reader inclined to studying the artificial construction of story beats, it’s a natural twist to have a group of children rescue a hero whose very journey involves his need to protect them.

In an atypical move by Dysart, these children aren’t the good samaritans you expect them to be. Immediately they tear away his clothing, explore his possessions, and take anything of value. Even more damning, they don’t recognize a picture of Somali peace activist Abdulkadir Yahya Ali, a man murdered for practicing non-violence. These are children alienated from their cultural history; symbolic orphans abandoned by government and people. Their morally-dissonant actions are far better survival skills than anything else presented.

The metaphorical (and physical) power of the gun, a topic that I will explore in-depth later, comes to the forefront in a confrontation between the children. Upon retrieving a discarded AK-47, Olim declares that he is a “a man” and that finally he can “have respect” (*Unknown Soldier* #2). Revealing the imprint of violent power that has transgressed these false images of innocence, Olim nearly shoots the group’s wiser, more sensible leader. Luckily, there are enough guns for the both of them.
Much like Moses, these children are on their own personal exodus. Unfortunately, this exodus is leaderless and without divine protection. Their Promised Land is as temporary as the night sky — they return to their homes each morning. In reflection of the eternal cycle of violence, their journey is a cycle of survival, repeated daily, without any hope of ending.

Dysart returns to establishing the association between the protagonist and conventional mother figures, all highly symbolic of the ‘birth’ and ‘infancy’ of the Unknown Soldier. Nude and helpless, Moses lies on the Ugandan soil in an infantile stage. He is then ‘nursed’ to health by Sister Sharon Cavanaugh, a nun. In a dream sequence, the nun is connected to Sera, our maternal Africa symbol.

Hopefully the feminist sympathizer doesn’t feel too scandalized by Dysart’s use of female figures. The maternal archetype is an important trope in cross-cultural literatures (Relke).
The mother as nurturer, as selfless creator, as a teacher of empathy, as a giver of sanctuary — these are not submissive but active traits, just as Dysart argues that a philosophy of non-violence can be active (Griffin). In fact, these women are, as Moses himself described was needed in war-torn Uganda, the maternal avatars of peace and prosperity (Unknown Soldier #1).

And Sister Sharon is one of those maternal avatars, although there's a minor irony here that she is both Caucasian and celibate. As we are shown, Sister Sharon has been an exemplar advocate for non-violence: establishing the Corpus Christi Catholic School for Girls, providing a nurturing environment for as many orphaned girls as possible, negotiating the safety of her school with the LRA. But her orphaned girls see a white woman as their role model, not an Ugandan. As we learn later, the girls do not believe any Ugandan has achieved success. The nun has created a safe haven for orphans whom will someday be the mothers and grandmothers of a future Uganda (something that she herself will not achieve being a celibate woman). But the women of Uganda need to believe that future can be a positive one if any real change is to be made.

In relation to Moses’ own journey, Sister Sharon acts as a threshold guardian. It’s her purpose to keep Moses from continuing his journey — in this case, a journey down the path of violence. By her hands, she wraps Moses in his medicinal garb to protect his mutilations from infection. But by his own hands, Moses will transform the facial bandages into the trademark of the Unknown Soldier (a trademark regrettably shared with other heroes, including Doom Patrol’s Negative Man). When he surpasses this ‘threshold,’ he will have become her opposite — a male avatar for violence. In other words, a soldier.
Here we also have the first pangs of Moses’ elusive identity. Following closely to his blood-soaked ‘birth,’ the termination of his maternal crucible, and his unconscious (or infantile) chrysalis, we see Moses now as a blank slate. He has become like a child, able to be formed or molded in anyway. He is the orphaned hero, capable of wearing many masks. This corresponds with an earlier incarnation of the Unknown Soldier. In earlier runs, the Unknown Soldier was a master of disguise. He had two weaknesses, which were that 1) his latex masks would itch and 2) that sometimes he cared too damn much, tossing aside the mission to help a better cause. In Dysart’s run, Moses’ duplicitous nature comes from the ambiguity of his facial wraps. Here, he can be mistaken for a common man mutilated by the LRA. Here, he can be a priest, a doctor, an NGO worker, maybe even a monster.

If the old Unknown Soldier had a tell (which, lamely, was frequent itchiness), so does this one. While Moses might conceal his identity for a time, his actions inevitably reveal his expertise as a manufacturer of violence. It seems that he is, ultimately, a soldier.

In fact, Moses’ identity comes into question during an attack on Corpus Christi which completes the issue. Despite his desire to rescue the orphan girls from becoming sex slaves, Moses still hasn’t committed to killing child soldiers. They are, after all, victims as well — children broken and reforged into human weapons. In a bizarre hallucination, Christ himself appears before Moses, touches his head, and whispers “remember” (Unknown Soldier #2). This is followed by the appearance of a red-skinned clone of Moses in his former fully-healed state. The ‘devil’ confronts Moses with technical but brutal military advice. The arc ends on a cliffhanger. Will Moses venture down the path of violence? Or is there still hope for redemption?

Works Cited


Asante, Molefi Kete. “Where is the White Professor Located?” Dr. Molefi Kete Asante Author


**Addendum:** Joshua Dysart includes a glossary of terms in the back of #2.
When Desmond White is not blogging out of both ends, he’s stunt doubling for a bear or actually doing his job -- teaching literature at a Texas high school. A loose definition of genius, Desmond's goals in life include making yerba mate sound appetizing ("It’s grass... that you drink!") and writing about comics. Check out his blog, which is dedicated to bad writing advice for the aspiring bad writer.

See more, including free online content, on Desmond White's author page.

1 Comment

Kevin Thurman says:
20 December 2013 at 8:15pm

Unfortunately I am only familiar with Dysart’s work from Harbinger. But, I am about to go buy the first trade of Unknown Soldier just based on this article. It is so rare to see anything focus on Africa beyond the typical CNN talking points and parade of pictures. I also thought it brave that you called your own self out and toiled with that some. I think it is that type of honesty and vulnerability needed to help us all think better and more just about situations like Uganda, as well as anywhere else in the world that has such horrible conditions.

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Unknown Soldier, Vol. 2 has 350 ratings and 34 reviews. William Thomas said: It is a polarizing thing, violence. Some people would view even accurate portrayal of violence as gratuitous. With this ongoing series from Joshua Dysart, I feel that it has become a series of movements in an opera. Go on. Go read this.

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