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Agents of Suffering: Invisible Children and the Problems with Humanitarian Discourse

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The concept of morality has been central to humanitarianism since the 1800s. Despite the presence of good (and often religiously influenced) intentions from then until the present day, this discourse has left room for people viewed as "the humanitarians" – often located in the global North (the part of the world that is largely not stricken by poverty) – to become spectators of suffering and to form situations and problems within their own views and cultural influences. This has always been a problematic aspect of humanitarianism. Although service-oriented non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Doctors without Borders have helped immensely in aiding suffering bodies, there have also been significant drawbacks to working within the subjectivities of humanitarianism. On top of this, the discourse is constantly evolving, and now there are new types of humanitarianism outside the realm of service, extending even beyond simple narratives written by people from the global North who attempt to aid those struggling in the global South.

As time goes on and technology becomes more intricately woven into people's daily lives (those who can afford to have technology, that is), discourses such as humanitarianism evolve, as well. While humanitarianism in theory has largely remained the same since the 1800s, the methods and tactics for gaining donor support in the global North have completely changed. In the beginning, there were few (if any) advertisements, print or otherwise, to gain attention and solicit donations. Now, advertising is one

of the biggest characteristics of the entire field. Much of the time, suffering bodies are used in advertisements and other forms of media in order to spur shock and to convince people in the global North that donations are needed, immediately. Although this is congruent with the way that humanitarianism has always operated, this particular approach is a fairly new phenomena. Methods of this kind have evolved since advertisements first became common. In some newer humanitarian organizations, such as Invisible Children, Inc. (IC), the use of media and branding has been extremely prevalent and has proven useful in engaging donors in the global North, especially young supporters of high school or college age. Although these methods have enjoyed success by building support bases, these tactics can also create a variety of problems and drawbacks, as well.

Newer humanitarian organizations such as IC still depict the beneficiaries of their organization as suffering, victimized bodies, almost always completely devoid of any human characteristics. Although it could be argued that framing situations as urgent helps with funding and donations, it is still of the utmost importance that these suffering bodies be taken out of the context of humanitarianism and examined as *people* who are more complex than simply having the characteristic of suffering. In order to do this properly, humanitarianism must be examined closely. Through an analysis of the history of humanitarianism and a discussion of the organization Invisible Children as a case study, this paper will consider how to view these suffering bodies in a rights-protective way that is mindful of human dignity.

Conceptualizing Humanitarian Discourse

Both the structural framework of humanitarianism and what is commonly referred to as the "humanitarian narrative" are crucial to the way the discourse shapes Western perceptions of suffering bodies. Both of these concepts have been developing since dawn of humanitarianism in the 1700s. Although narratives exist within this framework, they can still be viewed as two different concepts: Humanitarian framework is the way the discourse is structured, while the humanitarian narrative is

provided by missionaries, scholars, and Western spectators of human suffering. These two concepts will be considered here in turn.

The term "humanitarian framework" is used to discuss how the discourse of humanitarianism shapes different situations, such as responses to a humanitarian crisis, the activity of donors, or the symbolism behind advertisements for humanitarian NGOs. It has changed and evolved since the formation of the discourse, but many aspects of this structural framework remain the same. One defining characteristic of the humanitarian framework is the concept of bearing witness – when a person from the Western world physically witnesses an atrocity, such as a war crime, a battle, or the aftermath of a natural disaster, and then reports back to the Western world about what they have seen. The action of bearing witness is usually taken with narratives from humanitarians, as well as from people who were contributing pieces before and during the creation of the humanitarian framework.

The humanitarian narrative is a component of the framework itself, giving insight to Western audiences and typically coming from other Westerners who witnessed atrocities or disasters in a distant place. This is true even for pieces like John Gabriel Stedman's *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* (1796), which was technically written before humanitarianism was a known discourse. *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition* is an example of how bearing witness served as a key component in the humanitarian narrative from the beginning. The narrative spans from the years 1771 until 1775. Stedman used grotesque written imagery to describe the atrocities he bore witness to, along with William Blake providing violent, and oftentimes sexualized illustrations for the narrative. Stedman used the voyeurism of witnessing the abuse of slaves as a humanitarian tool to inform individuals who would eventually read his narrative (Andrews, 1995). In the 1700s, humanitarianism was obviously not developed enough to have a concrete structural framework and organizations unique to the discourse. However, the same grotesque language and imagery has been used within humanitarianism throughout time, even before it was an actual discourse.

The humanitarian narrative is the narrative created by people from the Western world since around the 1700s, mostly in the form of written works. These narratives were and are created by Christian missionaries, humanitarian aid workers, Hollywood celebrities, or any other person from the global West who has written (or sometimes spoken) about their experience within the realm of humanitarianism. Since Henry Dunant wrote *Un Souvenir de Solferino* in 1859*,* the language of humanitarianism has been constructed within the concepts of compassion and bearing witness to atrocities. Dunant wrote his narrative in the perspective of “a tourist facing the atrocities of modern war with only his compassion at his disposal” (Taithe, 2007, p. 125). He was describing bearing witness to the battle between the French and Piedman in Solferino, Italy. Dunant not only contributed this narrative, but also founded the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in the same decade. Dunant's point of view utilized a specific rhetoric, as well; one of compassion and pity for those outside of the Western world suffering from war crimes and natural disaster. The funds that were and still are raised for the ICRC are only used to alleviate people’s suffering, usually on the other side of the world. Although humanitarian efforts are typically seen as not only noble, but vital, it was not the ICRC’s purpose to end war; “If anything it harnessed new forces to the war effort, even as it bore witness to its excesses” (Taithe, 2007, p. 126). Taithe (2007) goes on the explain that by having these international aid workers witnessing the things that go on during war, militaries were able to blackmail workers of the ICRC into suppressing evidence of atrocities.

It is important to note that the beginning of the relief effort by Dunant and the ICRC coincided with the start of mass media, including illustrated media. Subjects like famine brought “more sharply defined images of faraway lands” (Taithe, 2007, p. 127). The Great Algerian famine in the 1860s corresponded with the freeing of the press in France at the end of the Second Empire of Napoleon III. The Chinese Disaster of 1876-9, another famine, was given international coverage and was used to create an image of distant people’s passive suffering. The history of humanitarian framing can be

discussed in a global context, but a large amount of humanitarian framing was happening in France in the late 1800s. Aside from the impact that Dunant had on humanitarian framework, Cardinal Charles Lavigerie also played a key role in framing the language and norms of humanitarianism. Lavigerie wrote striking descriptions of suffering people in his narratives describing bearing witness to atrocities like slavery, similar to some advertisements for humanitarian NGOs as well as to modern-day narratives. His narratives made audiences faint due to the grotesque description of human suffering (Taithe, 2007). His depictions of the suffering people on the receiving end of the aid he was providing were that of skeletons with “begging bowls” (Taithe, 2007, p. 129). Humanitarian framework continues to use the same language and tactics as Lavigerie and Dunant presently, with accounts of suffering on the other side of the world.

This language of compassion, suffering, and pity can be found within a religious context, as well. Narratives that would be described today as “humanitarian” would probably have been for religious purposes in the late 1800s, typically written by missionaries who had traveled across the world to alleviate suffering and to preach Christianity. For example, the work done from 1810 until 1840 in New Zealand by British missionaries mirrors the work done within the humanitarian field today in many ways. For example, the Maori (indigenous peoples of New Zealand) "were framed within a distinctive British evangelical print culture that was, for a moment at least, particularly influential in shaping British understandings of the empire" (Ballantyne, 2011, p. 235). Today, indigenous peoples all over the world are framed within the distinctive humanitarian culture. When the missionaries began to have experiences with the Maori, "church missionary presses began to compose and circulate carefully crafted accounts of missionary endeavors in New Zealand" (Ballantyne, 2011, p. 236). When an expatriate worker for a humanitarian aid NGO has experiences with a person that is suffering, a carefully crafted account of their endeavor is released for Westerners back home, as well. What was later to be known as the humanitarian narrative was focused on "the suffering of another’s body in order to

engender compassion for their subject and to urge ameliorative action" (Ballantyne, 2011, p. 237). This is also what advertisements for NGOs are focused on. The action being urged is typically for Westerners to donate money in order to help alleviate the suffering of distant others.

New forms of media are currently replacing humanitarian narratives, condensing them into a more easily consumed message. Presently, advertisements for humanitarian NGOs are like a narrative within an image and a caption. Humanitarian narratives written by British missionaries in New Zealand and advertisements for humanitarian NGOs use the same language to send the same message. In terms of language, humanitarianism and Christianity have quite a lot in common. Augustine poses two questions relevant to humanitarian framework; "Why would you want to experience suffering by watching grievous events that you would never wish to endure yourself? And why is the very pain felt at the sight of another's tragic suffering uniquely pleasurable?" (Blowers, 2010, p. 2) These questions are relevant to early and present humanitarian framing, as well as to the advertisements that humanitarian NGOs release. Narratives from the past and the present are records of individuals experiencing suffering through bearing witness to other people's suffering. It can be assumed that Augustine would say that modern day humanitarian media presents sights that depict suffering for other people to see, therefore making it "uniquely pleasurable." Although this could be true, with the abundance of depictions of suffering on the other side of the world, Western consumers' feelings when confronted with these images and modern narratives could be slightly more complex than having a pleasurable experience.

Although having an eerily pleasurable experience from witnessing suffering firsthand or from an advertisement is entirely possible, experiencing "compassion fatigue" is probably much more likely. Compassion fatigue happens when the media exposes Western consumers to catastrophic events happening far away at a seemingly constant rate. As a result, it has a "domesticating and numbing effect" (Vestergaard, 2008, p. 472). Compassion fatigue is seen as a "challenging dilemma for humanitarian organizations, which have previously used the depiction of suffering both to create

legitimacy for the organization and its cause and to mobilize support from the public" (Vestergaard, 2008, p. 472). Compassion fatigue refers to a variety of different things, usually pertaining to people working in a crisis situation. However, in this context, it refers to the feeling that one could have eventually when confronted with images of suffering in the media. One of the most well-known examples of compassion fatigue for Western media consumers is the advertisements that organizations like Save the Children release in magazines featuring captions such as: "You can help this child or you can turn the page" (Moeller, 1999, p. 2). Moeller (1999) thinks that most media consumers get to the point where they do, in fact, just turn the page. This is essentially the definition of compassion fatigue through example. Compassion fatigue can also be experienced through news stories. Some theorize that the average persons' moral reaction to humanitarian crises "is determined as much by the volume of media attention, which is closely related to our own self-interest, as it is by human need" (Brownscombe, 2005, p. 182). This infers that donor support is also affected by media attention. Therefore it could be assumed that news coverage in general, while not directly advertising for an aid NGO, is advertising for humanitarian relief efforts by constantly featuring images of survivors and victims of war crimes and natural disasters. How the media portrays international crises makes people in the global North "feel overstimulated and bored all at once" (Moeller, 1999, p. 3). Although individuals living in Western society should be informed of what is happening on the other side of the world, compassion fatigue is an issue that affects not only the donor support of humanitarian NGOs, but also how Westerners perceive victims and survivors of atrocities and disasters. How they view these victims and survivors is based historically on narratives provided mostly by other Westerners, and presently by the information being received from humanitarian advertisements.

Compassion, sympathy, and pity are the three main emotions meant to be provoked from humanitarian narratives. It is difficult to avoid compassion fatigue because compassion is one of the main components of humanitarian framework in itself. The problem arises when Western viewers are

bombarded with images of suffering from advertisements at a constant rate. In modern times, as more and more organizations come out of the humanitarian framework, advertisements are typically framed as descriptions of global emergencies. The urgency of these advertisements could be linked to the compassion fatigue felt by Western viewers. Although media exposure of humanitarian crises can have negative effects on viewers, especially when a donation is being asked for at the same time, Amnesty International succeeded in being commercialized without sacrificing all of its ethical integrity; consider an advertisement released within its Danish sector in 2004. The advertisement did not feature any footage or photographs of those surviving conflict or natural disasters on the other side of the world. It featured seemingly mundane things happening in the Western world, like a girl staring into TV screens and then looking away. The verbal component is as follows (translated from Danish): "They look upon the world with different eyes. They prevent weapons from falling into the wrong hands. They create security. They provide a voice for the silent. They find those that have disappeared. They release the innocent" (Vestergaard, 2008, p. 473). When the visual is matched up with the verbal, it becomes evident that the script is describing Amnesty International in action, and the visual is describing Western passivity towards people dying from atrocities and natural disasters. Western society is portrayed visually, and the action that Amnesty International takes is presented verbally. It is up to the viewer to take action by logging on to Amnesty's website, where one can write letters to world leaders and politicians, read full reports on situations around the world, and take actions in many other ways besides donating money to the organization. Although Amnesty International is by no means a perfect NGO, it succeeded in creating an advertisement that is not damaging to the viewer's perception of people warehoused in refugee camps, struggling to escape war, and recovering from natural disasters. It does not make the viewer too tired to care.

Although this Amnesty International advertisement is a great example, it is not the only option humanitarian NGOs have to leave blatant violence out of their imagery. An advertisement from the Norwegian Red Cross does not focus so much on the aspect of bearing witness, within the context of workers in the field and within the context of potential donors. The viewer of this advertisement assumes that the woman is pregnant as a result of rape used as a weapon of war because of the text – but the image alone is only of a pregnant woman. This advertisement subtly displays the Red Cross's value in impartiality and neutrality because unlike Stedman's narrative, it is not imperative for Westerners to bear witness through a third-hand perspective. The text at the bottom, "Even war has limits," has connotations of neutrality, as well. It insinuates that the message is not addressed to any group or nation in particular. It is being addressed to both sides of any real or supposed conflict. Advertisements released by the ICRC, or any other humanitarian organization that may value impartiality over bearing witness, are not necessarily the norm. There are a large amount of advertisements produced by humanitarian NGOs that are more similar to *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition* than the modern advertisement produced by the ICRC. In many instances, rather than impartiality alone, bearing witness to suffering bodies is the more desirable characteristic of the humanitarian framework.

The Case of Invisible Children, Inc.

Invisible Children as a case study illustrates what can happen when a humanitarian NGO releases information about an atrocity in a way that those who survived the atrocity do not approve of (I'Anson & Pfeifer, 2013). On one hand, the organization encourages young Westerners to "do more than just watch" (Karlin & Matthew, 2012, p. 257). On the other, IC's "edgy, MTV-inspired aesthetic that underscores the claim of an appeal to youth(fulness)" makes it so that "the film and website ask us quite explicitly to identify with the filmmakers as opposed to the African children" (Schultheis, 2008, p. 34). Invisible Children was founded by Jason Russell, Bobby Bailey, and Laren Poole; three young men from California who found themselves in Northern Uganda after traveling to Africa initially to learn more about the conflict in Darfur in the early 2000s (Schultheis, 2008). Upon arriving in Sudan, the three young men could not find a crisis to film. They arrived in Uganda in order to film Sudanese refugees and ended up learning about the "night commuters," the children who sleep in large groups in the city to avoid being captured by the Lord's Resistance Army, or LRA (Invisible Children, 2006). The trio screened their first film in 2004. The following year, they debuted Invisible Children as a non-profit organization (Karlin, 2012). Within eight years, the organization produced several films, including *Go* in 2008 and *Together We Are Free* in 2009 (Invisible Children, 2014). Although there is a fair amount of research from within this time arguing for and against the methods of Invisible Children, the organization did not gain its status as a household name until their release of the viral video, *Kony 2012*. The video and the organization have been both praised and criticized; while it is an almost undeniably positive thing that the struggles of children abducted by the LRA is now worldwide knowledge, the way that this message was distributed by Russell and his colleagues through the media is problematic.

The imagery that emerged from Invisible Children did not differ from the imagery presented in more traditional humanitarian organizations. Rather, it was the portals of media through which the imagery emerged that were different. Although the organization used similar imagery of shock and

sympathy, such imagery appeared in the form of short documentaries, social media, and online videos on the IC website, rather than in print advertisements or on a television special. It was much more inextricably linked to social media and modern technology than the work of other humanitarian organizations. The organization began with a short documentary made with a single camera, and the first IC film contains much of the imagery that would be expected from a humanitarian organization. Notably, however, Invisible Children did not exist as an organization yet when this documentary was made. The bare nature of the introductory film makes it clear that that the three young men were newcomers to the realm of humanitarianism, as well as early learners engaging with the deep complexities of armed conflict. Russell addressed the use of traditional humanitarian imagery in the film, although it is not clear how much knowledge he yet had about concepts such as the humanitarian narrative or the spectatorship of suffering; "Overpowering images of starving children with potbellies, with flies and snot on their face is really not what America wants to see, which is good because it kinda gets people uncomfortable, 'cause it helps address why people are uncomfortable, you know?" he said (Invisible Children, 2004).

Most humanitarian organizations use images of suffering people who receive international humanitarian aid. More traditional humanitarian actors such as the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) have been known to display images that are similar to those featured in *Invisible Children: Rough Cut*; "where the bodies of 'victims' are portrayed in horrific, starved conditions, in order to maintain the focus on the sufferer and furthermore create a distance between the spectator and the distant sufferer. This is the relationship the author intended" (Jorge, Mathiesen & Larsen, 2013, p. 20). This tactic of using grotesque imagery is used with the purpose of trying to invoke pity and sympathy within potential donors. Invisible Children is not only a part of this, but the organization was using this tactic of grotesque imagery before it was even officially an organization – although there is a call for donations at the end of *Rough Cut*. Thus, grotesque imagery of suffering bodies, as well as a call to

action focusing on Western donations, were both used before IC officially became a humanitarian NGO. The media and imagery that has been released since IC became an official organization has certainly evolved since *Rough Cut* debuted in 2004, but the relationship between the spectator and the sufferer remained largely the same throughout the duration of the organization's media presence. Although their most famous piece of media, *Kony 2012,* was the most widely viewed viral video of all time (Briones, Madden, & Janoske, 2013), it contains problematic imagery similar to their early works.

Kony 2012 is a roughly 30-minute video that was released by IC in 2012. The organization framed the video as an "experiment" to see if they could "make Kony famous" (Invisible Children, 2012). The video assumes that the audience does not know about Joseph Kony, who is the leader of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), a rebel group in Central Africa. The introduction of the *Kony 2012* video does not reveal straight away what exactly it aims to accomplish. "The next 27 minutes are an experiment," declares Russell, the narrator here and in most other IC films. The connection of the audience to the victims of the LRA is also not immediately made. Russell first asks the audience to identify with themselves, more or less; the short film begins with images of people in the global North using social media, and then an introduction to Russell's young son, Gavin, by showing video clips of his birth. The fact that this video asks people to first identify with people much like themselves can help viewers ease into a troubling discussion of atrocities, but this approach can also be viewed as highly problematic because it focuses attention so squarely on a Western audience. Indeed, the video was met by protests and riots in Uganda when screened. "Is it really surprising that the video was not popular in Uganda? The discourse in the video is aimed at a Western audience…and presumably the Ugandan people will relate to a lesser degree to the discourse and themes of social media, transnational activism, etc." (Jorge, Mathiesen & Larsen, 2013, p. 35). It is not problematic that the video aims to relate to the audience in order to engage people who otherwise would not have known about the LRA and the struggle of people in Central Africa, but it is problematic that the video is non-inclusive to Ugandan

people and people elsewhere in Africa who are or have been affected by the atrocities committed by the LRA. For much of the video, *Kony 2012* uses the same themes of suffering and distant bodies that people in the global North do not come into contact with outside the media; this approach is much like the rest of the humanitarian discourse, past and present. The strong reaction from Ugandan viewers highlights that this disconnect is dubious.

The visual themes in *Kony 2012* may inspire Western audiences, but some aspects of the video dehumanizes the African "other" that it constructs. Following the introduction featuring mostly Western bodies, the audience is introduced to Jacob, a young man that Russell met during his first trip to Uganda in 2003. Jacob was featured in the very first IC film and that clip is repeated in *Kony 2012,* with Jacob telling Russell that he comes to town to sleep and to hide from the LRA, and that the LRA killed his brother by slitting his throat. In another clip, Jacob states that he would rather be dead than alive. Jacob then begins weeping over his deceased brother, while Russell is comforting him, telling him several times that everything will be okay and promising that he will do everything he can to stop the LRA (Invisible Children, 2012). "To what degree is it ethical to explore a child tragedy and expose him to this level of vulnerability for millions of people to see?" ask Jorge et al. (2013). "One could argue that the way Jason tried to instigate an emotional response from this child is unethical. Jacob is somehow used to raise the viewer's emotional engagement" (Jorge, Mathiesen & Larsen, 2013, p. 75). Even though Russell and Jacob appear to have built a lifelong friendship, and even though Jacob is surely thankful for all that Russell has done for his community and for other victims of the LRA, Russell is still doing Jacob a disservice by broadcasting his most vulnerable moment to the world in a viral video. What is missing from this segment is the background information; it makes it seem as though Russell, Bailey, and Poole had always aimed to create awareness about children affected by the LRA, when in reality, they ended up in Uganda because there was nothing interesting to film in Sudan. This is not only misleading, but it

strengthens the imagery of these three men as the white saviors, and the children trying to escape from the LRA as passive, suffering bodies.

These suffering bodies, however, are not even mentioned in the next portion of *Kony 2012.* Following the introduction to Jacob, the declaration is then made that the video expires on 31 December 2012 (Invisible Children, 2012). Similar to the theme of the exploitation of suffering bodies, the sense of emergency created by these statement is also a recurring theme that appears in humanitarian discourse. “Within this imaginary, snapshots of helpless victims become the public face of humanitarianism and aid organizations, as well as of Western donors, appearing as the only heroes who can respond to emergencies” (Musarò, 2011, p. 15). *Kony 2012* represents the emergency imaginary perfectly. Following the glimpses that the audience receives of young, suffering African bodies, the expiration date is presented. The concept of *Kony 2012* exists within an emergency imaginary by putting inexperienced, young Western people who know very little about the LRA or Kony’s whereabouts in the spotlight. Note that this is not to say that young people in the global North cannot be agents of change, but the video is suggesting that these young people who know very little about this situation can do better in stopping a wanted war criminal than activists/specialists who are actually located in Central Africa. In fact, this segment of the video is shown before the proper introduction to Kony and his crimes against humanity are even mentioned in detail.

The first real introduction that the audience of *Kony 2012* has to Joseph Kony himself is the same one that Russell’s young son, Gavin has. Gavin is told about Kony in the simplest of terms by his father. Russell mentions explicitly as the narrator that he could not go into details with his son about what Kony does; at this point, the audience is made aware that Kony’s atrocities are indeed serious. As Russell explains, Kony kidnaps kids “just like Gavin” (Invisible Children, 2012). As evidence, images and dramatic reenactments are shown in the film: “Similar to the previous shot [of a presumably Ugandan boy being kidnapped from his bed], the first thing the viewer is shown is a close up of Kony’s left eye

with an oblique camera movement, until reaching a traditional medium chest shot. The focus on the eyes in both shots creates two different connotations. On one side, the child's eyes connote fear, making him the victim. On the other, Kony's eyes are red and black connoting a sense of evilness. There is also a transition from the rebel's actions (group) to Kony (individual). The villain acquires a face" (Jorge, Mathiesen & Larsen, 2013, p. 56-57). And although Kony's crimes are in fact crimes against humanity, the way that the photographs of Kony and child soldiers are featured in *Kony 2012* almost make him appear as a cartoonish villain (Jorge, Mathiesen & Larsen, 2013). The audience's attention is attracted by shock value, which is congruent with the rest of humanitarian discourse. As Russell informs the audience that Kony makes child soldiers mutilate peoples' faces, images flash of children with parts of their faces cut off. The quick sequence avoids shocking the viewer more than necessary, in order to not lose their attention. On the other hand, these pictures have close up framings and are shot with wide angle lenses, which amplifies their shock potential. The decision to show a limited number of intensely shocking images can be associated with the intention to create a more spectacular and sometimes surreal narrative (Jorge, Mathiesen & Larsen, 2013, p. 59).

Imagery and meaning can also be found in the language that is used in *Kony 2012*, even within what is left unsaid. This is not just prevalent within Russell's role as the narrator, but with the people he chooses to interview. From the explanation of Kony's crimes, the video goes into an interview with the head prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague, Luis Moreno Ocampo. He explains that Kony was the first person indicted by the ICC for war crimes and crimes against humanity, including murder, sexual slavery, and rape (Invisible Children, 2012). What is not mentioned by Ocampo or by Russell is the ICC's prevalence for indicting criminals from the African continent, ignoring criminals from the rest of the world. This is not inferring that Kony and other war criminals indicted by the ICC do not deserve to be indicted and arrested, but rather it is meant to point out the fact that the kind of heinous crimes that Kony committed are not exclusive to the African continent. War crimes, crimes

against humanity, and genocide happen all over the globe, and the indictments and arrests made by the ICC do not reflect that. This also perpetuates the image of Africa as a homogenous and violent "third world." The way that Ocampo describes what must be done could also be said to be simplistic, although it might have something to do with how the video is framing Ocampo's words. According to Ocampo, "the only way to stop Kony is show him, hey, we're going to arrest you" (Invisible Children, 2012). The video then puts Ocampo in juxtaposition with Russell's young son, Gavin. They both say, in so many words, that Kony needs to be stopped.

Russell makes the statement that if people knew who Kony was, he would have been stopped a long time ago. This is an interesting point to make, since years after *Kony 2012* was made and most of the world does indeed now know who he is, he has still not been arrested or indicted. After interviewing Ugandan politicians about their feelings toward Kony, politician Santo Okot Lapolo summed up many peoples' priorities: "First, to rescue our children, and secondly, to deliver the justice" (Invisible Children, 2012). In interviews with United States government officials, IC was essentially told that if U.S. interests were not involved – financially, politically, or otherwise – there was no way that the state would involve itself in a situation like the one in Central Africa. IC's idea of getting the government involved in order to stop Kony and the LRA was to lobby government officials to send troops in to advise Ugandan soldiers in capturing and arresting Kony (Invisible Children, 2012). "The world viewing Joseph Kony as a global poster boy for Africa's problems will, to be sure, make things worse for him; however, the increased foreign and domestic military presence will also serve to further militarize the region as a whole, as governments sending armed forces can justify their actions by magically referring back to Kony, the global scapegoat" (Finnström, 2012, p. 132-133).

According to Russell, people made aware of the atrocities committed by the LRA were shocked and "their awareness turned into action" (Invisible Children, 2012). In order to illustrate that action had been taken, the video shows a mass of young people, presumably American, chanting "it's not over"

(Invisible Children, 2012). At this point in the video, there is a very brief explanation that Kony is actually not in Uganda anymore, and was not at the time that *Kony 2012* was made, either. There is a picture of a map of Central Africa, with a red shapeless blob that is supposed to represent the LRA. The blob moves from Uganda and into surrounding countries, including the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Russell, as narrator, continues to explain that since the United States government would not help them, they did it themselves, with their "time, talent, and money" (Invisible Children, 2012). This is not only misleading and confusing (since the video does not go into enough detail about where the LRA is, how long they have been out of Uganda, or what places they are affecting the most now), but it is also, once again, calling upon the audience to identify with the Western members of the organization much more than people in Central Africa who have been affected by violence perpetrated by the LRA. This not only oversimplifies and appropriates the trauma that these people have experienced (Edmondson, 2012), but it also does the Western audience a disservice by not properly educating them on the topic – a topic that the organization presents themselves as experts on. However, the fine detail of the situation with the LRA and the added problems that *Kony 2012* brought upon it does not seem to matter to Russell, who declares triumphantly that because of the efforts of Invisible Children, "the unseen has become visible" (Invisible Children, 2012). Although it is indeed true that Russell and the rest of the organization shined a light on an issue that was not very well-known on a global scale, it is also true that the solutions proposed by IC were oversimplified the issue by assuming that American troops would solve many of the problems in Central Africa – flat-out offending many Northern Ugandan in the process.

Although *Kony 2012* shows that lobbying U.S. government officials had proven unsuccessful in the past, IC went back to lobby after they had gained much more support. This time, government officials were willing to listen. Senators and state representatives from both the Republican and Democratic parties are shown speaking in the video, prompted by action from Americans and other Western advocates. However, missing from this discussion were actual people who had been victimized

by the LRA. Again, advocacy action excluded the voices of those with the most at stake in this process. “The fact that the video’s discourse towards participation and engagement is aimed at millennials and not Ugandans is highly interesting to point out,” notes Jorge, Mathiesen, and Larsen, 2013. “The Ugandans do not receive any agency through this approach. The only way this conflict will be solved, according to the video, is if the millennials share the video and join in activism to get the U.S. government’s attention so they can help with military intervention” (p. 84). The exclusion of people in Central Africa was solidified later, with the announcement that Invisible Children was successful in convincing the U.S. government to send military advisors to Uganda. At their headquarters in San Diego, people burst into cheers and applause at the announcement (Invisible Children, 2012). “There is a certain degree of naivety about the complexity of Joseph Kony’s survival, and the ‘happy ever after’ classical Hollywood cliché in Kony 2012 triggered by Obama’s deployment of US troops in central Africa,” writes Dokotum (2014, p. 14-15).

Invisible Children employed a variety of tactics to garner international attention for its cause. In order to capture the audience’s attention, *Kony 2012* shows photographs of Adolf Hitler as well as what was presumably a Nazi death camp, with Russell stating that “it’s hard to look back on some parts of human history, because when we heard about injustice, we cared, but we didn’t know what to do. Too often, we did nothing. But if we’re going to change that, we have to start somewhere” (Invisible Children, 2012). Aside from supplying technology such as a high-frequency early warning radio system, Russell argues that IC has assisted Central Africa by calling attention to Kony and “making him famous,” therefore bringing about awareness and action from people in the global North. The goal, then, was to make Joseph Kony a household name. Aside from the goal of targeting 20 “culture makers” (such as celebrities) and 12 policymakers, attention was created through the “Cover the Night” event. The organization printed a large amount of posters and stickers for people to post Kony’s name and likeness in as many physical space as they could. The organization also made bracelets for people to wear, but

apparently only for the year 2012. The bracelets had identification numbers that people were supposed to enter on the internet, and there were also ways to track posted pictures of Kony. In fact, IC sold an "action kit" for engaging in these and other activities. The "Cover the Night" campaign occurred on 20 April 2012, when plastering Kony's name and likeness reached its height of popularity. This date, however, was problematic for the very people it was intended to aid: "In particular, they [victims and relatives of victims of the LRA] took issue with the date of the campaign roll out: April 20th. This date is the anniversary of a massacre of northern Ugandans in the village of Atiak, which took place at the hands of the LRA in 1995. For many Ugandans it is a day of mourning and remembrance. For this reason, the Cover the Night campaign seemed particularly insulting" (I'Anson & Pfeifer, 2013, p. 9).

I argue that the practices outlined in this paper shows how Invisible Children is housed within the "empire of trauma" (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009). This empire exists within a "neoliberal world order in which trauma serves as currency" (Edmonson, 2012, p. 12). In the context of *Kony 2012,* the trauma is the imagery of suffering bodies and currency resulted with donations that were gathered after the video was released. Trauma as currency exists in other ways within the organization, as well. For example, the "action kits" for *Kony 2012* and other products profited the organization in the form of actual money, as well as a way to advertise their cause and garner more donations. Through the sale of material goods, it could also be said that IC exploited victims of Kony and the LRA. The occult economies described by Finnström (2012) are also very closely related to the theorization of trauma as currency and help to explain how these commodities exploit the very people the organization aims to help; such commodities hint at hidden transactions between people and "magical" forces to attain spiritual and material power (p. 128). In the case of IC action kits and other products, transactions were made in the name of activism but they also supported Western neoliberal power. For instance, many IC material goods advertised the organization itself but did not educate about human rights abuses; they were a method of branding and gaining more donations, rather than directly combatting atrocities. And although it could be argued that

donations are important for humanitarian organizations in order to keep programs afloat and to keep aid coming in for the people who need it, it is noteworthy that IC used two-thirds of the donations following the release of *Kony 2012* to cover the cost of production for the video itself (Finnström, 2012). It seems as though branding of the organization was prioritized over providing actual relief, and this approach only makes sense within a Western capitalist ideology.

Indeed, the way IC presented the situation of the LRA and these "invisible children" from the beginning was very Anglocentric. This is congruent with the way that issues with child soldiers have been framed for a long time – certainly since before Invisible Children was a household name, and before *Kony 2012* was produced. "The romanticization of childhood as a time of innocence and play…reflects a prioritization of Western, capitalist values that, I would argue, are inseparable from the history of modern colonialism and the Anglophone novel," writes Schultheis (2008, p. 32). Although it is obvious that the LRA is engaging in horrific acts against children that constitute mass atrocity crimes, IC frames these children in terms of Western ideology and Anglocentrism. Very rarely do activists consider what life is like for the average Ugandan child minus the threat of being taken away from their homes. This is consistent with the humanitarian imagery of suffering bodies to the point of dehumanization. Children are understood in the context of a specific emergency, separate from the other issues and interests in their lives.

The Restructuring of Invisible Children & Recommendations for the Future

To the surprise of many, Invisible Children restructured itself at the end of 2014. The organization announced that the mobilization of young people in Western countries through the means of capital and media would cease. "We don't visit school in vans, we aren't making new videos or selling T-shirts. We aren't hosting major awareness events, benefit concerts, or grassroots fundraisers. We moved out of our San Diego office and the majority of our staff have moved on to new things, including

our executive leadership," IC announced online (Invisible Children, 2014). The only activism that has been done since January 2015 in the United States is lobbying work. Most of IC's work will now take place in Central Africa, with plans for the organization to hand over all of their resources to community leaders there. "Every dollar we raise this year will enable us to continue this work and responsibly handover our programs to local community partners in 2016," the organization noted (Invisible Children, 2014). It seems as though Russell and his team of cyber-activists took the advice of scholarly critics, who have been especially active since the release of *Kony 2012.* This paper has already outlined shortcomings in IC's early approach, but it is commendable that organizers eventually decided to pass their organization along to the people it affects most.

The changes that were made within Invisible Children are quite uncharacteristic of a humanitarian organization. Even in humanitarian NGOs that are more service-based, like Doctors Without Borders, people from Western countries are on location servicing beneficiaries viewed as suffering bodies. IC is proposing to essentially phase out their entire organization. In terms of combatting the white savior industrial complex, this can be seen as both a positive and negative message. On one hand, it could be said that because of this reform, more power was given to the people to enable them to advocate for themselves – something that is rarely done by humanitarian organizations. This shows that there is progress within the discourse, and that it is possible to help improve the lives of others without dehumanizing and belittling them. On the other hand, the last video that Invisible Children made framed the situation as if they had fought for this all along and won; that the "experiment" mentioned in *Kony 2012* had been a successful one. This is untrue. Although images of dehumanized suffering bodies will no longer be a characteristic of IC, the organization is still disbanding without really educating their Western audience and donors on the complexities of the situation with the LRA in Central Africa. When asked about how involvement with Invisible Children had affected them, samples of American high school students stated that it had influenced them in a positive way. However,

research also shows that *Kony 2012* was not successful in giving students much actual knowledge about issues in Uganda, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, or any other places of LRA activity. Many students expressed a wish to work in "Africa," which illustrates the fact that these students view the African continent as at least a somewhat homogenous location. One high school that participated in the study stated: "I want to go to medical school and become a doctor and if that happens I would like to be a part of Doctors without Borders and work anywhere/everywhere in Africa. If I don't get accepted into school, I would like to become part of a non-profit organization that helps with issues in African countries" (Karlin, 2012, p. 13).

In order for IC to make a lasting difference, for both the people affected by the LRA as well as for Western audiences and supporters, there is still the need for drastic change, even if most of the organization has disbanded at this point. Although Invisible Children has decided to stop making videos, it would be useful for the organization to issue educational materials about the complex political situation in Central Africa – materials created outside of humanitarian discourse and narrative. This is also an opportunity for the organization to look back on its work and critically assess its work in order to improve humanitarian action in the future. For many people living in the global North, the only exposure to the LRA or to these "invisible children" may be through Invisible Children. It is important for them to understand the complex nature of the situation; this is not a Hollywood movie starring Joseph Kony as the villain, children like Jacob as the victims, and Jason Russell as the savior or the protagonist. The widespread shock related to *Kony 2012* shows that many people in the global North are unaware of what is happening in the world around them, and Russell himself points out that people's awareness will turn into action. Invisible Children no longer has to be concerned about branding or about fund raising to cover film production costs; instead, they have the chance to focus on education and advocacy in a fairer, more humane, and useful way. The progress made by Invisible Children folding their organization and focusing more on the issue at hand is admirable, but it cannot stop there. Audiences in the global

North have already been engaged by anecdotes provided by IC about villains, victims, and heroes. It is the responsibility of organizations such as Invisible Children to correct these misconceptions and to help Western audiences understand political issues on the African continent outside the scope of humanitarian discourse and narrative.

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