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The Acholi of Northern Uganda and Invisible Children, Inc. Bodies in Pain, Misrepresentation, and the Construction of "Africa" within American Imaginaries

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A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts
in African Studies

by

Laura Dick

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Acholi of Northern Uganda and Invisible Children, Inc.
Bodies in Pain, Misrepresentation,
and the Construction of “Africa” within American Imaginaries

by
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Master of Arts in African Studies
University of California, Los Angeles, 2014
Professor Allen F. Roberts, Chair

Part One of this thesis explores how the non-profit organization Invisible Children, Inc. misrepresented the conflict between the Lord’s Resistance Army and the Acholi victims in Northern Uganda. This analysis of misrepresentation within the organization’s films and ephemera was mainly concerned around the historical evidence and deliberate silencing of opposing opinions. Part Two illustrates how the use of pain can be employed as props in the American portrayal of “Africa”, and how this portrayal can be, in turn, used to further subjugate the "idea of Africa" in American imaginaries, subsequently reinforcing Western hierarchy.
The thesis of Laura Dick is approved.

Allen F. Roberts
Sondra Hale
Edith Omwami

University of California, Los Angeles
2014
CONTENTS

I. Introduction ............................................................................................................. 1

II. Part One ............................................................................................................... 4

III. Part Two ........................................................................................................... 26

IV. Conclusion ......................................................................................................... 44

V. Works Cited .......................................................................................................... 45
Introduction:

In 2006, the non-profit organization Invisible Children, Inc. released a documentary entitled *Invisible Children* exposing thousands of young Americans to the conflict in Northern Uganda involving the Lord’s Resistance Army. Six years later, the same organization released an online short film entitled, *KONY 2012*. Nobody expected the overwhelming reception it would receive. Within just six days of the video’s release, *KONY 2012* had reached over 100 million views, becoming the most shared online video in history. But with great attention, comes great scrutiny. Soon after the film’s release the organization began receiving multiple and varying criticisms. Within only a few weeks after *KONY 2012*’s release date, many had already forgotten about Invisible Children, Inc. Perhaps a testament to the young American Internet users of today, the film was buried as quickly as it was spread.

Despite the critiques Invisible Children received as an organization and the subsequent lack of interest by the American youth today, it is still imperative to identify what elements within Invisible Children’s campaign engrossed the American population so dramatically. As journalist Alan Greenblatt of NPR wrote, “Invisible Children’s techniques will be closely studied, if not widely imitated by other nonprofits. And indeed, anyone else with a message to promote” (Greenblatt 2012). With the potential for this model of documentary and film to be reproduced due to its immense success, we must dig deeper and search for the underpinning issues of representation, power, and politics.

By taking heed from V.Y. Mudimbe’s scholarly suggestions, this thesis will take Invisible Children’s representations of African events and footage of horrendous pain and rethink what the politics at play are. As Mudimbe stated,

Today, the best students, faced with contradictory reports, will ask pertinent questions: What are these reports witnessing to? Do they contribute to a better knowledge of the African past? Are they scientifically credible and acceptable? If correctly answered,
these propositions lead, in principle, to a new understanding of human history. (Mudimbe 1988: 23)

Is it possible through detailed cross analysis, to find a better knowledge of the past Northern Ugandan conflict than what has already been represented to American audiences? It appears today that “Africa” is a trending topic amongst young people in the United States. Buy a special water bottle at Whole Foods and a portion of the proceeds increases access to clean water in some African country. Feeling lost in your twenties? Go volunteer in Africa, teach English, visit an orphanage. Walk the streets of New York barefoot for a day to spread awareness of the many African children without shoes. You like my handbag? Made by African women, it’s for charity. The list goes on.

“Africa” is most certainly a sexier topic than the discussion of race within our own U.S. borders. Speaking of borders, “Africa” is undoubtedly more Facebook-friendly than discourse surrounding our own immigration reform. Discussing United States politics over dinner is surefire taboo. However, “Africa”? That’s kosher enough. After all, everyone can agree upon a 100% against-child-soldier position. We must both dismantle and investigate these supposedly safe topics, for they may be conveniently shielding us from something far more uncomfortable and revealing about American imaginaries.

It is apparent, as noted in the examples above that the West often gazes upon the African continent from a comfortable distance. “Africa,” indeed a concept, indicating no specificity in regards to the continent’s immense diversity of cultures, people, and individual countries, can serve the West as an abstraction of the exotic, pitiful, beautiful, and grotesque. “Africa as a concept has historically served, and continues to serve as a polemic argument for the West’s desperate desire to assert its difference from the rest of the world” (Mbembe 2001: 2).

By using the non-profit Invisible Children, Inc. and its agenda and misrepresentation
of the conflict in Northern Uganda as a springboard to a more theoretical analysis of how the idea of Africa is constructed in the American imaginary, I will specifically focus on the idea of pain being used as a prop for this conceptualization. Achille Mbembe’s *On the Postcolony*, Susan Sontag’s *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Saidiya Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection*, and Elaine Scarry’s *The Body in Pain*, as well as many other scholar’s works will serve as my theoretical foundation, as I investigate how the use of representations of pain in the portrayal of Africa further subjugate through "ideas of Africa" and reinforce Western hierarchy.

A brief historiographic account of the conflict in Northern Uganda is included in this thesis for clarity and context, but what I wish to focus most attention upon is the misrepresentation (or rather, a dangerous over-simplification) by Invisible Children, Inc. within both of their films. Part One provides historical context to the theoretical implications of representations of pain that I explore in depth in Part Two.

It is also central for this thesis to explore how empathy can be misguided and manipulated, and as an emotion, can be double-edged. The road to hell is, indeed, paved with good intentions. Through detailed analysis of Invisible Children's videos and ephemera, we shall see how the black body, as Hortense Spillers states, "becomes the source of irresistible, destructive sensuality...at the same time’-- in stunning contradiction -- the captive body reduces to a thing" (Spillers 1987: 67).
Part One: Setting the Stage of Invisible Children: Representing the Concept of “Africa”

There is nothing on earth more distressing than the sound of a child in pain. Perhaps this is because we listen and the sound immediately feels vehemently unjust, even without any context specified. Perhaps it is because something deep rooted within our psyches connects the sound to our own adult loss of innocence, and/or triggers memories of childhood trauma and suffering. Or perhaps the piercing cry of a child in pain is deemed so unnerving and gross because this very sound embodies human helplessness and insecurity, a feeling we all wage battle against each and every moment. To come face to face with the sound of the genuine pain of another individual, and of a child in particular, will bring many to tears. The sound certainty provokes a response of some sort, whether it is sympathy, anger, sadness, or empathy. For that reason, images and representations of children in pain are surefire devices in provoking viewers to action.

One of the final scenes in the 2006 documentary Invisible Children is an interview with a young Acholi boy named Jacob. Though his age is not documented, he appears to be no more than eleven or twelve. IC’s filmmakers were told that Jacob’s brother was killed during an LRA raid on their village, and they question the boy about his misfortune and loss. Jacob begins to describe how he would rather die than live in the world he must encounter each day in Northern Uganda. He explains to the Americans behind the camera that his brother is lucky to be in heaven. Seemingly in dismay, filmmaker Jason Russell asks the boy, “You would rather die than stay on this Earth?” This is a violent and utterly depressing question to ask a young child, who responds with a chillingly simple, “Yes.” Instead of addressing Jacob’s disturbingly truthful and tragic admission of suicidal wishes, Russell continues to provoke the child’s fragile emotions. He asks, “What would you say to your brother if you saw him again?” The boy takes a labored breath and begins to explain that he would tell his brother
that he was missed, but before Jacob can even complete the sentence he breaks down into high-pitched almost infant-like cries. There are no words to describe the sound. His cries do not need explanation. The sounds cannot be categorized. They are sobs of pain, naked and vulnerable. It is truly horrendous, a scene so difficult to watch, one must question to what degree and for what reasons this boy’s pain is being exploited.

Is it ethical to use a child’s loss and pain for some greater mission? If the goal is to stop more suffering, are Jacob’s cries the means to a greater end? Who can decide? Do representations of pain like Jacob’s further humanize or dehumanize his character? When does this child’s distress get taken for granted?

In this section I wish to focus on the organization Invisible Children’s founding documentary entitled *Invisible Children*, the more recent viral phenomenon *KONY 2012*, as well as this non-profit organization as an entity. By analyzing both of Invisible Children’s films along with public criticisms and critiques received, I will locate the multiple voices (some projected, others stifled) within this complex American youth movement – or scandal, depending upon how one interprets it. What is certain is that there is much more than meets the eye in these films. It is most important to uncover what has been hidden or buried, because often the material deliberately denied exposure sheds light on the power dynamics at hand. What has been ignored, and why?

As a practice in postcolonial theory, I will address the topic of Invisible Children and its films from an ideological standpoint, borrowing from scholar Pauline Marie Rosenau’s ideas of Marxist epistemology and methodology. I will attempt to follow her instructions that, “nothing is to be accepted; nothing is to be rejected,” and will form my arguments with special care so as to, “deny the legitimacy of all dichotomies, because there are always a few
exceptions to any generalization based on bipolar terms, and these can be used to undermine them” (Rosenau 1992: 121).

I will first begin by giving a brief overview of the films Invisible Children and KONY 2012 and the dynamics behind the viral sensation produced by the latter. I will also include critiques and criticisms that the organization Invisible Children (IC) received from Americans, Ugandans, and Diasporic Ugandans. By interrupting, interweaving, and intervening with various scholarly texts and postcolonial theory, as well as by borrowing from the ideas of V.Y. Mudimbe and Achille Mbembe, I hope to examine Invisible Children in a deep and theoretical manner rather than dismissing it as American propaganda, or as manifesting some sort of white savior complex. Because of Invisible Children’s impact on America’s youth and IC’s part in constructing what “Africa” is within a contemporary American imaginary, it is imperative to uncover the not-so-obvious issues of representation at hand. Something, some element, within these films stirred a shockingly enormous response among American youth, as a generation so often considered to be apathetic, entitled, and lazy. What was it in KONY 2012 that triggered such widespread response? And furthermore, what impact have the two IC films had upon preconceived notions of the African continent?

After giving an overview of the issues of representation and misrepresentation at large, I will apply Achille Mbembe’s argument in On The Postcolony about how “discourse on Africa is almost always deployed in the framework (or on the fringes) of a meta-text about the animal-to be exact, about the beast: its experience, its world, and its spectacle. In this meta-text, the life of Africans unfolds under two signs” (Mbembe 2001: 3). The first such sign is how many in the West view “the African” as strange and monstrous. The second notion is in what ways many in the West view Africa in terms of experimentation. Both these interpretations of African life establish a dehumanizing and assumedly superior distance for certain American
audiences. According to Mbembe, Westerners share the view that, “We can even, through a process of domestication and training, bring the African to where he or she can enjoy a fully human life. In this perspective, Africa is essentially, for us, an object of experimentation” (Mbembe 2001: 2). Mbembe’s theories may be a gross generalization of the “West” and has been critiqued as such, but regarding organizations like Invisible Children and its two films, it is necessary to ask how certain American audiences can prove Mbembe’s theories true.

As a Western and American scholar of Africa, I need to account for my own positions. It is critical, as Sondra Hale reminds us in “Some Thoughts on Women and Gender in Africa: Listening to the Whispers of African Women” that, “a necessary process for any researcher of Africa, who is coming from the outside and looking in, is to engage in constant self-interrogation” (Hale 1998: 25). Where do my own biases lead me? Can I locate my own exoticisms or romanticisms, prejudices and discriminations, and even racisms within my analysis of the issues at hand? With such questions in mind, I will present my analysis, all the while expecting that upon completion, as Molara Ogundipe-Leslie once said, I will “leave the rest to you as social scientists to accept or reject, to disprove, research and document statistically or paper over with Greek and Latinate words, percentages and graphs” (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994: 189).

Before addressing the specific examples of Invisible Children and how the organization, perhaps unknowingly or perhaps unabashedly, used misrepresentation as a weapon against the very people it claims to help, I shall explore ways for “setting the stage” of representation. Imagine a theatrical stage set before you. In the audience you sit back in your chair, comfortable in your own personal position, and waiting with an expectant gaze. The lights go out. A player (otherwise known as a stagehand) is disguised and hidden in darkness. Between the scenes, as moments of light, scrutiny, and observation, the stagehand is able to
place a single chair at a precise angle in the dark, so that when the lights come back up and the actors return onstage, this chair is in its perfect location. It is positioned in carefully curated light. With an illuminated stage, the audience sees a new scene, and a chair that, due to the manipulation of the stealthy stagehand, appears to have always been there. We take the chair for granted. The chair is simply there. We do not think of the chair’s movement or placement because we did not see it happen in action.

It is helpful to apply this example to films like *Invisible Children* and *KONY 2012*, as well as to organizations like Invisible Children. Before jumping to any conclusions, we must ask questions like, who are the stagehands? For whom are the chairs meant? What has been placed in front of the audience in those moments of darkness, that is then, in turn, taken for granted?

With so many various opinions and motives made public through the inquiring eyes of Internet users and media sources, one would presume that under this supposed fact-checking generation age of ours, we have hammered down the art of “responsible representation”. But is “responsible representation” but is any such endeavor possible? As Edward Said explains,

> The act of representing (and hence reducing) others almost always involves violence of some sort to the subject of the representation… whether you call it a spectacular image, or an exotic image, or a scholarly representation, there is always the paradoxical contrast between the surface, which seems to be in control, and the process which produces it, which inevitably involves some degree of violence, decontextualization, miniaturization, etc. (Said 1985: 4)

It is naïve to ever believe in truth with a capital T. After all, how many times have audiences been tricked, emotionally manipulated and left bleary-eyed by so-called “poverty pornography”? How many times have viewers’ tears been tricked out of their ducts to mourn the over-the-top displays of scrolling black and white photographs of anonymous dead bodies? Or during commercial breaks on prime-time television when a woman sings gently to
the sound of a piano, as bloated babies stare helplessly into the camera. In the case of Invisible Children, are the Acholi African bodies used simply as props, no different than a methodically positioned chair upon a stage?

Invisible Children: The Conflict in Northern Uganda and the Unmentioned Complexities

In 2006, non-profit organization Invisible Children, Inc. released a documentary entitled Invisible Children depicting the plight of the Acholi people in Northern Uganda. The film played particular attention to the violent abductions of children taking place by members of a rebel group called the Lord’s Armed Resistance, otherwise known as the LRA. Although the documentary was screened across the United States, and especially targeted towards American youth and particularly high school students, the non-profit organization was still new and developing. Nobody, including the staff and founders of IC, could have foreseen the immense amount of national and international attention the organization would soon receive.

On March 5th, 2012 Invisible Children released a short film online called KONY 2012, which called for the capture and arrest of Joseph Kony, leader of the Lord’s Resistance Army. Kony, an indicted war criminal and International Criminal Court fugitive, became a household name in the United States overnight. Within just six days of the video’s release, it had reached over 100 million views. It is estimated that over half of the young adults in the United States, from ages 18 to 29, had seen the video in just three days following KONY2012’s release. (theguardian.com 2012) Invisible Children had never seen such immediate response and publicity throughout its entire existence as a corporation. The short film was originally shared through social media platforms, mostly Facebook, but soon national and international news outlets started to spread word of this new buzzworthy film documenting the atrocious acts of Joseph Kony and his rebel army.
Joseph Kony, shown in the video holding a rifle, surrounded by children he had abducted as part of his rebel army, was simply called the “bad guy”. In the film, Invisible Children co-founder Jason Russell explains to his son that it was up to “us” to get the bad guy. Quite literally, Invisible Children’s mission had been translated into terms so simple that even a child could understand. Capture Kony. Celebrities quickly jumped on the bandwagon to support Invisible Children’s mission, because after all, it’s not difficult to take a stance against child soldiers. It seemed like a no-brainer to click “like” on the film’s link, or to copy-and-paste the film in an email to a friend. The craze to spread awareness, or as Invisible Children put it “to make Kony famous” seemed like a simple enough task for a generation of American youth so consumed by social media.

But unfortunately the war in Northern Uganda was not as simple as Invisible Children painted the conflict to be. By simplifying the events and histories at hand, in such crude language that even a young child can understand, is not only misleading, but also violently irresponsible representation of the Acholi affected.

Before delving into the complexities of the civil war in Uganda, and the subsequent criticisms of KONY 2012, it is important to reiterate that there are multiple players, multiple stagehands and multiple systems of representation. It is impossible to attempt to present all parties affected, however the voices of Invisible Children, the Acholi Diaspora community in Southern California, and excerpts from the local “Acholi Times” news website will provide a substantial pool of opinion on the events.

Taking into account the danger of constructing a simple and limiting argument against Invisible Children (and avoiding the creation of a dichotomy – IC representation of events versus “actual” Acholi representation of events). Great attention should be placed on avoiding at all cost the potential for demonizing or glorifying any one particular point of view.
The conflict in Northern Uganda, specifically regarding the plight of the Acholi ethnic group, has been active since 1986. When the armed National Resistance Army (NRA) led by current president Yoweri Museveni successfully overthrew the leadership of President Milton Obote and later Tito Okello, the Acholi ethnic group was targeted as a weaker group and frequently labeled as traitors. Little representation was granted to the Acholi people in the government, and Museveni initially viewed the Acholi as sympathizers for the country’s previous rulers. Much has happened since 1986 concerning the political environment in Uganda, but President Museveni still continues to hold power today. For this reason alone it is crucial to map out the past and contemporary politics of power in relation to the conflict Invisible Children intends to represent in both the organization’s films.

Undoubtedly what would later turn into Joseph Kony’s Lord’s Resistance Army has its roots in one woman’s revolutionary movement; Alice Lakwena and the Holy Spirit Movement. Alice Auma was a woman of many names. Born in 1956 in Northern Uganda as a member of the Acholi ethnic group, Alice Auma’s childhood was nothing out of the ordinary. But by the time Auma reached thirty-years old she was no longer Alice Auma, but was internationally known as Alice Lakwena. Not only was her image printed on the front page of England’s Daily Telegraph, but an estimated 10,000 Ugandan men, women, and children had died under her military order.

Who was this woman who was rumored to have the ability to transform bullets into water? Who was this priestess who could heal and forgive a lifetime of sins with a single prayer or touch? Who was this “hysterical and insane” Ugandan woman acting “mad” and “uncivilized”? These questions swept the world by storm, her news coverage dragging its sticky blood-soaked limbs across borders, picking up ethnic, cultural and racial prejudices like dirt particles along the way. Alice Auma, Alice Lakwena, Acholi Priestess, or Commander in
Chief of the Holy Spirit Movement was a woman of endless debate. Her portrayal in the international media and the Holy Spirit Movement’s subsequent and assumed connection with Joseph Kony’s Lord’s Resistance Army would later shape how Invisible Children documented the history of Northern Uganda’s conflict.

Alice Auma’s life began to take a turn from the norm after two failed marriages, both ending due to her inability to conceive a child. After her marriages, Auma moved back with her father in the Gulu Province of Northern Uganda and began working as a spirit medium and healer, a job common in the region for women unable to bear children. (Allen 1991: 380) Soon after, Alice Auma disappeared into the wilderness for a rumored forty days and nights, returning with several spirits possessing her, the most prominent being a spirit being called Lakwena (a word meaning messenger in the Acholi language). Lakwena was said to be the spirit of a dead Italian army officer. It was through this spirit possession that Alice Auma became locally and internationally known as Alice Lakwena and successfully recruited hundreds of Ugandans, a majority being Acholi men, in a movement whose official aim was to bring a second coming of Christ. (Behrend 1997)

In 1986, Alice Lakwena led her Holy Spirit Army southbound through Uganda, in an attempt to overthrow the National Resistance Movement (NRM) government of Yoweri Museveni. Though her movement eventually ended unsuccessful, her reputation and international representation remained prominent. She was forced to flee the country and sought safety at a refugee camp in Kenya. After being jailed for a short period of time, Alice Lakwena was released and spent the remainder of her life at the Ifo Refugee Camp in Kenya. She died in 2007. A woman whose life was surrounded by controversy, her death was no different. Some claimed she died of AIDS, others say it was an unrelated illness. Rumors and
accusations of child trafficking and prostitution consistently followed Alice Auma until her
death. (Behrend 1997)

Today, Alice Lakwena’s legacy is now spoken of mainly in regards to being a precursor
to Joseph Kony’s Lord’s Resistance Army, a movement also shrouded with rumors and
uncertainties. In 1987, Kony and his LRA started to form just one year after President
Museveni overthrew the leadership of Tito Okello, as well as when Lakwena’s Holy Spirit
Movement began. After Lakwena’s movement started to dwindle and accept defeat, Kony
claimed to be the cousin of Alice and announced that he could too, possess the same spiritual
powers and divine connection Lakwena was so famous for. Lakwena however, denied any ties
to Kony, both genealogical and political. Nevertheless, Kony received attention and was
considered powerful to many just because of his association with Lakwena. (Mukwaya 2004:
63)

It became apparent in the early 1990’s that the Lord’s Resistance Army and its part in
perpetuating the conflict in Northern Uganda no longer had the Acholi people’s wellbeing in
mind. The guerilla movement was only concerned with overthrowing the Ugandan
government, and by any means necessary. This included the massive abductions of thousands
of Acholi children for the purpose of eventually training these young boys and girls to become
child soldiers and fight for the LRA. In an assessment carried out by the Acholi Religious
Leaders Peace Initiative and the Justice & Peace Commission of Gulu Archdiocese entitled
“Let My People Go”, the atrocities and horrors Acholi community members faced each day
were described in greater depth. According to the many individuals affected, the year 1996
was when the Acholi community faced the most LRA persecution. “Civilians were killed and
tortured almost everywhere on a daily basis and children were abducted in the
thousands”(Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative, 2001). By the time the three American
filmmakers of Invisible Children happened to stumble upon the conflict in Northern Uganda after being disappointed by their coverage of the war in Sudan, the Acholi men, women, and children had already been suffering for twenty years.

What is important to note here is the lack of protection or support the Acholi community received from President Museveni’s government. It is the history of tensions between President Museveni and the Acholi, on top of the fact that the National Resistance Movement party had failed to stop the LRA invasions and violent abductions of children, that ultimately left the Acholi population embittered and distrustful of the President and government in general.

More importantly, the NRM government has failed to capture the imagination or win the support of the larger swathes of the population in the Northern sections of the country. Notably, the Acholi in the North, who once supported Obote during his two stints in power, have remained unreconciled to Museveni’s rule. (Mukwaya 2004: 65).

In Aaron K. Kabweru Mukwaya’s work, *Uganda: Riding the Political Tiger, Security and Wars in the Greater Lakes Region*, scholar John F. Clark describes the ever-evolving political opinions and actions of President Museveni himself, as well as his reputation amongst Ugandan citizens and on the larger international stage. Clark explains how Museveni’s own National Resistance Army (NRA) was initially deemed as a positive model movement of probity and discipline, and was credited for instilling order and peace after it’s struggle between 1981-1986 for power. Uganda after it’s independence, had gone through a series of tumultuous political upheavals, including the internationally famous and tumultuous regime of Idi Amin.

John Clark also notes that for obvious reason (the fact that President Museveni has continued to stay in power since 1986 until today) the history of the President’s National Resistance Army (now just referred to simply as the ‘Movement’) has been lovingly
documented and painted glowingly in the nation’s history books. What has not been documented is the President’s flip-flopping political ideologies over the course of his years in power. Initially, President Museveni veered towards the side of radical Marxism, but has been swayed over the years by foreign investors. Political allegiances were formed with the United States and other Western powers. “In practice, however, Museveni abandoned his own ‘Marxist’ convictions, as well as the state-led development schemes of the 1960’s, and warmly embraced the neo-liberal strategies of the World Bank and IMF” (Mukwaya 2004: 65).

It is not entirely uncommon for a president to adopt new ideologies or be swayed to create new allies, but what is unique to Uganda and President Museveni is his fraught relationship with large populations in his own country, especially the Acholi ethnic group.

Now that the history of the Acholi plight in Northern Uganda is illustrated as complex and multifaceted, which differs drastically with Invisible Children’s account of events, it seems reasonable that credible news sources and fact checkers around the world would immediately criticize IC for misrepresentation. That said, it must be noted that a majority of the Western criticisms Invisible Children received after the release of KONY2012 were regarding the validity of IC as a charity. When I give you my money, where does it really go? Invisible Children, Inc. responded immediately by publishing all its financial documents to the general public. Although some critics disagreed with what programs the money was going to over other programs, IC was not ousted as a financially corrupt organization. The financial criticism was unfounded, perhaps too easy to assume that would be the cause for concern.

The second criticism most commonly expressed by Americans were the questions, “Why would I support American troops going into Uganda? Don’t our soldiers have enough going on?” Again, Invisible Children, Inc. made it clear that American soldiers would not be heading into dangerous combat in the unknown and treacherous forests of Central Africa, but
rather would be using U.S. technology to help track down Kony. Overall, neither of these criticisms are all that interesting, especially since IC was able to shoot both down fairly easily. But what is interesting is where the immediate concern from the American public manifests and what that looks like when examined. Look at both kneejerk criticisms Invisible Children, Inc. received. The first, where will my money go? The second, will our troops be safe there? Both questions are solely concerned about the “my” and “our” of the American public. Is this a reflection of the self-satisfaction tied to charitable giving that we wish to receive, or is it a reflection of careful research and responsible philanthropic practices?

These American-centered criticisms of Invisible Children’s organization and film KONY 2012 is what caused the general public to ignore the real issues of misrepresentations at hand. Simply put, Invisible Children failed to mention in both their films that the very people who IC was attempting to help (the Acholi population of Northern Uganda) had a long, violent, and extremely complicated relationship with the current Ugandan President and government, the very same government that Invisible Children was and continues to work with today. It is this very large and controversial emission from the “brief historical context” IC’s KONY 2012 shares, from which outrage within the Acholi community and Acholi Diaspora sprung.

In the Acholi Times, Professor Odora explains in his article The ICC and the Situation in Northern Uganda: The Big Picture, that “the history of the armed conflict in Northern Uganda is as complex as President Museveni’s involvement in wars. President Museveni has spent his entire adult life fighting one enemy after another. Where there are no enemies, he will always invent one” (Odora 2012). New York Daily News correspondent Julia Spiegel, stated that she knew Invisible Children’s intentions were good from personally knowing the founders and their ambitions regarding the KONY 2012 video. She clarified in her article that the
organization needed to make sure that the position of the Ugandan government and President Museveni within the violent and complex history of the Acholi people was presented to the American viewers. She stated, “Yet hundreds of Acholi — the main population in Northern Uganda, most affected by this war over the last 25 years — told me repeatedly that they felt they had had two enemies (the LRA and the Ugandan government) and no friends” (Spiegel 2012).

When the LRA began to continuously raid, torture, and abduct Acholi children many families were forced to flee their homes due to the lack of security they faced in their region. President Museveni’s government responded to the large amount of displaced Acholis by setting up several displacement camps in the country’s Northern region. However, many Acholis claim that these camps were merely a way to further subject the Acholi ethnic group to severe persecution and ultimately death. In a short documentary released by an organization called Campaign to End Genocide in Northern Uganda, the organization claims that the Acholis were often physically forced into the displacement camps and that the government was executing a genocidal campaign under the guise of protection from the LRA. “Allegedly to protect them from the LRA, President Yoweri Museveni forced millions of civilians into IDP (internally displaced persons) camps during a period of twenty years,” during which thousands of Acholis died in the camps due to malnutrition, violence, disease and famine. “Under Museveni’s supposed protection, they have suffered extreme hardships and Human Rights abuses” (CEGUN 2008).

What Invisible Children failed to mention in both films was the massive displacement of the Acholi population in general. If the subjects in both their films were indeed dying of planned neglect by the government, and President Museveni had indeed forcibly removed many Acholis from their homes and relocated them into the camps, the story Invisible
Children paints is not only wrong, but violently and insultingly incomplete.

The labeled “far-left” approaches and critiques to Invisible Children take the conflict even further, reminding us of the close relationship between President Museveni and Rwandan President Paul Kagame. In the short film entitled *The Deluge*, the viewer is asked, “who backed the 1990 invasion of Rwanda by the guerillas who call themselves the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF)?” (*The Deluge* 2012) Alluding to the idea, or conspiracy it is often labeled, that the United States as well as Ugandan forces had ties to the Rwandan Genocide.

Milton Allimadi, publisher and CEO of *Black Star News* asked,

Why is Rwanda being allowed to be invaded by Ugandans. Uganda had actually launched a war of aggression, in 1990, I said it then and I maintain it today. Had that war of aggression been dealt with, and had it been halted, the mass killings, typically referred to as the genocide in 1994, never would have occurred. (*The Deluge* 2012).

Though this conspiracy is often considered unfounded, it is worth noting that President Museveni, just like Alice Lakwena and even Joseph Kony are shrouded in secrets and hidden histories. One of the secrets carefully disposed of is that fact that President Museveni’s own forces in the 1980’s used children soldiers in order to overthrow the Ugandan government at the time. Now, Museveni claims that the entire country is free of child soldiers, and that he was never involved with any child soldiers during any time in his political career. However, in the 2005 Danish documentary entitled, *In A Soldier’s Footsteps*, footage of President Museveni is shown as he unabashedly explains, “in Africa here, even by the age of four, you learn how to fight. This is our tradition if you don’t know, fight with the sticks and spear, with arrows, that’s the tradition so if you are trying to say that this will disorient psychologically, that is not that case” (*In A Soldier’s Footsteps*, 2005).
It is crucial to note how President Museveni and Invisible Children are able to skew the events in Northern Uganda to their own individual agendas. Scholar Achille Mbembe discusses in his chapter within Arjun Appadurai’s book *Globalization* how,

> When resources are put into circulation, the consequence is a disconnection between people and things that is more marked than it was in the past, the value of things generally surpassing that of people. That is one of the reasons why the resulting forms of violence have as their chief goal the physical destruction of people (massacres of civilians, genocides, various kinds of killing) and the primary exploitation of things. (Appadurai 2001)

But what happens when this distinction that Mbembe poses between people and things is blurred? What happens when the people become the things and become the political props? In this particular case, what happens when the Acholi people become a prop for the Ugandan government’s tirade against the LRA as a false showmanship of allegiance to universal human rights as the American audience watches. When do the Acholi people merely become props for Invisible Children’s unrelenting mission, to capture and persecute Kony, even if it means working alongside an oppressive government?

On March 29th, 2012, within the same month *KONY 2012* was released, a mass email from the head of the Acholi Diaspora Association, Charlie Lakony, explained that not only had the Acholi community of Southern California and San Diego in particular (the city in which Invisible Children headquarters is located) had been trying to work collaboratively with Invisible Children for the previous eight years to no avail, but also that Invisible Children’s founders fully understood and knew the implications of working alongside President Museveni. The email states,

> At some point during the meeting, Mr. Russell looked me straight in the face and stated the following:
> a. He knew what Museveni was doing to the Acholi people more than I did;
> b. He and his troupe of IC staffers and volunteers had been in nearly all the camps all over Acholiland; they saw with their own eyes what tragedy the Uganda security
forces were committing against the Acholi
c. He knew for a fact that Museveni was conducting a genocide project in
Acholiland but blaming the LRA for it.
d. He knew first hand that the UPDF soldiers were massacring, raping, torturing,
robbing, and mutilating people in and outside the concentration camps
e. IC could not tell that story to the world because it needed free access to Uganda
to accomplish its mission.
f. The IC had the ears and eyes of the American youth, and soon the world youth.
IC was going to change Uganda first, then Africa, then the United States, and finally
the world. If we were smart, we would stop fighting them and instead join them in
telling their one-sided story. IC had the money that we didn't, and we could not
possibly stop them.
(Lakony 2012)

The largest challenge (as I attempt to self interrogate my own position) surrounds the
representation of Invisible Children. After receiving the email noted above, it becomes
incredibly difficult not to condemn the entirety of IC and all its endeavors. It becomes
tempting to cast the entire organization aside. But again, this is not sufficient. Nothing can
be fully accepted, and nothing can be fully rejected. Invisible Children as an organization and
as an American viral youth movement is an example for just how wrong “good intentions”
can lead you astray. As seen in Part Two, Invisible Children serves as a catalyst into a more
theoretical analysis, leading to questions like, what do American viewers react to, and why?

An unfair analysis that depicts Invisible Children Inc. against the entirety of the Acholi
population in Uganda must be avoided. Invisible Children, Inc. is an organization with a clear
mission statement, a common goal and cause, and simply an easy target for scholarly critical
analysis to take aim. It is important to take into account the many men and women who still
support IC despite its controversial criticisms made public. Also it would be presumptuous to
assume that every Acholi citizen shared its disdain for Invisible Children, Inc. It is evident
that multiple Acholi men and women have greatly benefited from Invisible Children, either
through employment, scholarship funds and micro-grants, and IC even claims it was able to
(as their website boasts) persuade child soldiers to escape the LRA and return home.
With Invisible Children's criticisms clarified, let us return to the ideas which scholar Achille Mbembe posed; the West either views Africa in the realm of the strange and the monstrous, or as an experiment in humanizing something inhuman. Again, this theory can be deemed as a gross generalization of the West, but keeping this framework in mind with the situation of misrepresentation detailed previously, one could undoubtedly argue that Invisible Children participates and engages with Africa in both realms Mbembe states.

In KONY 2012, Joseph Kony, given no intellectual reasoning behind his rebel movement other than “religious” (which is an incomplete and false label) is portrayed as a monster. Many believe, including myself, that through Kony’s actions of abduction, mutilation, murder and rape over the last twenty years that he is indeed a monster. Not many will disagree with this. If there is any fraction of accordance in this thesis, the affirmation of Kony being an atrocious individual is it. It is incomplete to solely place criticism and blame for all Acholi suffering on just the LRA alone.

Professor Odora of the Acholi Times continues, “President Museveni, like his ally, Invisible Children, have reduced the complexity of the causes of war in Northern Uganda to tribalism and the alleged looting of government and private property” (Odora 2012). Invisible Children, Inc. had the non-profit organization represented the issue within the complex and tumultuous context that is the current political environment in Uganda, may have humanized the LRA. But that is not as compelling, is it? Too confusing for the viewer maybe, and most certainly inconvenient for Invisible Children to establish offices in Uganda after exposing the Ugandan government for its part played in the conflict.

It is also necessary to note that the founders of Invisible Children are Evangelical Christians. Though the organization claims that their own personal religious beliefs play no part in Invisible Children itself, it is crucial to remember the history of Christianity and its ties
to the field of anthropology on the African continent. Scholar V.Y. Mudimbe states that it is critical that we be weary of the derisive language of Christianity and of anthropology’s first ventures into the African continent. Mudimbe argues that both of these types of discourse and their language are reductionist. “They speak about neither Africa nor Africans, but rather justify the process of inventing and conquering a continent and naming its ‘primitiveness’ and ‘disorder’ as well as the subsequent means of its exploitation” (Mudimbe 1998: 20). Professor Andrew Apter agrees with Mudimbe’s argument that history establishes limits on the practice of African anthropology. “But when anthropology examines this history…it deepens our knowledge of the colonial encounter itself” (Apter 1999: 592) This then leads itself to the question, how are organizations like Invisible Children and their interactions today with the concept of “Africa” useful for historians as a springboard into how colonial encounters may have been like. Can we link the ignorance of American youth “slacktivism” like KONY2012 to the feelings behind the “civilizing mission” of colonization? Certainly there are differences, but certainly there are similarities.

Mbembe’s second notion of how the West conceives the concept of Africa is that of experimentation. It is only fitting that on the Invisible Children website, where the organization addressed the many critiques KONY2012 was handed, states,

The KONY 2012 campaign started as an experiment. Could an online video make an obscure war criminal famous? And if he were famous, would the world work together to stop him? Or would it let him remain at large? The experiment yielded the fastest growing viral video of all time. 3.7 million people pledged their support for efforts to arrest Joseph Kony. (invisiblechildren.com).

It is obvious in the choice of words that Mbembe was not off track on his observations. By conducting charitable experiments repeatedly and launching campaigns to humanize and educate in Africa, are we reinforcing the idea of seeing Africa as, “…a
bottomless abyss where everything is noise, yawning gap, and primordial chaos” (Mbembe 2001: 3).

Scholar Hortense Spillers’ article, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” examines the confounded identities encompassing the black body in the United States specifically in regards to the U.S. history of slavery and its contemporary repercussions. Similar to Mbembe’s analysis of Western views and associations with the continent of Africa, Spillers also places particular attention to “the captive body” and the notion of experimentation. She states,

The anatomical specifications of rupture, of altered human tissue, take on the objective description of laboratory prose- eyes beaten out, arms, backs, skulls branded, a left jaw, a right ankle, punctured; teeth missing, as the calculated work of iron, whips, chains, knives, the canine patrol, the bullet. (Spillers 1987: 67).

Why do American audiences depend on the images of torn African flesh and bodily pain in order to be “moved”? Does the American viewer need to be reminded of their humanity? Or is it what Mbembe would likely say, that Invisible Children is just another experiment in the task of humanizing the native African.

In the perspective of Mbembe, Invisible Children’s films present the audience with such atrocity and suffering idea that the West, then in turn, views the concept “Africa” and the African as inhuman. Many postcolonial theorists, including V.Y. Mudimbe, Achille Mbembe, and Frantz Fanon examine how Western politicians, media, and even modern day scholars participate and use a certain language alluding to the idea that “Africa” is not only inhuman, but embodies nothingness. As Achille Mbembe hypothesizes, “More than any region, Africa thus stands out as the supreme receptacle of the West’s obsession with, and circular discourse about, the facts of ‘absence,’ ‘lack,’ and ‘non-being,’ of identity and difference, of negativeness- in short, of nothingness” (Mbembe 2001: 4).
In Joseph Conrad's controversial book, *Heart of Darkness*, the specific character of Marlow exemplifies this portrayal of the African as inhuman in his descriptions of the continent. In the book Marlow illustrates the exoticized idea of African men and women as something outside the realm of humanity.

No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it- this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity- like yours- the thought of your remote kinship with the wild and passionate uproar. (Conrad 1993: 70)

By implying that there ever was a question of ‘remote kinship’ as Conrad states, reinforces the idea that Africans are inhuman, of another species. The Africans in this passage are described like one would describe an animal population, with focus on their physical movements and features.

Attempting to address the issues at stake in this paper through a postcolonial theoretical lens, I want to end on the idea of selfishness. It becomes increasingly tiring of interrogating oneself, so that we avoid ourselves yet be aware of ourselves… in any case, there is a lot of “self” involved, just as much as the “Other”. Does the realm and practice of postcolonial theory only teaching us more about “ourselves”, ourselves being the hegemonic West?

The only hope I have in the representation of others is in the careful and unrelenting task of searching for the grain of truth. In other words, not throwing the baby out with the bathwater. This can be seen in Andrew Apter’s article, “Africa, Empire, and Anthropology: A Philological Exploration of Anthropology’s Heart of Darkness” as he attempts to locate the truths hidden or clouded by racist and supposed superiority complexes of the colonizing anthropological early accounts in Africa. Or as Anne McClintock demonstrates in “No
Longer A Future Heaven: Nationalism, Gender and Race” by both complimenting and critiquing Franz Fanon’s earlier works. We must continue to listen to one another, and build off each other’s ideas, not desperately searching for a crack or weakness from which we can tear apart vehemently and ultimately destroy.

Let us find the validities within the conspiracies. Before assuming organizations like Invisible Children are speaking for the Acholi, or dismissing the organization and therefore laughing away in totality, let us locate the Acholi community themselves.
Part Two: Bodies in Pain: *The Construction of “Africa” within American Imaginaries*

Since the earliest developmental stages of photography, mankind has been drawn to documenting other people’s pain. Even earlier, artists were consumed with exposing the most atrocious and painful scenes imaginable. Whether it is the iconic image of Jesus crucified, or countless men bloodied in countless battles, there is undoubtedly a peculiar attention and focus placed on moments of extreme human physical and psychological pain. Where does this fascination come from? Some say there is a need to document and preserve these situations in order to “make them seem real”. Others insist that there is a need for images of other’s pain in order to incite human compassion and empathy. Susan Sontag states in her work *Regarding the Pain of Others*, that “compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action, or it withers” (Sontag 2003: 101). The question is, what does the action entail? Who is facilitating a viewer’s compassion into a specific action? Who establishes what actions are warranted?

It’s a difficult task attempting to write about a concept so abstract as physical and psychological pain. In fact, it is impossible to ever succinctly verbalize and express the pain one feels. Anybody who has spent time in an emergency room attempting to describe their own pain on a scale from one to ten, or has attempted to assign adjectives to their own painful sensations, knows that it is an immensely frustrating endeavor trying to explain your own personal pain to another.

As explained in Elaine Scarry’s book, *The Body in Pain* “to have pain is to have certainty, to hear about pain is to have doubt” (Scarry 1987: 13). As a listener, or in the case of this paper’s analysis, as a viewer to another’s physical and emotional pain, there is always a sense of distance and doubt. Scarry’s book is split into two sections. The first concerned with the “unmaking” of pain, and the second concerned with the “making” of pain. This thesis is
primarily concerned with the latter section, as it focuses not on deconstructing the emotion of physical pain but rather on the objectification and appropriation of pain of others. Do we, as the viewers, work as witnesses who are able to confirm the truth, and are able to decipher the distortions of torture and pain within media and film for ourselves? Or are we vulnerable to these distortions and the other agent’s agendas at play? It is because the concept and expression of pain is so difficult, that misrepresentations and distortions of events are able to go easily undetected.

The act of misdescribing torture or war, though in some instances intentional and in others unintentional, is in either case partially made possible by the inherent difficulty of accurately describing any event whose central content is bodily pain or injury. (Scarry 1987: 13).

Part One of this thesis intended to clarify how the non-profit organization Invisible Children, Inc. misrepresented the conflict between the Lord’s Resistance Army and the Acholi victims in Northern Uganda. This analysis of misrepresentation within IC film and ephemera was mainly concerned in terms of historical evidence and the deliberate silencing of opposing opinions. Part Two aims to illustrate how the use of pain can be employed as props in the American portrayal of “Africa”, and how this portrayal can be, in turn, used to further subjugate the "idea of Africa" in American imaginaries, subsequently reinforcing Western hierarchy. Building off the first section’s analysis of Achille Mbembe’s notions of the perceptions of Africa by the West – established as either the strange, the monstrous, or under the prospect of experimentation— all three of these assumed notions are unified and linked together through the multiple theories concerning the concept of pain I wish to address.

With the help of works like Susan Sontag’s Regarding the Pain of Others, Elaine Scarry’s The Body in Pain and Saidiya Hartman’s Scenes of Subjection, alongside a detailed synopsis of each of Invisible Children’s films, the intention is to develop a new and critical lens on how
American viewers interact and interpret the pain of African individuals in contemporary film and media. It must be made clear that by no means is this meant to be an accusatory or damning analysis towards Invisible Children. That is neither useful nor original. Rather, this analysis it is meant to grant a new perspective on the active part viewers play, more often than not on a subconscious level, in the subjection of the African body and the assumed superiority and humanity of the American viewer. As previously stated, whenever a film like *KONY 2012* comes along and creates such an immediate response and is urgently shared by hundreds of thousands American supporters, it is crucial to identify and scrutinize what are the hidden dynamics at play.

For clarity’s sake, I will divide part two into two separate sections, each addressing either IC’s founding documentary *Invisible Children* or the viral sensation *KONY 2012*. First, while exploring the theoretical underpinnings of what we consider to be “empathy”, a particular focus will be placed on *KONY 2012* and how the film compares and contrasts the American viewer to the African child. Whereas in the second section, when discussing the analysis of images portraying bodies in pain in relation to the subjection of the African body, a particular focus will be placed on the documentary *Invisible Children*. However, it must be noted that the theories surrounding pain and pain in regards to “others” that will be illuminated, undoubtedly overlap throughout both films, as well as into other examples of American media, art, and film.

Through detailed analysis of IC’s videos and ephemera, I will illustrate how sometimes within American media representations and film sometimes portray how the black body (or in this case the Acholi victims of violence in Northern Uganda), "becomes the source of irresistible, destructive sensuality...at the same time - in stunning contradiction - the captive body reduces to a thing" (Spillers 1987: 67)
**KONY 2012: Uncovering the Two Sides of Empathy:**

Before focusing on the topic of empathy, the use of empathetic triggers within films like *KONY 2012*, and the politics of power and representation involved, it is first necessary to give a brief yet detailed synopsis of the viral sensation that is Invisible Children’s *KONY 2012* short film. The images, illustrations and scenes are deliberately curated by Invisible Children’s creators and artistic designers, and can by no means be dismissed as unintentional. Each quote, frame, or music choice should be taken into account.

*KONY 2012* begins on a relatable note for a vast majority of American youths. The film begins by describing the impact of social media on contemporary world events. How young men and women around the globe have been able to share tremendous videos with one another, across borders, instilling wonderment, joy, and even revolution. The images and video clips are all recognizable to most Internet-active viewers, acting as a video montage of powerful and emotionally loaded mnemonic online clips. One clip shows an excerpt from a famous YouTube video showing a woman hearing her own voice for the first time with the help of hearing aids. Images from the 2011 Egyptian revolution, of young men running triumphantly in Tahrir Square are shown.

“The next 27 minutes are an experiment,” says Invisible Children co-founder Jason Russell’s voiceover, “but in order for it to work, you have to pay attention.” Suddenly the film switches from newscast and YouTube clips to personal and home footage of Jason Russell’s son’s childbirth. “My name is Jason Russell, and this is my son, Gavin,” continues Russell’s voice, while video clips and images of his blond hair, blue-eyed adorable child start to roll. Russell explains to the viewer that his son does not yet understand what his work, as Invisible
Children co-founder, entails. The film takes on a very intimate and personal tone, almost like the viewers are invited into a personal video-diary peeking into the daily life of Jason Russell.

Russell then explains what his job does exactly entail, showing previous footage from the organization’s founding documentary *Invisible Children*, recounting how he and his two friends stumbled upon the conflict in Northern Uganda after wanting to shoot footage in Sudan. Footage of multiple Invisible Children film screenings begins to run, showing images of American high school students looking at their classroom television screens in shock, wiping away tears. “Who are you to end a war? I’m here to tell you, who are you not to?” Russell asks a student in what looks like a school assembly.

The film then revisits the same scene previously described of an interview with young Jacob, the boy who breaks down in hysterical sobs after being questioned about his brother’s murder by the Lord’s Resistance Army. *KONY2012* shows footage, which interestingly is not shown in the original documentary, of the filmmakers repeatedly promising the crying boy that they would stop what was happening in Northern Uganda. “We are going to do everything that we can to stop them,” Russell is seen telling the hysterical boy. “Do you hear my words? We are going to stop them.”

The footage then takes a turn back to the American-centric setting. Russell emphasizes and reiterates once more, next to rolling footage of trendy and attractive young Americans putting up IC activist posters, the promise Invisible Children made to Jacob to stop the violence.

“Over the past nine years I have fought to fulfill it…and this year, 2012, is the year we can finally fulfill it.” But at this point, the viewers have not been told any details about the conflict whatsoever. What is it about? Who are these children with their lives at stake?
KONY 2012 then delivers an explanation of the conflict in the simplest terms imaginable, by translating the complexities of the issues at hand into rhetoric simple enough for Jason Russell’s toddler to understand. Russell sits his son Gavin down, and explains what his father’s work actually does entail. Gavin only knows that his father, “stops the bad guys from being mean” in Africa. But the child doesn’t know exactly who or what their names are. “The star wars guys?” Gavin guesses. Adorable guess, but very wrong. Russell slides a picture of Joseph Kony over to his son, showing him exactly who this bad guy is. Russell then slides a picture of Jacob, the same boy who IC made a promise to, who Gavin knows. “That’s Jacob!” Gavin excitedly exclaims. Russell then explains that the one picture, Kony, does bad things to kids like Jacob. He takes them away from their families. He makes them shoot guns and kill people.

Then some very well staged and professionally shot reenactments take place with actors portraying Acholi children and what can be assumed to be Lord’s Resistance Army members. In one shot, a teary eyed child is suddenly grabbed from his bed while trying to sleep. The child’s face screams out in pain and anguish as he’s being pulled into the darkness. All the while, Russell’s voiceover continues to tell the viewer of all the terrible acts Kony and the LRA commits.

A shot focuses on one of the very rare photographs of Joseph Kony in existence. The camera focuses in on Kony’s red and blurred eyes, eventually zooming out until the entire picture of his menacing gaze is illuminated for the audience. A second picture is shown, in which Kony is standing behind a group of young girls, his hands draped around the collarbone of one child. He is “turning the girls into sex slaves,” Russell says, “and the boys into child soldiers,” the picture switches to an image of a young child carrying a rifle practically half his size, swung over his frail shoulder. And then the most aesthetically
gruesome grouping of images appears, “he makes them mutilate people’s faces” Russell says as pictures of children’s faces flash rapidly on the screen. Some children with their lips cut off, other without any eyes or noses.

Then again, the film takes a turn back to the American setting. The rest of the short KONY 2012 film focuses on images of the “army of young people” that Invisible Children has created, who have dedicated their lives to stopping Kony. Images of large crowds of young (majority white) Americans throwing up their fists in solidarity, crowds of students chanting in unison, “we’ve seen these kids. We’ve heard their cries. This war must end. We will not stop. We will not fear. We will fight war.” A bird’s eye-view shot of hundreds of young Americans, throwing up their hands, panning out until the audience sees that the students are standing in the formation of a peace sign, like a well choreographed high school band.

“It’s hard to look back on some parts of human history” Russell’s voice beckons out, showing images of Hitler and WWII. Then another mass grave is shown in what is assumedly Sudan. Another picture shows a line of the now unfortunately famous Rwandan genocide skulls.

It is here that the comparison to America begins to explicitly develop. “If my son were abducted and forced to kill, it would be all over the news,” Jason Russell notes. An image of over one hundred children huddled together, sleeping in Northern Uganda on the cement floor of a bus park pans out, illuminating just how many tiny bodies are crammed into the room for shelter. “If this happened just one night in America, it would be on the cover of Newsweek.”

With the images and quotations above and keeping KONY 2012 in mind, this analysis will focus in on this method of comparison that Invisible Children repeatedly appeals to throughout the short film. What does this comparison between the United States setting to
the Ugandan setting (or simply called “Africa” by Russell’s son multiple times) invoke in the American audience? By appealing directly to the American youth and placing the American setting alongside the Ugandan conflict within such a short, yet emotionally draining film, Invisible Children uses the feeling of empathy and the use of empathetic triggers to emotionally provoke the viewer into outrage and subsequent action.

But is empathy always a “good” thing? Attempting to dismantle the idea that empathy is unarguably benevolent, it is crucial to explore the questions of how empathy can be misguided and manipulated by problematizing our reactions to the images seen in Invisible Children’s films Invisible Children and KONY 2012. According to Merriam-Webster dictionary the word empathy means, “the feeling that you understand and share another person's experiences and emotions: the ability to share someone else's feelings” (Merriam-Webster Online). What does “empathy” mean when there is further action implied and directed, as with Invisible Children’s goals as an organization and non-profit. Does the feeling take on a new meaning when there is a political agenda at hand? Is empathy in this circumstance, a self-centered and inappropriate response by American viewers who do not personally know the physical and psychological pain of being a child victim of the Lord’s Resistance Army?

Scholar Saidiya Hartman in her book, Scenes of Subjection, uncovers forms of domination and racial subjugation during United States slavery that are often unexposed and undocumented within the U.S. historical canon. In her work she explores the theoretical underpinnings surrounding the politics of power in the “scenes of subjection” commonly shown and repeated when documenting the United States history of slavery. Although the scenes of subjection examined in Hartman’s book are placed within the context and setting of United States slavery, her analysis serves as an invaluable lens into recognizing the power dynamics within films like KONY 2012.
In *Scenes of Subjection*, Hartman explores the active role viewers and audiences play as well as the power these position holds, hinging on individual perceptions. Again, this often is based on a subconscious level. More often than not, the audience members may not realize the politics of power they themselves are enforcing or interacting with. This is the very reason why certain types of propaganda are so powerful and dangerous. Hartman explains that often in public scenes of subjection or with portrayals of other people in pain, “at issue here is the precariousness of empathy and the uncertain line between witness and spectator” (Hartman 1997: 4). Oxford dictionary defines the word witness as “a person who sees an event, typically a crime or accident take place.” Whereas, the word spectator is defined as, “a person who watches at a show, game, or other event,” (Oxford Online Dictionary). The uncertainty of difference between the witness and the spectator depends on the expectation and interaction with whatever is viewed. But when the American concept of the idea of “Africa” has already been formed for a viewer (as seeing the black body as strange, monstrous, or as an element of experimentation) over the span of their lifetime due to contact with other media and film representations, then is the viewer already expecting and anticipating certain scenes of subjection within *KONY 2012*? Is this sense of expectation and anticipation then therefore classifying the audience members as spectators?

The uncertain and unstable role of empathy is an uncomfortable subject. Empathy, an emotion often championed, is set upon a beautiful premise. To be able to truly feel the pain for another person, to make his or her own feelings your own, is indeed a lovely concept. To walk a day in another’s shoes, so to speak, conjures an image of a kind and benevolent global world. These ideas are romantic and uplifting to believe, as well as easier to hold when in a position of privilege.
But we must ask ourselves, is it really possible to know another’s pain and then, in turn, be able to feel it for oneself? There are multiple instances in KONY 2012, where the viewers are provoked to take a turn and ask themselves what it would be like to go through the atrocities and hardships of the Acholi children victims. There is a consistent harking of, “this would never happen in the United States,” which sounds like a statement that is contrasting the situation and pointing out difference, but also placing emphasis on the shock and outrage Americans would feel if a similar situation were to happen within our own borders. As described in the footage of KONY 2012, the film regularly switches to and from an American setting. Jason Russell brings in footage of his young child perhaps to show the innocence and preciousness of childhood, in contrast to the atrocities children in Northern Uganda were faced with. The American youths involved with Invisible Children create their own army, “an army for peace” in contrast with the Lord’s Resistance Army. By placing deliberate “empathetic triggers” like Russell’s son, or quotes like, “something like that would never happen in the United States,” the viewer’s own individual positionality is brought to surface. I am an American. I wouldn’t stand for this in my own country. I need to help stop this. The focus is placed on the “I”, rather than the “them.” But does this even matter? In the scheme of the “greater good,” who cares if Invisible Children implements some empathy provoking measures in order to capture Kony and stop the violence? Everyone can agree that Kony needs to be found and punished for his violations against various human rights. If these measures are a means to an end, then why should it matter?

Complicating the pervasively positive common understanding of what is “empathy” does, in fact, matter immensely because it grants another perspective of the power dynamics in place, particularly when regarding the black body or the African body. In part of Saidiya Hartman’s Scenes of Subjection, she explains how the need to interject one’s own (in this case,
white) body within one’s mind, to be able to access this sense of “empathy” and closeness to a black body’s painful situation, is in itself a contradictory endeavor.

Put differently, the effort to counteract the commonplace callousness to black suffering requires that the white body be positioned in the place of the black body in order to make this suffering visible and intelligible. Yet if this violence can become palpable and indignation can be fully aroused only through the masochistic fantasy, then it becomes clear that empathy is double-edged, for in making the other’s suffering your own, this suffering is occluded by the other’s obliteration. (Hartman 1997: 19)

And so, when viewers imagine themselves in place of the Acholi victims in KONY 2012, as Hartman puts it, the victims are “obliterated” and replaced by the viewers’ own sense of self. The fact that Invisible Children implements empathetic triggers within the film is a reflection of how American audiences cannot feel “empathy” for the Acholi situation (because it is too strange or monstrous) unless they place themselves in the situation. This analysis of the “double-edged” nature of empathy grants us a different lens to use when reading the American youth’s initial reactions to KONY 2012.

In the article entitled “How Teenagers Learned to Hate Joseph Kony” by Alan Greenblatt, a student suggests, “that the film speaks powerfully to young people in part because they can identify with Kony’s victims- children themselves who’ve been pressed into sex slavery or made to serve in the army.” Judging by Greenblatt’s tone in the article (as well as from the title), it seems absurd to Greenblatt that any American college student could possibly have the audacity to relate their own issues to those of the children in Northern Uganda. But, it is true. After all, the act of relating to another’s pain or struggle may very well be what we so often call “good intentions.” Many students do feel like they share a certain comradesry with the Ugandan children represented in the film due to their similar age. An American college student interviewed explained, “‘It tugs on your heartstrings,’ she says.
‘You’ve just passed out of that phase of childhood and you can’t imagine being a child soldier.’

Analysis of *Invisible Children: Scenes of Pain and Subsequent Subjection*

Watching a film or documentary that features gruesome and painful scenes takes an emotional toll on the audience. Yet, undeniably there is a sense of fascination and appeal. As audience members, these scenes provoke guttural feelings of repulsion, while at the same time attraction. As Susan Sontag writes in her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, “But images of the repulsive can also allure. Everyone knows that what slows down highway traffic going past a horrendous car crash is not only curiosity,” (Sontag 2003: 95). But what are the politics of power and representation involved within this fascination and allure of pain?

In this section a particular focus will be placed on the documentary *Invisible Children*, including a brief, yet detailed description of some of the images and scenes shown within the documentary. The scenes of physical and psychological pain will serve as evidence and material for the analysis of how certain images portraying bodies in pain can be in direct relation to the subjection of the African body. As well as how American audiences when watching a documentary like *Invisible Children*, can sometimes feel as if they are pardoned of any guilt or connection to the painful scenes, just by simply watching.

The imaginary proximity to the suffering inflicted on others that is granted by images suggests a link between the far-away sufferers- seen close-up on the television screen- and the privileged viewer that is simply untrue, that is yet one more mystification of our real relations to power. So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence. To that extent, it can be (for all good intentions) an impertinent- if not inappropriate- response. (Sontag 2003: 102)
Invisible Children begins with a quote by Dan Eldon, who was a daring young photojournalist, eventually killed while documenting his work. The quote dramatically scrolls across the screen in bold lettering. “Once one has been to these challenging terrible places they’re always strangely drawn back because there’s nothing that can compare to seeing the raw reality of the basic human need for survival. It both disgusts and inspires.”

The quote disappears and the screen flashes to a shot of a young boy walking alone, barefoot, dirty, carrying what we can only assume is everything he owns in a sack thrown over his emaciated shoulder. He does not smile. He does not look at the camera. It is nighttime, and the camera’s spotlight illuminates the child in fluorescent white light, as he is surrounded by desolate darkness. A voiceover begins from a distinguished sounding British man who briefly explains how atrocious the current state of Northern Uganda is. The boy continues to walk, paying no mind to the camera and it’s blinding light.

Suddenly the documentary turns to an American setting. A blond, blue-eyed, American young man asks naively, “Is the camera working?” as he films himself. Clearly he has no idea what he’s doing. If that is what angle Invisible Children was going for, they certainly proved it. “So, we are naive kids that haven’t traveled a lot,” explains one of the directors in a self-filmed interview. The three male American directors, all in their early-twenties, explain that they have decided to travel to Sudan to document “the war”, without giving much specification to the audience what “the war” entails. The film shows images of emaciated Sudanese women, and one disturbing picture of a young girl with all ten fingers severed and healed.

“And then we set up our cameras, thinking that if we didn’t come back from Sudan alive, this is how we would be remembered.” Director Jason Russell begins to film his mother in an interview who begins to break down in tears, sick with worry and grief just imagining
about her son traveling to such a dangerous place. “Do I think I’ll die?” another director asks himself pensively. What is most apparent from the very beginning of the documentary is that the founders and directors of Invisible Children were not only expecting danger during their travels to Africa, but that they were actively searching for it. This preconceived idea of “the dark continent” becomes increasingly evident as the documentary continues, following the three young men’s journey.

Without any explanation footage then begins in Kenya, not Sudan. Perhaps IC assumed viewers would think this was close enough. In any case, not to worry, the men found an overcrowded orphanage filled with young children whose parents had died from AIDS. The children’s situations were far from ideal, “but when they danced, they really danced,” IC narrates, showing joyful footage of the young boys and girls dancing together. After leaving the orphanage, the three directors start to make their way via car to Sudan. But once they have arrived, there doesn’t appear to be much going on. And it’s hot, very, very hot. After some graphic footage of two IC directors vomiting probably due to dehydration, as well as some light hearted shots of them lighting a termite hill on fire, the group decides to head down into Uganda, to attempt to document Sudanese refugees in a nearby makeshift camp. However on arrival, the group begins to realize that there was a vicious conflict surrounding them. They were located at the crossroads of the conflict between the Acholi people and the Lord’s Resistance Army, a war that had been waging for almost twenty years. “Needless to say, we found our story.”

A troubling footage mash-up begins, intermixing shots of Acholi children performing traditional dances, with shots of armed military grown men standing with their rifles. The drumbeat continues on faster and faster, as the shots between dancer and warrior alternate quicker and quicker. The distinction between child and soldier becomes blurred, and the
sound of the African drumbeat and the dance steps of the children ultimately are framed as scary and violent.

The rest of the film focuses mostly on the Acholi children, afraid for their lives and spending their nights avoiding abduction by the LRA. In order to escape abduction, the children who live in rural villages walk every night to protected bus parks and other urban areas where they can attempt to sleep in peace. Some children are forced to find other creative safe spaces because of overcrowding. IC interviews a group of three boys who sleep on a damp basement floor every night, miles away from their families. The young boys do their homework by candlelight as an IC interviewer asks emotionally provoking questions. The boys answer the questions calmly. “The children here never cry,” observes director Jason Russell.

The end of film goes on to show short clips of child after child, exposing their individual wounds. A boy undresses and bares the gaping wounds scattered across his back. Another child displays his amputated foot, still freshly bandaged. Another has knife wounds to the skull, puffy and swollen scars down his neck. The screen displays the child’s name, their age, and the type of wound received. Finally it shows a young girl breastfeeding her baby. Debra, 14, raped.

“What I have seen is that the children here are incredibly resilient,” Jason Russell’s voiceover begins. The documentary finally stops with a plea to American audiences to share what they had just witnessed on the screen, to spread awareness, and to donate money.

It goes without saying that the scenes depicted in the documentary Invisible Children are disturbing. Those wounds are real. Those gashes and scars and looks of fear are not lies. Those atrocities and unspeakable acts of violence against children, they happened. There is no disputing that. Nor is there any dispute over the need for justice. Joseph Kony and the
LRA need to be captured, need to be held accountable for what they have done, and need to be severely punished. But what I am concerned with is not whether Kony is a monster, or whether what happened in Northern Uganda as seen in the footage of *Invisible Children*, was truly hell on earth. That is unquestionable. What I am concerned with is looking deeper into the theories behind what happens to the American audience when faced with this type of framed footage of “Africa.”

Between scenes of emaciated women in Sudan, the orphaned masses of children in Kenya, and lastly to the heart wrenching shots of the children sleeping in huddled terrified masses in Northern Uganda, *Invisible Children, Inc.* illustrates in their founding documentary that “Africa”, in its entirety, is plagued with violence, destruction and utter despair. This is obviously not a complete or well-rounded picture of the continent, but unfortunately it is more often than not the exact portrayal American audience’s receive on a daily basis. What happens when documentaries like *Invisible Children* frame these conflicts and wars in ways that subsequently subjugate the black body and the idea of “Africa”?

Take *Invisible Children*’s initial quotation from Dan Eldon. The audience from the very first frame is set up to view the following footage as both, “disgusting” and “inspiring”. An emphasis is based on human survival, which in other words places the Ugandan children under a lens that identifies them as primal and animalistic. The three American directors were completely transparent about wanting to travel to Africa in the purpose of seeking out conflict and danger. Because, perhaps, they believed that encountering this danger, trauma, and despair was inevitable. As Susan Sontag explains, the footage that American or Western audiences see of the stereotypical post-colonial Africa carries a “double message.” On one hand, the footage is abominable. On the other, it reinforces what the idea of “Africa” is: a violent, destructive, primitive mess of nothingness.
Thus postcolonial Africa exists in the consciousness of the general public in the rich world—besides through the sexy music—mainly as a succession of unforgettable photographs of large-eyed victims, starting with the figures in the famine lands of Biafra in the late 1960’s to the survivors of the genocide of nearly a million Rwandan Tutsis in 1994… These sights carry a double message. They show a suffering that is outrageous, unjust, and should be repaired. They confirm that this sort of thing which happens in that place. The ubiquity of those photographs, and those horrors, cannot help but nourish belief in the inevitability of tragedy in the benighted or backward—that is, poor—parts of the world. (Sontag 2003: 59)

What is also common rhetoric in many portrayals of “Africa” is the emphasis placed on African people’s resilience. For example, within Invisible Children there is often a refrain after showing these scenes of pain and agony, explaining how unbelievably adaptive and dynamic these people are. When the children in the orphanage are still able to dance joyfully, despite losing their family. When the children sleeping on damp basement floors are able to hold in their tears while being asked emotionally provocative questions. But is this a testament to their resilience, or a questioning of their humanity?

And with this idea of questioning African humanity, how are the graphic and disturbing pictures of wounds and flesh featured in Invisible Children, also reinforcing the subjection of the black body? Because of this expectation of Africa being destructive and disturbing from the audience’s preconceived ideas, the images of the open flesh and wounds do not reaffirm African humanity, but rather refute it. “Indeed, the elusiveness of black suffering can be attributed to a racist optics in which black flesh is itself identified as the source of opacity, the denial of black humanity, and the effacement of sentience integral to the wanton use of the captive body” (Hartman 1997: 20). Because of the constant bombardment of violent, depressing, and “backward” images American audiences see and expect from film and media regarding Africa, even the sight of open flesh has lost it’s original shock. It is now merely reinforcement. The American viewer cannot be categorized as either viewer or
spectator, for this hinges on whether the individual holds expectations of these gruesome images.
Conclusion:

In a recent article entitled, “Joseph Kony is Back in the News. Do Teenagers Still Care?” journalist Alan Greenblatt summarizes the current relationship between a majority of American youth with the conflict in Central Africa. “Kony is back in the news, with President Obama ordering 150 additional U.S. special operations personnel on the hunt for Kony. That was not the result of pressure from young people, who seemed to drop Kony as a cause just as swiftly as they elevated him” (Greenblatt 2014).

Though Invisible Children might like to take some credit for Obama’s actions, the organization likely had little effect on the decisions made in the larger political arena. But what Invisible Children did undoubtedly do is illuminate the way in which social media and social activism can spread like wildfire, especially with the calculated tactics and politics of representation at play within both of Invisible Children’s films.

In this thesis, it was my intention to analyze both IC films and identify the deeper underlying issues, while working with material that often times was intended for other functions. Borrowing from Saidiya Hartman’s approach, “Therefore the documents, fragments, and accounts considered here, although claimed for purposes contrary to those for which they were gathered, nonetheless remain entangled with the politics of domination” (Hartman 1997: 11).

It is my hope that this analysis does not come across as slanderous, cynical, or pessimist. Rather, I find it important and empowering for us to gain a new way of thinking about the active role we play as audience, the double-edge nature of empathy, and the theories of pain and representations of others.
Works Cited

Acholi Diaspora Association (personal communication, March 26, 2012)


Invisible Children, Inc., 2006. DVD.


