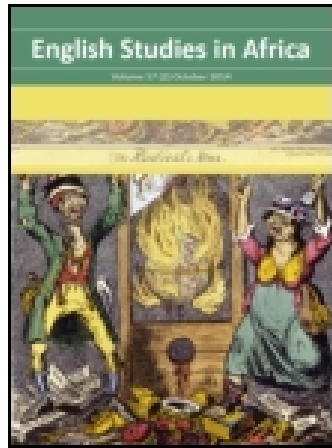


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HUMANITARIANISM AND THE HUMANITY OF READERS IN FEMRITE'S TRUE LIFE STORIES

Katherine Hallemeier

Abstract

This paper examines three FEMRITE collections of 'true life stories', *Today You Will Understand* (2008), *Farming Ashes* (2009), and *I Dare to Say* (2012), all of which include testimony of women's experiences of war in northern Uganda. While these volumes explicitly aim to abet a project of national awareness and reconciliation, they also self-consciously address themselves to Anglophone audiences in the global North. The nature of this address is distinct. On the one hand, the collections echo an international humanitarian discourse that tends to emphasize that personal testimony is, indeed, 'true life'. On the other hand, the collections also foreground that the testimonies they present are imaginatively constructed accounts, or 'stories', that have been co-authored by FEMRITE writers and women who have lived through war. Non-African Anglophone readers are thus invited to engage with women's testimony in terms that alternately recall and resist western media accounts of the northern Ugandan conflict.

Keywords: FEMRITE, humanitarianism, women's testimony, Uganda, LRA, Afropolitanism,

According to its website, FEMRITE-Uganda Women Writers' Association is 'an indigenous Non-Governmental Organisation that promotes women writing in Uganda'. Founded in 1995 and launched in 1996, the goals of the organization are both national and regional in scope. While the organization's stated mission is to build 'a platform for women to contribute to national development through creative writing', FEMRITE's broader vision extends beyond the national development paradigm to 'bringing together women writers from across the continent' in order to 'create a sense of belonging for African Women writers' groups – a sense of belonging that will inspire women to write and to support one another'. Almost two decades after its founding, FEMRITE continues to support and publish women's writing that advocates for greater gender equality in Uganda. Its list of publications (as of January 2014) includes five volumes of short stories, seven novels, four volumes of poetry, and four collections of what FEMRITE describes

as ‘true life stories’. The organization also continues to pursue its goal of uniting women writers across Africa: 2013 marked the fourth annual FEMRITE Residency for African Women Writers, featuring ‘twelve writers from eight countries across Africa’. FEMRITE aims to affect change both within Uganda and across a continent.

This essay, however, reads against the grain of FEMRITE’s explicit goals by focusing on how the organization’s publications are situated within a global, as opposed to a national or regional, literary marketplace. Further, it departs from extant criticism on FEMRITE’s literature by focusing not on fiction and poetry, but rather on several volumes of ‘true life stories’ – a distinctive genre category that will be central to my argument – that recount women’s experiences of war in Uganda. My reasons for considering how FEMRITE’s true life stories engage an international readership are two. First, analyzing texts that are explicitly committed to grappling with national conflict in terms of their global appeal throws into relief the limits of current debates about the proper scope and content of contemporary Anglophone African literature. Second, analyzing how FEMRITE’s true life stories are situated globally points toward new possibilities for understanding how African literature may implicate non-African readers in ongoing histories of national conflict.

FEMRITE and Afropolitan Fiction

In his introduction to *The Granta Book of the African Short Story* (2011), Helon Habila argues that the current generation of African writers aspires to be ‘post-nationalist’: ‘I see this new generation as having the best potential to liberate itself from the often predictable, almost obligatory obsession of the African writer with the nation and with national politics’ (viii). During a contemporary moment when much Anglophone African literature seems committed, as Habila contends, to exploring ideas and ideals of the transnational, the cosmopolitan, and the global,¹ the literature of FEMRITE-Uganda Women Writers Association may appear anomalous, and perhaps even anachronistic, in its explicit and continuing commitment to national and regional community.

The tension between Habila’s argument and FEMRITE’s goals points toward a more general debate as to whether African literature is or should be post-national, or ‘Afropolitan’, in character. Advocates of post-nationalist African literature such as Habila, but also, prominently, the novelist Taiye Selasi,² tend to embrace literary expression that eschews the tropes of what has been characterized as Afro-pessimism. Habila argues: ‘The world is a dark and ugly place, a lot of that ugliness and injustice is present in Africa, but we don’t turn to literature to confirm that’ (Review). Selasi makes a similar point in her characterization of an Afropolitan ethos: ‘The media’s portrayals (war, hunger) won’t do’ (Tuakli-Wosornu). Literary expression for the post-nationalist artist, according to these critics, endeavors to ‘understand what is ailing in Africa alongside the desire to honor what is wonderful, unique’ (Tuakli-Wosornu). Critics of the Afropolitan perspective, however, such as Bwesigye bwa Mwesigire, argue that it shows a problematic willingness ‘to erase African realities from the literary landscape’ and to ‘deny that there are those of us living in disreputable conditions on the continent’. In Bwesigye’s account, ‘issue-based African literature’ continues to be urgently required: ‘The Africans who are keen on dealing with home issues, those who look to literature to articulate their pain, as a form of catharsis? What about them? Have they lost their Africanness?’. This recent argument about the scope and purpose of contemporary African literature provides frameworks for reading FEMRITE’s literature, which consistently addresses Ugandan women’s suffering and resilience,

as either overly pessimistic and reductive or as a salutary alternative to the growing production of 'stories about the African of the world, where the world is the West' (Bwesigye).

While conversations about the proper scope and content of African literature are ongoing, I invoke them not to advocate for a particular side, but rather to contest a central assumption about audience that inflects the division of Anglophone African literature according to its supposed post-national or national character. Of particular interest to me is the way in which post-national and Afropolitan literature is routinely identified and valued for how it addresses an implicitly western audience. When Selasi avers the inadequacy of 'the media's portrayals' of Africa, she means the western media's portrayals. Proponents of Afropolitan literature argue that it stands as a valuable corrective to stereotypes about African life because they assume the literature's audience includes western readers who have regularly been exposed to those stereotypes. National and issue-based literature, in contrast, is identified and valued for how it addresses itself to a national or regional audience. The 'catharsis' that Bwesigye argues that non-Afropolitan literature may provide is explicitly linked to readers 'on the continent'. It is in part through the assumption that issue-based literatures focused on a particular region primarily invite national and regional audiences (or, at least, do not aim to address the prejudices of western ones) that FEMRITE texts have been understood as being *not* post-nationalist.

Yet, FEMRITE publications are promoted to and read by Euro-American readers. Accordingly, this essay troubles the tendency to draw a clear-cut distinction between nationalist and post-nationalist African literature by reading FEMRITE narratives in terms of their imbrication in a global Anglophone literary marketplace. Inspired by Graham Huggan's *The Postcolonial Exotic* (2001), I ask how FEMRITE texts negotiate what Huggan describes as the conditions of postcoloniality, wherein perceived cultural difference is consistently fetishized and commodified within a neocolonial market system. Departing from Huggan, I focus on a specific condition of postcoloniality that shapes the production and reception of postcolonial literature – namely, global humanitarianism. By examining the presentation of testimony in three anthologies that offer true life stories of women's experiences of war in northern Uganda – *Today You Will Understand* (2008), *Farming Ashes* (2009), and *I Dare to Say* (2012) – I contend that these anthologies, although oriented toward a national project of peaceful reconciliation, nonetheless establish international literary relations that at once reproduce and challenge global humanitarian discourses endemic to western media.

FEMRITE's Locality

Given FEMRITE's stated aim of fostering Ugandan and African women's writing, it is unsurprising that the two major studies of FEMRITE to date have focused on how the group's literary publications represent and seek to influence national and regional (that is, East African) culture and politics. Marie Kruger's monograph *Women's Literature in Kenya and Uganda: The Trouble with Modernity* (2011) examines how 'East African women writers have engaged with established representations of gender, race, and modernity in an effort to define their own versions of the alternatively modern and to recover the emancipatory promises of social reform from the fraudulent practices of the colonial intervention and the often equally ambivalent gender rhetoric of nationalist programs' (12–13). Doreen Strauhs's recent *African Literary NGOs: Power, Politics, and Participation* (2013) similarly focuses, albeit from a 'literary-sociological approach' (3), on how FEMRITE writers, as well as members of the Kenyan writers' group Kwani Trust, position themselves in national and regional debates. Whereas Kruger's study focuses on how

East African women writers define a particular alternative modernity, Strauhs's work examines how they have affected 'literary and sociopolitical arenas in both Kenya and Uganda' (5), tracing the strategies by which women's Literary NGOs, or LINGOs, 'gain authority, shaping the local literary canons, while being limiting agencies at the same time' (4).

Although the international community beyond Africa enters into both Kruger's and Strauhs's analysis, for both scholars, evaluating FEMRITE's literature in these international terms is secondary to understanding, as Strauhs puts it, how this literature is 'highly reflective' of its 'immediate Ugandan...environment' (9). While Kruger emphasizes how the work of FEMRITE writers has important implications for global discourses of modernity, including discourses of 'rights *and* responsibilities' (14; emphasis in original), she maintains that these interventions arise primarily through the reinscription of modernity 'into the cultural fabric of *particular* geographical sites' (15; emphasis mine). Similarly, while Strauhs alludes to 'transnational funding' (4), including initiatives such as the Crossing Border Program of the British Council and the Caine Prize for African Writing (74), she primarily does so in order to clarify the pitfalls and opportunities FEMRITE has negotiated in seeking 'power and stability' as an 'enduring institutio[n] in the *African* literary market' (77; emphasis mine). In sum, scholarship on FEMRITE has tended to align itself with the organization's mission statements by reading FEMRITE and its literature as distinctively Ugandan and (East) African.

By highlighting how FEMRITE publications, and especially those publications marketed as true life stories, might be read as being produced in and for a global literary market of Anglophone readers, this essay admittedly offers only a very partial view of those publications' history and effects. Yet, by analyzing how FEMRITE's literature constructs and addresses readers in the global North, the essay seeks to illuminate how that literature generates alternatives for engaging those readers in histories of national conflict in the global South.

FEMRITE's Post-Nationality

In order to think through how FEMRITE's literary interventions might be conceived chiefly in terms other than the local or regional, this paper focuses especially on those volumes that present testimony about the decades-long war in northern Uganda between the Ugandan People's Defence Force (UPDF) and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA): *Today You Will Understand*, *Farming Ashes*, and *I Dare to Say*.³ FEMRITE's collections of true life stories have not been central to work on FEMRITE to date.⁴ Yet, the texts at hand are particularly suited to a discussion of how national literature of the global South is marketed to readers of the global North, insofar as all three anthologies are now widely available to Euro-American readers and, indeed, self-consciously so.

Today You Will Understand, for example, although based on sixteen interviews that were recorded and aired over local radio stations across Uganda in order to raise national awareness about the violence in the north, explicitly targets an international audience (Buchholz 2). Edited by Jackie Christie, the booklet and CD that comprise *Today* were published by the United Nations Office at Nairobi (UNON) and saw FEMRITE members collaborating with employees of the Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN) organization, which is part of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). Although the text is no longer in print or available for purchase through FEMRITE's website, the booklet can be downloaded for free as a .pdf through IRIN's website, where audio recordings of the interviews are also available. As IRIN's book launch announcement makes clear, the production of *Today* was part of IRIN's

project 'to enable the voices of local people to be heard by as wide an audience as possible'. The announcement's citation of FEMRITE coordinator Hilda Twongyeirwe affirms this goal: 'Sharing and publishing these stories is one way of raising awareness about the atrocities of war and making the world reflect more closely on what happens in armed conflict'.

The intended global scope of *Today* is also apparent in *Farming Ashes* and *I Dare to Say*. *Farming Ashes*, a collection of eighteen stories and poems edited by Violet Barungi and Hilda Twongyeirwe, is published by FEMRITE Publications Limited. Funded by Africalia, ArtVenture, and IRIN, the volume can be downloaded for free at femriteug.org. Twongyeirwe asserts in her introduction to this volume that the stories are intended for both 'Ugandans and the rest of humanity' (1). *I Dare to Say*, edited by Twongyeirwe alone, is a collection that adapts stories from *Farming Ashes* and also includes testimony about Ugandan women's experiences of domestic abuse, female genital mutilation, and living with HIV and AIDS. The volume is published by Lawrence Hill Books, a division of Chicago Review Press. Its appeal to western readers includes cover blurbs by both Maya Angelou and *Publisher's Weekly*. The volume's acknowledgements state that 'Lawrence Hill Books has contributed' to the FEMRITE objective of 'build[ing] new reading audiences' by taking 'African women's voices' to 'new readers' (Twongyeirwe xi). Each FEMRITE volume, whether digital or print, aims to present women's testimony about the effects of war in northern Uganda to a global Anglophone audience.

My analysis of *how* these collections present testimony to a worldwide readership follows proponents of post-national, Afropolitan literature in critiquing western media representations of African conflicts, yet suggests that FEMRITE's national, issue-based collections both repeat *and challenge* these representations. On the one hand, in their concern with widely disseminating 'true life' accounts of women's dehumanizing experiences of war in northern Uganda, the FEMRITE collections are comparable to those texts produced by 'international observers' who 'repackage...testimony for the global stage in the format of human rights reports, world news, and international aid policy' (Edmonson 455). On the other hand, the FEMRITE texts diverge from western media coverage of the conflict insofar as they also emphasize their status as 'stories,' that is, as imaginatively recounted narratives that attest to their authors' collaboration.

FEMRITE's Humanitarianism

To differing degrees, all three FEMRITE collections foreground the facticity of the stories they relate. The back cover of *Farming Ashes*, for example, affirms that the volume contains 'real life experiences'. *Today You Will Understand* offers more explicit assurances to its international readers that the included stories are true. Twongyeirwe notes in her introduction to *Today*: '[t]hese are not stories from the press, which cannot be verified, but voices of women in first person narration' (3). The stories themselves are formatted as interviews, thereby emphasizing the text's mimetic representation of real life. Footnotes clarify terminology and offer statistics related to Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps, HIV prevalence rates, landmines, and other issues related to the women's stories. The booklet's interviews are supplemented not only by the CD recordings of the interviews, but also by realist photographs of northern Uganda, emphasizing the connection between the women's stories and regional history as a whole. The introduction to *Dare* similarly asserts the truth of the included testimony, as well as its comprehensiveness. It reassures readers that the following stories 'could not be captured effectively in fiction' and that the editor has worked to 'verify facts' (Twongyeirwe xiii, xiv); it avers that the stories have been selected in order to avoid 'gaps' in describing the effects of the conflict (xiv).

Even as the FEMRITE collections variously frame personal testimony as conveying a specific regional reality to an international audience, Twongyeirwe's introductions also assert the value of this action, both for the volumes' storytellers and their readers. In her introduction to *Today*, Twongyeirwe states that '[f]or the women who tell their stories here, it is a major healing process toward becoming whole again' and a way of forgetting 'dehumanizing experiences' (3). The introduction to *Dare* similarly invokes the idea of 'storytelling as therapy' (xiii), while that of *Farming* states that women 'wanted the stories to get off of their backs so that they could walk straight again' (1). The collections are upheld as aiding the woman who gives testimony about how she has been harmed; they are also positioned as edifying the reader by motivating her to take action that will prevent future harm. *Today*'s introduction claims: 'The stories should inspire the reader and listener to construct meaningful social and political opinions toward a collective responsibility for the stability of our societies' (3). The introductions of the other two collections similarly invite the reader to 'reflect on these stories and together work towards a world that cherishes and promotes peace and human dignity for all' (*Farming* 1; *Dare* xv). The FEMRITE collections promote themselves to the western reader as opportunities to gain a greater understanding of a dehumanizing reality that must be transformed through awareness and action.

In so doing, the FEMRITE collections resonate with humanitarian discourses that have tended to stress the objective truth of personal narratives and the potential of western subjects to restore humane conditions. On the one hand, this resonance arguably forwards just political aims. By presenting women's testimony as representative of the history of war in the north, FEMRITE texts reflect a humanitarian convention, delineated by Laura Edmonson in 'Marketing Trauma and the Theatre of War in Uganda' (2005), that invokes personal narratives in order to 'overcome the disbelief and indifference' to the war in northern Uganda that has frequently characterized audiences in southern Uganda and the global North alike (465). By foregrounding the potential of western readers to acknowledge and respond to war based on their awareness of women's experiences, the texts work to change a reality in which women often 'do not get a chance to be heard, because they are not part of the negotiating arena' (Twongyeirwe, *Today* 3).

On the other hand, the pursuit of awareness and action risks, perhaps necessarily, simplifying or eliding ethical questions about listening and responding to stories of trauma, such as those stories of abduction, injury, death, displacement, sexual assault, hunger, poverty, and illness that the collections relay. FEMRITE texts' emphasis on verifiability, for example, corroborates with what Edmonson describes as 'a global marketplace that uses the mirage of objectivity to convey the horror of the LRA war to...southern Uganda, and the world' (463). The 'mirage of objectivity', as already discussed, stresses the undeniable reality of injustice and advocates for the urgency of action; it also, however, can function to 'confine and domesticate atrocity' such that the victim-survivor of trauma in northern Uganda becomes the object of the southern Ugandan or western reader's facile identification and sympathy (463). Stressing the facticity of personal testimony glosses over the possibility, seminally asserted by Cathy Caruth, that experiences of trauma may, in important ways, belie narrativization (187). Furthermore, emphasizing the objectivity and accessibility of testimony can downplay what Michela Borzaga has described as the 'importance of contextualizing experiences of trauma and of taking into account historical specificities' when endeavoring to understand them (79).

FEMRITE texts' presentation of testimony as that which enables the overcoming of conflict and its dehumanizing effects is similarly fraught. The humanitarian discourse that these texts echo constructs a causal narrative whereby both the telling and reading of stories abet a

humanitarian project characterized by the restoration of victim-survivors' full humanity. Such a narrative, however, as Elizabeth S. Anker argues in *Fictions of Dignity: Embodying Human Rights in World Literature* (2012), tends to uphold 'the stigmatizing reduction of embodiment to dehumanization' (30–31). Suggesting that narrative helps to make a person 'whole' again reinforces a problematic association of personhood with the overcoming of bodily suffering. It implies that corporeal suffering has rendered women's bodies somehow nonhuman and upholds a normative definition of personhood that depends upon the absence of such suffering. At the same time, the positioning of Euro-American readers as potentially key to the project of promoting 'peace and human dignity for all' resonates uncomfortably with humanitarian appeals that have formed the 'master narrative of the LRA war' by calling upon implicitly white western individuals to imagine themselves 'in the role of the active humanitarian hero who will end the victims' suffering and restore the social order' (Edmonson 465). This narrative, like that which contributes to a 'mirage of objectivity,' flatters the understanding, authority, and humaneness of the privileged western subject, while downplaying those systemic histories of humanitarian intervention in Africa that have exacerbated injustice and served Euro-American so-called security interests more than those of the victim-survivors of war (Sharp). FEMRITE texts, in addressing the reader as one who has the potential 'to construct meaningful social and political opinions towards a collective responsibility' by attending to stories of dehumanizing embodied suffering, replicate a binary human rights discourse that imagines a self-contained, thinking subject whose humanity is both defined and confirmed via stories of dehumanization.

One way to read these FEMRITE texts as post-national is to consider how they invite readers to engage with northern Ugandan women's testimony on terms that reflect humanitarian discourses of the western media, which aim to convey a dehumanizing reality in the global South that must be transformed at least in part through collective awareness and action in the global North. In echoing these discourses, FEMRITE texts work for the just inclusion of women's experiences in negotiations for peace, while risking the containment of women's experience of war as that which can be readily understood and overcome. Importantly, however, the FEMRITE collections do not only appeal to their readers to approach women's stories as 'true life'. They also frame women's true life stories as *stories*, which is to say as imaginatively constructed narratives. In so doing, the FEMRITE collections contest the global humanitarian discourses they also invoke.

FEMRITE's Humanity

Just as the FEMRITE collections differently highlight their claims to 'true life', so too do they differently figure their status as 'stories'. *Today*, for one, begins and ends with two poems, 'The New Green' and 'This time tomorrow', both authored by members of FEMRITE. These poems, which meditate on the effects of war on nature and time, stand in stark formal juxtaposition to the footnoted interviews, insofar as they eschew both claims to facticity and narratives of closure in favor of imagining an uncertain future: 'We wait / Will it be the same this time tomorrow?' (Twongyeirwe, 'This time' 19–20). The poems challenge the reader to encounter *Today* as not only a factual text, but also as a literary text that is created and creative. The titles of each interview strengthen this challenge. The first story, for example, is titled 'The Silver Lining: Judith's Story', thereby inviting readers to determine whether and how Judith's story contains a 'silver lining'. Each subsequent title similarly offers a phrase that suggests the interviewer's

framework for reading or understanding the interview, followed by a subtitle that emphasizes another individual's role in the telling of a story.

Dare also amplifies the fact that each story in the collection's testimony is the product of collaboration between two women, one a member of FEMRITE and one a woman who has lived through the northern Ugandan war. Like *Today*, this collection offers interpretive titles for each story, such as 'Fathomless Luck'. Interestingly, however, each story is attributed not to the northern Ugandan woman whose narrative forms the majority of each section (for example, 'Judith'), but to the member of FEMRITE who has conducted the interview before rendering it into fluid prose. 'Fathomless Luck' is not presented as being authored by Lucky, the woman who describes her abduction by what she terms 'so-called rebels' (Agiresaasi 3). Rather, the story is attributed to Apophia Agiresaasi, whose narrator provides a brief opening description of her encounter with Lucky in an italicized paragraph separated from the main body of the text, the latter of which begins with the declaration 'My Name is Lucky' (177). The international reader is thus made keenly aware that Agiresaasi and other FEMRITE writers have substantively shaped the form of northern Ugandan women's stories.

Of the three FEMRITE collections that focus on war, however, *Farming Ashes* most explicitly invites the reader to engage with its testimony as imaginatively constructed literary texts (which are yet undoubtedly also 'true life').⁵ *Farming* does not include a detailed explanation of the volume's methodology and offers no reassurance of the stories' verifiability. As in *Today*, it includes multiple poems by FEMRITE writers that reflect on war. As in *Dare*, each story is authored by a FEMRITE writer. Unlike in *Dare*, however, the author's explicit commentary is not limited to an italicized introductory paragraph. In the version of 'Fathomless Luck' by Agiresaasi that appears in *Farming*, for example, Lucky's testimony is interwoven with commentary by Agiresaasi's narrator. The story begins:

Women speed past me. They are riding bicycles. Children are strapped on their backs. Some women are carrying jerrycans of water while others are carrying bundles of firewood. They hum different tunes as one foot peddles on, followed by another, in unison. About a hundred metres away, in Labujje trading centre, both young and old men sit on their stools around huge pots of local brew commonly known as *lacoyi*. Each man sips from a straw that connects their souls to the pot of *lacoyi*. Some of them are already drunk as betrayed by the drowsy look in their eyes. They are yelling vulgarities at one another and at passersby. Beer has given them that kind of boldness. I hurry past them and head to our meeting place. I do not wait for long before Lucky arrives. (2)

Here, the opening sequence stresses the narrator's role as mediator and translator ('a local brew'), even as the descriptive passage performs literary work: the narrator's observation of the gender divide in and around the trading centre resonates with the threat of sexual assault that Lucky relays in her account of her abduction by LRA soldiers. While Lucky's narration comprises the majority of the story, the narrator records her responses to Lucky's testimony as an important component of the story entitled 'Fathomless Luck'. Near the story's end, for example, the narrator notes:

At this point, I remind Lucky that she has indeed been a very lucky girl to survive all this. Her determination and strength through it all is simply amazing. The power that lies in meanings behind names and their ability to determine one's destiny gains new meaning to me. (13)

The narrator's interjections develop an interpretive frame for understanding Lucky's experiences, while also highlighting that the story being offered has already been interpreted – as an instance of 'Fathomless Luck'.

As these collections emphasize their status as 'stories', they diverge from and even contradict the international humanitarian discourses that they also deploy. For example, the emphasis on the creative presentation of women's testimony troubles the 'mirage of objectivity' favored by humanitarian reports and, to varying degrees, the collections themselves. The reader is made aware that the true life stories presented by FEMRITE writers have been structured and interpreted by those writers. Without casting doubt on the truth of women's testimony, the volumes emphasize that readers' access to this testimony has been enabled through a collaborative process, one characterized by translation, mediation, and creativity. This emphasis on collaboration, in turn, undoes the simplistic illusion of objectivity and comprehensiveness upon which humanitarian appeals that draw on personal narrative often depend. Readers are self-reflexively offered an interpretation of women's testimony, highlighting the fact that their own encounter with this testimony and the reality of the northern Ugandan conflict might itself be better understood in terms of interpretation rather than objective knowledge. This framing keeps open the possibility that the stories may be, as the back cover of *Farming* suggests, 'disturbing and baffling in the extreme', as opposed to revelatory and empowering. It throws into relief, rather than minimizes, ethical questions about how to bear witness to experiences of trauma that may resist easy co-optation into narrativization or may be shaped and transformed by specific cultural and historical circumstances.⁶

The collections' presentation of women's testimony in literary terms has the additional effect of qualifying those moments in the paratexts that evoke a humanitarian binary of dehumanized and humanized subjects. One critique of literary treatments of others' trauma, as Jessica Murray concedes in her readings of fiction by Antjie Krog and Yvonne Vera, is that they may locate trauma not only in the person who has lived through it, but also in the person who bears witness to, and writes of, those experiences (5–6). Literary treatments may emphasize the writer's pain in hearing testimony as much as, or more than, the pain of the victim-survivor who shares her testimony. The effect of the literariness of the FEMRITE texts, in which the interviewers' and narrators' responses consistently remain secondary to victim-survivors' true life stories, is different. Rather than problematically suggesting equal suffering, they suggest equal creative agency or, indeed, equal humanity. Precisely because the collections highlight the role of FEMRITE writers in shaping the published true life stories, they also invite reflection on northern Ugandan women's roles in shaping the stories they relate.

In the case of *Farming*, this invitation is reinforced by Dominic Dipio's forward, which avers that '[t]hese stories assert human dignity in the face of what negates it' (viii). In this reading, the stories do not restore humanity to the victim-survivor but evidence that it has persisted and persists. In fact, as Dipio frames the stories, they 'humanize both the narrator and the listener' rather than the survivor because they lead the former to question their own humanity (x): 'we can now share in their [survivors'] greatness and remain challenged by it' (ix). Humanity here is not defined by the absence or overcoming of bodily suffering but as a work in progress that hinges on responding to others' humanity. This definition counters the humanitarian narrative that would urge the western reader to work to end the dehumanization of women in the global South. Rather, it creates an alternative narrative in which humanity emerges through the realization of collective accountability. Such a narrative, as Birgit Brock-Utne has discussed, is central to the institution of *Mato Oput* – an institution that exists among Acholi people in northern Uganda –

which emphasizes reconciliation through the acknowledgment of ongoing mutual responsibility. By suggesting that narrators' and readers' humanity depends upon reciprocal relationships and creative, collaborative engagement with others, Dipio evokes a prominent Acholi institution. Through their modelling of creative collaboration, the FEMRITE collections of true life stories do the same.

Conclusion

FEMRITE's true life stories belie categorizations of African literature that would associate western readers primarily with Afropolitan texts that eschew national conflict by inviting non-African readers to engage with northern Ugandan women's testimony. In so doing, however, the generically distinct collections do not simply replicate western humanitarian media that appeal to Euro-American audiences to use their knowledge to work to stop dehumanizing war. They also demand these audiences consider the limits of their knowledge, as well as of their own humanity. The uneasy relation between 'true life' and 'story' in the presentation of FEMRITE's true life stories inaugurates an international literary relation that questions as much as it affirms the humanity of readers.

Notes

- 1 A few recent examples of Anglophone African literature that thematically engages ideas of transnational connection are *Open City* (2011) by Teju Cole; *Americanah* (2013) by Chimimanda Ngozie Adichie; and *Ghana Must Go* (2013) by Taiye Selasi.
- 2 Selasi is widely credited with popularizing the term 'Afropolitan' in her essay 'Bye-Bye Barbar' (2005).
- 3 For a recent collection of essays that explore the history of the LRA in Uganda, see Tim Allen and Koen Vlassenroot's *The Lord's Resistance Army: Myth and Reality* (2010).
- 4 The three other volumes of true life stories published by FEMRITE that are not addressed in this paper are: *Tears of Hope* (2002), which relates stories of domestic abuse; *Beyond the Dance* (2009), which 'is a compilation of testimonies and poems about the humiliation of female genital mutilation' (FEMRITE); and an earlier publication called *I Dare to Say* (2007), which focuses on testimony about HIV and AIDS.
- 5 Assuming that humanitarianism has proven itself an effective framework for marketing stories of the global South within the global North, it is possible to conclude that *Farming Ashes* highlights its status as a collection of 'stories' over and above its status as 'true life' because it is being marketed neither by an international NGO (as is *Today*) nor an American publisher (as is *Dare*).
- 6 Offering ethical readings of the testimony presented in the FEMRITE collections is an important project that is beyond the scope of this paper, which focuses instead is on elaborating the kinds of readings the collections invite. For examples of scholarship that has grappled directly with ethically reading African women's testimony, see Fiona Ross and Aisha Fofana Ibrahim.

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