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## **Perpetrator Trauma in Television Crime Series *We Hunt Together***

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**Abstract:** Crime fiction scholarship increasingly focuses on trauma in contemporary crime narratives, but has largely neglected to investigate perpetrator trauma. This article contributes to filling this gap by exploring perpetrator trauma in *We Hunt Together* (2020), a British television crime series written by Gaby Hull, that portrays the consequences of perpetrator trauma on a former child soldier from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Babeni (Baba) Lenga, waiting for permanent residency in the UK. Viewers learn about his violent past through flashbacks and his involvement with Frederica ‘Freddy’ Lane which precipitates Baba’s present return to violence. Informed by crime fiction studies, literary trauma theory, and research on child soldier narratives, this study argues that perpetrator trauma complicates and renders agency ambiguous in *We Hunt Together*, where Baba’s story eventually leads to healing. Ultimately, the perpetrator trauma narrative of a former child soldier, focalised through Baba, brings together the themes of war, colonialism, and the growing use of child soldiers in the present, challenging the crime-solving plot by raising ethical and political issues of guilt and responsibility and problematising any easy distinctions between victim and perpetrator/criminal.

**Keywords:** ambiguous agency, child soldiers, flashback, perpetrator trauma, television crime series, *We Hunt Together*

Scholarly interest in trauma in contemporary crime fiction studies has until recently remained modest despite the obvious connections between the subject matter and its psychological consequences. Leanne Dodd argues that the questions dealt with in crime fiction makes it an ‘ideal vehicle for representing trauma as a subset of trauma literature’ (235). Further, because of its elasticity, crime fiction gives writers room ‘to bend the genre to suit their narratives’ (Duerre Human 57), and on account of its ability for social critique and interest in psychological issues, crime stories now thematize traumatic experiences to the point that, as noted by Mary-Ann Gillies, trauma has progressively become ‘a core element’ of crime narratives in the twenty-first century (‘Trauma’ 40). This development has also contributed to increased interest among crime fiction scholars (Hamilton 318) and is also visible among some trauma critics who until now have mainly ignored popular or genre fiction (Rodi-Risberg, ‘Generic’ 280; Dodd 235).

Most studies on trauma in fiction, however, tend to focus on the victim and narratives dealing with perpetrator trauma, or the trauma perpetrators of violent acts may experience, have attracted less attention. This study focuses on perpetrator trauma in the critically acclaimed six-episode BBC police procedural *We Hunt Together*, written by Gaby Hull, which premiered in the UK on Alibi 27 May 2020.<sup>1</sup> The series not only spotlights the detection process and the discovery of the perpetrator(s) of the crimes under investigation. Using the crime thriller form with the traditional hunt motive, it highlights and problematises the effects of perpetrator trauma on the individual through one of its central characters, Babeni ‘Baba’ Lenga (Dipo Ola), a former child soldier from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), awaiting permanent residency in the UK, and struggling with moral psychological symptoms arising out of his past when he was forced to perpetrate violence. Through Baba, the series brings together perpetrator trauma and the violent exploitation of

children in wars. Our aim is to discuss the ways in which the on-screen expressions of ‘disjunct time’ (Killbourn 10), focalised through Baba, construct the trauma narrative.

Scholars have increasingly emphasised and analysed the tendency of contemporary crime fiction to expand its social critique to issues of a transnational character, thus communicating ‘an ambiguous relationship between crime, capitalism, Western colonial legacy and imperial world order’ (Piipponen et al. 25). *We Hunt Together* embeds its narrative in a transnational postcolonial context, constructed through images of war, ‘one of the principal and most obvious sources of trauma’ (Kurtz 12), and the familiar, ‘domestic spaces of crime fiction’ (Deer 344), tying together Baba’s child soldier past in the Congo Wars<sup>2</sup> around the turn of the millennium and his present adult life in the UK. The series is indicative of a new shift in television crime narratives because it establishes an ethically engaging portrayal of a traumatised perpetrator in analysing violence and culpability beyond the individual, simultaneously covering wide historical, cross-national and social contexts. By doing this, it enters new areas in depicting trauma in crime fiction beyond the recurring intimate portrayals of the personal lives of traumatised, deprived or otherwise suffering detectives, such as the eponymous characters in *River* (2015) and *Marcella* (2016--) or Henrik Sabroe in *The Bridge* (2011-2018). This shift in focus is significant because it makes room for reimagining and critically discussing stories featuring the traumatised perpetrator victim in the aftermath of colonialism.

*We Hunt Together* begins when Baba, in his work as a nightclub bathroom attendant, meets sex worker Frederica ‘Freddy’ Lane<sup>3</sup> (Hermione Corfield). Through Baba’s involvement with the manipulative Freddy, viewers learn about his turbulent past, and their unbalanced relationship precipitates his return to violence. Blurring the lines between perpetrators and victims by demonstrating how Baba’s past as a child soldier causes him to kill men by whom Freddy feels mistreated, the series shows how his ambiguous and

conflicting impulses originate in his dual status as victim and perpetrator. Through Baba's involvement in present violent acts, the series investigates agency and choice in his present life and how he is haunted by his past, suffering from perpetrator trauma, as shown for instance in flashbacks and nightmares. Thus, *We Hunt Together* is best described as a perpetrator trauma narrative, where Baba's past complicates and renders his agency ambiguous regarding violence in the present, but that eventually leads to healing. Although Baba may have committed blameworthy acts, he is also a victim of traumatising conditions, demonstrating Alan Gibbs' claim that 'these categories are often insufficiently stable in narratives to make clear distinctions between perpetrators and victims' (167).

*We Hunt Together* broadly elaborates on psychological questions through the four central characters, who all deal with problematic past or present issues. In addition to Baba's efforts to come to terms with his past, Freddy, Baba's partner in crime, lives in a world of hallucinations resulting from childhood emotional deprivation; DS Lola Franks (Eve Myles), the female member of the series' detective partnership uses drugs to soothe her pain for causing the deaths of a father and daughter in a traffic accident; DI Jackson Mendy (Babou Ceesay), her male colleague, tries to repress his anger about his wife's infidelity. These characters' acts and personal narratives are interlinked, and contribute to an understanding of the intersections between crime and its psychological impacts. However, Baba is the focal point of the series' exploration of the link between past trauma and present violence. Baba's internal chaos is depicted through memories, hallucinations and dreams that are a visual correlative of the fragmented narrative expression in trauma fiction. Because trauma theory has borrowed some of its key concepts including the flashback and anachronistic intrusive images from visual culture (Bond and Craps 115; Luckhurst 208), focusing on how these devices are used in portraying trauma in visual representation offers important insights into the phenomenon.

## Crime Fiction and Trauma

Crime fiction scholarship has in the last few decades progressively underscored the crime genre as a forum for social critique (Piipponen et al. 1). The prominent sociocritical approach, noticeable in crime fiction since the 1970s, is sensitive to current sociocultural developments such as the #Metoo and Black Lives Matter movements that have raised a new consciousness of the consequences of violence and discrimination in Western societies. This awareness produces expressions sensitive to the related traumas, be they of sexual or racial violence. Moreover, trauma critics emphasise that trauma narratives 'are often concerned with human-made traumatic situations and are implicit critiques of the ways social, economic, and political structures can create and perpetuate trauma' (Vickroy 4). Lucy Bond and Stef Craps indicate the potential of trauma theory to highlight and articulate wounding on individual and community levels for the purpose of helping to recognise exploitative and abusive circumstances and motivate social commentary and create public awareness (140-1). Many contemporary crime narratives depicting trauma engage with the urgent themes that trauma fiction does, but present these more accessibly (Rodi-Risberg, 'Generic' 286).

Although popular crime fiction is not read primarily as a form of trauma narrative, as argued by Leanne Dodd, crime narratives also resort to narrative strategies used in trauma literature (235) when telling stories of violence and trauma. Crime fiction deals with crime, its incentives and consequences and often with traumatised characters, some of whom suffer from having been victims or themselves perpetrated heinous acts. Mary Ann Gillies comments on how, 'by the last quarter of the twentieth century, the detective's trauma history frequently became a main focus of crime fiction' ('Trauma' 40). One of her examples is Sherlock Holmes in the BBC *Sherlock* TV series (2010 –), described by Gillies as a 'man whose life choices have been shaped by complex posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)'

(‘Trauma’ 40), caused by a repressed childhood memory. She has also studied detective agency and trauma as consequences of war: her analysis of traumatised war veterans in Laurie A King’s *Touchstone* (2007) and *Keeping Watch* (2003) discusses how war trauma influences their orientations towards normal life in their post-war lives (Gillies, ‘Liminal’). War trauma is the common denominator between the characters in King’s novels analysed by Gillies and Baba in *We Hunt Together*. However, while WW1 veteran Bennett Grey and Vietnam War veteran Allen Carmichael find a new purpose in detection, Baba returns to violence.

This choice associates Baba with another group of characters interesting from the perspective of crime fiction and trauma; victims of direct or indirect violence – rape, loss of child, parent or spouse – who turn into agents of violence. Victims-turned-perpetrators ‘go beyond the victim-perpetrator binary’ and belong to ‘in-between groups with complicated levels of guilt and complicity’ (Bond and Craps 124). These characters are often women. One example is Stieg Larsson’s well known protagonist Lisbeth Salander, who has appeared in novels, film, and studies, and features a traumatised female perpetrator who resorts to violence when her pleas for help are neglected by those responsible for her safety (see Mäntymäki, ‘Kuoleman’; ‘Memory’). In the three Swedish films from 2009, based on the Millennium novel trilogy (2005-2007), Salander’s trauma, caused by long-term mental and physical abuse, is expressed in dream sequences and flashbacks that fragment the linearity and stylistic realism of the narrative (Mäntymäki, ‘Memory’). Like Salander, Baba also belongs to such an in-between group, but while Salander’s trauma and her avenger agency results from her being a victim, Baba’s trauma originates from his personally having perpetrated terrifying acts.

Baba’s suffering in *We Hunt Together* is emblematic of perpetrator trauma, a largely ‘neglected area’ of cultural trauma studies (Rodi-Risberg, ‘Problems’ 118). The lack of

theorization is ironic as trauma theory initially anticipated that perpetrators may suffer from trauma; such trauma was used to typify trauma generally with the examples of Tancredi and Clorinda in Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata* and Sigmund Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* in Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* (Bond and Craps 117-18; see Caruth 1-9, 12-24, 67-72). Additionally, theories of PTSD were developed in the US, linked to American veterans of the Vietnam War and their experiences of perpetrating and witnessing horrors (Gibbs 18). Perpetrator trauma is central to the basic PTSD diagnosis. In their *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th edition, the American Psychiatric Association does not specifically use the term perpetrator trauma, but connects 'directly experienced traumatic events' with 'exposure to war as a combatant or civilian' (274). This is supported by Maria Root who regards 'direct trauma' as including both becoming 'the target of the trauma' and 'being forced to commit atrocities' as in some war experiences (239). Gibbs indicates the key problematic ethical issue faced by critics reading trauma narratives by mentioning that even if one may 'retain a moral distaste' for perpetrator trauma, one should seek 'analysis and understanding of both the victim and the perpetrator' (168, 167). This means that scholars have an 'analytical duty' to investigate perpetrator trauma as it is explored by cultural producers and creative artists and writers (168). Although trauma is understood as 'a moral judgement' in Western societies, 'both victims and perpetrators can suffer trauma' (Bond and Craps 119). Ethically speaking, trauma is a psychological classification and therefore neutral (119).

In exploring perpetrator trauma and its effects, *We Hunt Together* not only engages in an ethical discussion but also intervenes in ethical conversations on human rights violations and political oppression. Although as Bond and Craps note, 'public taste has traditionally favoured the reassuringly clear-cut categories of heroes or saints versus traitors or villains', there is currently a willingness in cultural productions to tell and in audiences to hear



perpetrator narratives (125). *We Hunt Together* invites spectators to empathise with characters who commit dire deeds. Hull has emphasised that with the series they ask the ‘audience to feel some sort of compassion for people, even when they do terrible things’ (Fletcher). In this, *We Hunt Together* bears resemblance to such series as *Dexter* (2006-2013) despite the very different trauma histories represented in the series: witnessing the murder of his mother as a baby turns adult Dexter Morgan into a serial killer of other killers acquitted by the justice system, while Baba is traumatised by his own acts. However, their trauma histories make room for audience sympathy precisely because of their in-between status that renders culpability volatile.

Baba’s story in *We Hunt Together* is similar to African child-soldier narratives which ‘trouble easy distinctions between victim and perpetrator’ (Bond and Craps 125). In *Writing That Breaks Stones: African Child Soldier Narratives* (2020), Joya Uraizee observes that because of their global circulation, African child-soldier narratives can take part in wider discussions about violence and social injustice outside Africa through portrayals of their young protagonists ‘as both victims and perpetrators, both culpable for murder and innocent of crime’ (xi).<sup>4</sup> As Baba gradually begins to concretely face his trauma in the images from his soldier past, the series resonates with African child soldier narratives which underscore the protagonists’ ‘ambiguous agency,’ in terms of their taking part, ‘directly or indirectly, in cruel and outlandish crimes’ but then for unclear reasons discontinuing their hostile and bloody deeds, underlining the capacities of child characters who ‘encounter traumatic situations and find ways to resist them’ (16, 73, 16).

*We Hunt Together* represents trauma as divided between different cultural settings and times. Baba’s war experience and how it affects him remain unknown for those around him except Freddy until the end when DI Mendy, himself an immigrant from Senegal, shows understanding for Baba’s inner landscapes when trying to talk him out of sacrificing himself

for Freddy. Craps has argued that trauma theory must recognise suffering in non-Western contexts where the wounding is often a result of political and/or economic oppression rather than a psychological problem, a view which challenges the event-based model of trauma as originating in a single disastrous occurrence healable through therapy (50): ‘the assumption underlying Western notions of trauma recovery that the patient is able to be returned to a state of normalcy’ (53) jars disconcertingly with the traumatic experiences of African child soldiers like Baba, whose suffering did not necessarily cease when the fighting/warfare ends (Uraizee 16). For many, to use Craps’s words in a similar context, ‘the “normal” experience is one of oppression, deprivation, and upheaval’ and ‘the Western standard of normality’, including ‘freedom, affluence, and stability ... are actually the exception rather than the rule’ (53). The ‘unique ways’ of representing African child soldiers’ traumas in Uraizee’s study include ‘[d]ystopic imagery, ambiguous narratives, and strange aporias’ (22, 21), which in *We Hunt Together* emerge through flashbacks and other temporally disjunct images that bring Baba’s past in Africa to the present in the UK.

### **On-screen Expressions of Trauma**

Visually mediated trauma narratives, including *We Hunt Together*, can through formal means more directly mimic traumatised minds than literary narratives. Gillies notes how the double story structure of traditional crime fiction, asserted by Todorov, disrupts linear time where the story of crime is set in the past, and the story of detection in the present (Gillies, ‘Trauma’ 42). She underlines that this fundamental principle is also visible in trauma: the investigation of the crime that gradually ‘reshapes readers’ understanding of the crime(s) until they get the full picture’ (‘Trauma’ 42) is associated with the memories of traumatised individuals whose understanding of their experiences are similarly reshaped. However, the basic division into past and present is far more multiform in *We Hunt Together*, where different pasts and

‘different attitudes toward the past’ (Leitch, 157) become intertwined into a complicated web of pasts, expressed through various filmic techniques to give the audiences access to Baba’s negotiation of his experiences as a child soldier. Baba revisits the past by talking to Freddy; his trauma is shown to viewers through close-ups focusing on his face, depicting psychological states of agony when haunted by painful memories or dreams. Moreover, to engage viewers in Baba’s trauma, these memories and dreams are shared with the viewers through flashbacks. Because of the constantly growing popularity and accessibility of audiovisual narratives on various platforms, it is fair to argue, following J. Roger Kurtz, that ‘image-based genres’ including film, and visual forms of expression may even be regarded as ‘our most important cultural forms in engaging trauma’ (14).

The detection narrative in *We Hunt Together* begins in the first episode when DI Mendy and DS Franks investigate the body of Baba and Freddy’s first victim at the crime scene, after which an analepsis to the murder follows. However, this order is soon reversed: when Baba’s trauma narrative is introduced, the narrative structure becomes linear and gives room to the flashbacks and dream sequences as the central narrative expressions of trauma. Flashbacks to Baba’s child-soldier experiences occur throughout as a way of telling viewers about his past and showing the extent of trauma and guilt. Defined in simple terms, flashbacks are ‘temporally disjunct inserts’ (Killbourn 10) highlighting transfers back in narrative time. Maureen Turim emphasises the multifacetedness of flashbacks as ‘a privileged moment in unfolding that juxtaposes different moments of temporal reference’ (1). Although traditionally flashbacks are associated with a strong truth value (Turim 42), they are also used in constructing parallel, conflicting or deceptive references engaging viewers in intricate networks of psychological considerations (Mäntymäki, ‘Memory’ 149). The analeptic flashes tied to Baba invite viewers into an inner landscape where the actuality of the experience

becomes blurred and intermingled with haunting and delusive images. These ‘altered states’ (Powell) highlight or blur the boundaries between dream and reality, past and present.

Flashbacks were likely employed in film already in the 1910s (Luckhurst 178), and the traumatic flashback has been ‘embedded in cinema’ since 1957 and Alain Resnais’s *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (Luckhurst 207). Yet, the flashback was not integrated into the diagnosis of PTSD until 1987 (178). As a result, the anachronistic temporality and backward plots of 1990s movies partly communicate ‘the experience of traumatized subjectivity’ (178). Contemporary movies mark traumatic distress through the unforeseen flashback ‘prompted analogically by a graphic (or auditory) match . . . that throws off the linear temporality of the story’ (180). Since flashbacks are focalised through individual characters, they typically convey their personal images of memory to viewers. To mirror elements of a ‘post-traumatic consciousness’ for the audience, posttraumatic cinema provides ‘an image-based form of witnessing’ trauma (Kruger 264).

As in Baba’s case, flashbacks can also combine the personal and historical levels of recollection and thus expand into a portrayal/witnessing of a wide-ranging account of socio-political events through a single individual’s remembered experience. This kind of ‘subjectivization of history’ in flashback is described by Turim as being ‘coloured by both the general processes of fictional transformation, and by the specific framing and focalisation of the fictional version of the historical past as flashback’ (17). In *We Hunt Together*, telling history through ‘biographical flashbacks’ and ‘a subjective focalization’ that construct the war as an ‘essentially individual and emotional experience’ (Turim 42, 17), Baba’s personal history becomes embedded in a particular historical moment that extends over his situated experience. Hence, flashbacks link his history as a child soldier to the collective history of violence not only in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, but any part of the world where hegemonic interest groups continue to promote their political, economic and military causes

in ways that call for violent action. How war is represented at any historical juncture reflects the distinct political and cultural circumstances ‘in which particular nations exist’; in postcolonial novels war experiences are sometimes used to link ‘colonialism and militarism’ (Bayer 216, 220). Cosmopolitan novels show that the wars in the new millennium and their traumatic aftereffects surpass ‘conventional forms of military conflict’ (225). This means that the political weight of narratives such as Baba’s relate to thousands of children and remind viewers of the serious problems of forms of slavery, past and present.

**‘I have killed many innocent men in my life’: Child-soldiering, Perpetrator Trauma, and Ambiguous Agency**

Baba’s fictional narrative is a reality for thousands of children today, as child soldiers play now an unprecedented part in armed conflicts, representing an estimated 80% of combatants – and the ‘trend’ shows no sign of decreasing (Schauer and Elbert 315). This is, according to Elisabeth Schauer and Thomas Elbert, a sign of a change ‘in “the culture of violence”’ that bespeaks a transformation that has occurred in terms of how ‘new wars’ are engaged in and ‘organized violence is exerted’ (312). Child soldiers exist on every continent, but the situation is critical in Africa. For example, the governments of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Central African Republic, Chad, Somalia, Sudan and Southern Sudan, and Uganda, used child soldiers between 2004 and 2007 (Uraizee 103, n. 2; see also Schauer and Elbert 315, n. 2). And this is to say nothing of non-state actors. Weak national governments make the situation particularly critical because with few other opportunities ‘children are susceptible to recruitment by militias’ (Uraizee 5). The problem is vast, involving huge numbers of individuals: studies from 2016 estimate that ‘hundreds of thousands of boys and girls under the age of eighteen had been recruited, by sixty-one parties to conflict worldwide’ (5). According to Schauer and Elbert, there are certain psychological benefits of recruiting

children, including their malleability, adaptability and susceptibility to indoctrination: children's personality and moral development are still incomplete and their inhibitions regarding performing violence is reduced (316).

In Episode 2, a flashback to Baba's childhood illuminates questions of culpability elaborated in the series and highlights the contrast between the child's reduced inhibition in a war situation and the adult's understanding of the moral question related to violence and culpability. In the flashback, viewers see children play football; they hear sounds of gunshots in the background, young Baba (Kamara Abraham) lies on the ground happy-looking and high on cocaine. In the present, Freddy tells the pensive Baba it is not his fault, whatever happened, and he replies that this is what everyone keeps telling him. Baba then tells her that his friend Pascal suggested a competition for the small amount of cocaine they had left to see who could kill the most villagers. They each killed 17, but as they went through the pockets of the dead they found that one of the women Baba killed was pregnant, which made it 17.5. He took the cocaine and then played football 'in the garden of the dead'. The next day Baba and Pascal laughed about the crime.

Drugs seem to play a crucial role in desensitising child soldiers against violence which complicates further the question of culpability that Baba is struggling with. Eleni Coundouriotis notes that child soldiers in real life are at times said to fight under the influence of drugs which allowed them to change positions 'seamlessly from perpetrator to victim' (Coundouriotis 192-4). The implication is that drugs were used to desensitise the children to the commission of atrocious acts. The dialogue between Baba and Freddy about responsibility highlights what Uraizee writes about child soldier narratives, referring to Coundouriotis's real life findings, that child soldier narratives describe 'ambiguous and unfulfilled motivations' (Uraizee 72). The overall question of children's responsibility for their deeds, in a situation where no other option exists, contributes to the frequent acceptance

of child soldier narratives as victim narratives, because the moral responsibility for the atrocities committed by a child under abuse or addicted to drugs is largely denied (Uraizee 8; Coundouriotis 192-4). As Myriam Denov's study of child soldiers in Sierra Leone shows, instead of coming out as 'extreme victims, extreme perpetrators or extreme heroes', ambiguity, confusion and paradox were characteristic of their identities and lead to great challenges in their later lives (2). Baba's story bespeaks the ambiguity and complexity of perpetrator trauma in ways that rewrite the stereotypical views of child soldiers in media and academic narratives as "pathologized" into some kind of perversion of innocence and purity' (Uraizee 17; Denov 7). Thus, as with Baba, the question of agency and culpability regarding child combatants is complex and requires alternative interpretations (see Uraizee 8).

Feelings of culpability in the form of hallucinations and dreams begin to haunt Baba after he meets Freddy who, as noted above, lures him to return to violence. According to Alan Gibbs who analyses perpetrator trauma in memoirs from both Gulf Wars, *Nachträglichkeit* (forgetting or acting out) is not the same for perpetrators and 'the unambiguous victim of trauma', because 'in perpetrator narratives, memory appears to be more often characterised by conflicting urges towards both silence and confession' (170, 170-1). Although perpetrators, particularly in war narratives, 'may wish to tell of their traumatic experience . . . there is clearly . . . a moral resistance to perpetrator narratives' (171). Baba is troubled by conscious recall and feels he can talk to Freddy about his past, even if she demands violence from him. During the war, after having lost his family, the troop of soldiers came to represent a new one based on perpetrating violence. Schauer and Elbert indicate that through a process of 'systematic indoctrination and acculturation' commanders can take the place of caregivers and act as 'adult role model[s]' for child soldiers who 'accept, and in fact, need to attach to for mentorship, guidance, and survival', while fellow child soldiers can substitute siblings 'and/or replace the community peer group'; yet such a "'surrogate family'"

is not willingly chosen but represents ‘a forced adaptation and might, in fact, be a sign of healthy development in the absence of other choices’ (319). This is exemplified in *We Hunt Together*, when Baba relates to Freddy that Pascal was everything to him for a long time (Episode 4). In the narrative present, being in a relationship with Freddy becomes an attempt to create a new (third?) family with her. This relationship entails killing men by whom she feels mistreated. Killing to guard Freddy against external enemies means reliving a novel version of the past. Here the series exemplifies traumatic repetition. Rebecca Martin notes that ‘Trauma is an expression of past pain or injury that manifests in the present, repeating the past experience in ways that unconsciously recreate the pain’ (173). Violence is endowed with new meanings when the past is relived: defending Freddy who represents a replacement for Baba’s family members, killed by rebellious troops before his eyes, gives Baba an opportunity to revisit that moment and gain agency in resisting the enemy by keeping safe his surrogate family, Freddy.

In *We Hunt Together*, trauma is not illustrated through visual effects only but also expressed in words. Because of the relationship with Freddy, who in her dual role is both a partner in crime and someone to defend, a context opens up for Baba where he no longer has to fight against remembering and speaking. In the last episode of the series when the couple are in a desperate situation surrounded by the police, Baba refers to the beginning of their relationship to explain his alliance with her saying that Freddy ‘saw’ him ‘when nobody else did’ (Episode 6). Freddy’s partnership in crime allows for a space free of restricting social rules or moral codes where the haunting images from the past are eventually organised into a coherent and cathartic solution. According to Cathy Caruth, trauma is ‘not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor’ (4). Baba’s belated memory of his war experiences as a child



combatant, shown in hypermnestic flashbacks, attributes new meanings to the past and demonstrates the change in his understanding that makes room for confession.

The initial episode of *We Hunt Together* shows the first unwanted flashback to Baba's war past: he sees a person's head when focusing on the target in a shooting game with Freddy, who has taken him to a local carnival to see how good of a shot he is. She overcomes Baba's reluctance by insisting she wants to win a big teddy bear and convinces him that their chance of winning is greater if he shoots. When Baba picks up the rifle, the target is uncannily replaced by the bloody head of a black person looking at him into the eye. This intrusive image introduces a weird eeriness to the scene, an uncanny 'sense of unfamiliarity that appears at the very heart of the familiar' (Bennet and Royle 34). In this kind of realistic crime narrative frame the viewer interprets the flashback as hallucination, a link between Baba's past and perpetrator trauma: the graphically detailed apparition (and his initial refusal to participate in the shooting game) shows that Baba is plagued by guilt. The traumatic past intrudes relentlessly on his present.

The series' vision and dream sequences show Baba beginning to investigate his culpability and focus on his guilt. After he and Freddy have killed their first victim together, one of her clients who tried to rape her at the club and which Baba prevented (first episode), Baba asks what she feels about them killing him. Freddy is unambiguous, saying they had no choice. Baba also feels reluctant before their second murder of Matt Bowers whom Freddy owes ten thousand pounds. He wants to know why he must be killed, and she says Bowers will kill her if she does not pay him. In the second episode, as Baba hangs Bowers, a witness, appears and Baba kills him too (and puts him in the trunk of the car). In the third episode, Baba's memories return in flashbacks and a dream sequence, and apparitions of his child self begins to control the haunting, demonstrating how, as Roger Luckhurst writes in another context, 'traumatic memory persists in a half-life, rather like a ghost,' an indelible 'absent

presence of another time in our time' (81). This happens for the first time when Baba and Freddy arrive at a house where they go hiding: Baba is welcomed by an apparition of a serious-looking armed boy soldier. The image flickers and vanishes as Freddy steps forward to occupy the same place in the frame, thus establishing a connection between Baba's past and their companionship as co-murderers. Later, when Baba is digging a grave for Darren Cork, who witnessed Bowers's hanging, he hallucinates about finding a bleeding body and is reminded of his older culpability as he tries to wash the blood off his hands. Feelings of guilt for Cork's murder and his soldier past merge in this scene, and when they discover Cork is alive, Baba tells Freddy: 'I felt his breath leave the body. I felt him die in my arms and then he came back. I think it's a sign' (Episode 3).

When Cork uncannily returns from the dead, Baba sees this as an exhortation to release him. Freddy protests this request, but Baba insists that 'this is not like the others. This was different': 'I have killed many innocent men in my life, I am not about to kill another' (Episode 3). Angry with Baba's determination, Freddy, after failing to kill Cork herself, leaves. Baba's agency in refusing to kill an innocent man marks a turning-point towards the future in his trauma story. The change is expressed in Episode 3 through two scenes, the first of which begins when Baba returns to the unfinished grave. He hears African singing and the sound of a spade shovelling sand and finds a boy digging in the grave. The boy lifts up his gaze to look at Baba in the darkness; a link between them is created by an extreme close-up of Baba and then the boy, after eye-contact, continues to dig. This visual interchange between his child and present selves in the same visual space shows how Baba's past actions cannot be evaluated from the moral position to which he presently aspires. Baba jumps into the grave and they continue to dig together to the rhythm of an African work song.

The following night, Baba has a dream. Unlike what is typical for flashbacks or apparitions, this dream sequence is not marked by visual cues, and it only becomes evident

that the scene is either hallucination or dreaming when Baba, chasing the escaping Cork, who falls into the grave originally intended for him, jumps down to find it empty. Baba then hears speech from above, turns towards the sound and sees both the young boy and Cork, dressed in fine clothes and looking down at him. Again, a connection between Baba and the two others is established through an extra close-up of their faces showing Baba's strong emotions. When the boy stretches out his hand and says something to Baba in his indigenous language, Baba wakes up in his bed covered with sweat to the crowing of a cock and goes to release Cork.

In these scenes, the fragmentation of time that essentially characterises trauma, besides intertwining past and present, also includes references to the future. The Freudian compulsion to repeat whereby traumatized individuals 'risk trapping themselves in cycles of uncomprehending repetition' in the present until the past traumatic experience is worked through has come to be 'a cultural shorthand' for the effects of trauma (Luckhurst 9). In trauma fiction, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* introduced 'the anachronic intrusion of the past into the present' through the spectral representation of trauma (193). Writing about trauma and ghosts in film, Natalie Boehler points out how apparitions from the past introduce 'questions about the future' because of their capacity to 'destabilize the otherwise clearly demarcated present and confuse our temporal orientation' (70). By establishing a visual interchange between the boy – who in the minds of viewers is associated with Baba as a child soldier – Cork and the present Baba, the scenes not only establish moments when the past exists simultaneously with the present; this confusion in temporal orientation that merges past and narrative now also points towards the future. According to Boehler, filmic representation as such contains an idea of futurity through the constant flow of images (72-3). Such a future notion of time becomes evident in *We Hunt Together* when Baba jumps into the grave and continues digging with the boy, and later, when the boy and Cork stand on the brink of the

grave offering to help Baba out of it, indicating prospective healing. On Freddy's return, Baba tells her about his child soldier past. This marks a change from passive guilt towards agency. Although this new phase is equally tainted with guilt, it also signals a new ethics and subjectivity.

Gibbs differentiates between perpetrators' and victims' traumatic experiences in terms of agency (225). Citing research by Marilyn Bowman and Rachel Yehuda, who 'note that a feeling of maintained agency is important as a resistor to trauma' as PTSD is usually associated with losing control to outside forces (Gibbs 225), he maintains that 'this is true for unequivocal victims', but 'quite the opposite is the case for perpetrators, who do everything possible to deny responsibility for events' (225, 226). Baba's character seems to align more closely with Gibbs' characterisation of a victim (maintaining agency) than a perpetrator (denying agency), and thus demonstrates that living with memories of war as either victim or perpetrator can be most difficult. When Freddy asks him whose fault it is if an adult leaves a child and a baby in the bathroom and the baby drowns – the child who was present or adult who left them alone – he responds by asking 'what if the parent returns to find the child holding the baby's head under the water with both hands, whose fault is it then?' (Episode 2). Baba's answer reflects Mark Sanders's argument, in his 'Culpability and Guilt: Child Soldiers in Fiction and Memoir,' that telling child soldiers they are not to blame for the crimes they have committed belies the emotional guilt they experience. According to Eleni Coundouriotis, real-life child combatants who went through rehabilitation were frequently resistant to the notion that they were not to blame, and were also often seen in their communities as perpetrators (192), so those who returned were often obsessed with 'rituals of purification' (193). In a similar vein, Baba has turned to religion, working as a churchwarden, in an effort to gain forgiveness and try to make sense of his trauma.

Baba's status as both perpetrator and victim complicates his trauma. As a former child soldier, Baba experiences conflicting impulses and damaging consequences as he has been traumatised, manipulated, and, to stay alive, forced to perform atrocious actions which further traumatised him. He, like other child soldier survivors must contend with recurrent and consequently 'cumulative effects of traumatic stress', such as 'exposure to combat, shelling and other life-threatening events, acts of abuse . . . violent death of a parent or friend, witnessing family members being tortured or injured, separation from family, . . . insufficient adult care' (Schauer and Elbert 314). When Freddy asks how he became a child soldier, Baba says his country has been at war his whole life, and in such an environment he ended up with 'the wrong crowd' (Episode 1). Living in a site of protracted military conflict is a well-known risk factor for becoming a child combatant (Schauer and Elbert 320). Baba also seemingly ends up with 'the wrong crowd' in the narrative present, represented by Freddy, who eventually proves important for his coming to terms with his past.

*We Hunt Together* shows how violence becomes normalised for child soldiers, that there is no respect for life in such a context, and that ethically responsible behaviour is not always possible for the traumatised subject. When Baba tells Freddy about the events that led him to become a child soldier, the series establishes a volatile and conflicting moral dialogue between Baba's victimhood and perpetrator status that gains expression through his trauma. The conflict between total powerlessness and guilt for the deplorable acts he was forced to commit in wartime underscores the suffering of perpetrator trauma. Baba recounts how rebel troops came to his village when he was twelve and gave his brother a gun and the choice to shoot either his father or mother; when he refused, they shot him and handed Baba the gun (Episode 5). This implies that to survive, Baba was forced to kill one of his parents, and shows how he was exposed to extreme brutality and used as a tool by rebel troops and commanders. By introducing the question of Baba's personal responsibility for his actions in

both past and present given this history of trauma, the series highlights a serious moral dilemma. Offering a powerful critique of the personal effects of using child soldiers in contemporary conflicts, it links personal consequences to global concerns. As Patrick Deer points out, the fact that ‘elements of crime fiction’ are ‘so strongly identified and identifiable, as they tenaciously disturb and disrupt the genres they come into contact with’ – in this case a war (perpetrator) trauma narrative – makes crime narratives useful in highlighting ‘the shifting global spaces, locations, codes and definitions of what is defined as criminality’ (344).

Apparitions and dreams communicate the path of Baba’s trauma from repression to dissolution. In the finale of the series, the moral question of the responsibility of the victim is emphasised. While crime narratives traditionally have a strong pressure towards closure, this requirement is only partly filled in *We Hunt Together* and leaves the viewer in mid-air regarding its justification. Many crime narratives with female victim-turn-perpetrators who avoid institutional punishment emphasise the difficulty of judging them in conventional ways thus pointing out that despite their culpability of crime, the moral responsibility is elsewhere (Mäntymäki, ‘Kuoleman’). This also applies to Baba. The series ultimately creates empathy for Baba by showing his humanity. The series ultimately creates empathy for Baba by showing his humanity. As Bond and Craps suggest, ‘the notion of perpetrator trauma . . . humanizes the perpetrator’ (120). Baba’s perpetrator-sufferer status makes him human for viewers by challenging stereotypes of child soldiers as either monsters or purely innocent victims of violence. Thus, *We Hunt Together* considers the possibility that those who commit horrible crimes can also/already be victims. Already in the first episode, DI Mendy, the philosophical centre of the drama and Hull’s mouthpiece,<sup>5</sup> tells DS Franks he does not become angry with criminals, because ‘they are human’ and ‘every decision we make are preceded by so many thousands of tiny factors that are completely beyond our control that

when we finally arrive at a moment of decision our actual conscious role in the process fade into mathematical insignificance' (Episode 1). Baba's philosophy is both similar and different: in the final episode where Baba and Freddy are on the run, occupying a house and taking the owner as hostage, Mendy attempts to persuade Baba to surrender by engaging him in an ethical discussion. Baba says that while 'God has a plan', humans are only 'powerless' 'vessels', who have 'no soul' without God, but claims that he holds himself 'to account' for his actions: without guilt there can be no forgiveness, but Mendy wonders how Baba can hold himself accountable as 'the notion of guilt makes no sense' in Baba's philosophy: "Are you hoping to achieve forgiveness by killing more people?" he asks (Episode 6). Although Mendy argues there are extenuating circumstances given Baba's background and that he can still become the paediatrician he tells Mendy he dreamt of becoming as a child, Baba carries inescapable feelings of guilt.

Just before the ending, Baba aims his rifle at the hostage, when an apparition, now recognised by the viewers as himself as a child, occupies his attention. The boy with an intense gaze has returned to warn him against killing innocent people, and while hesitating whether to pull the trigger Baba is shot by the hostage and wounded seriously. This apparition ends Baba's career in violence and the purpose of his partnership with Freddy. "You have saved me because you have brought me home" (Episode 6) are Baba's last words to her. Writing about diaspora communities, Agnew Vijay refers to the ways in which the past always defines the present and the individual's relationship with 'home'. In diaspora situations, 'home' appears as a conflicting construct made up of memories, alienation and desire to return (3, 19). For Baba, 'home' is an equally conflicting metaphor referring to his memories of the time before the violence began, his displacement and longing for atonement which he achieves by saving Freddy from being sentenced; before he is shot dead by the police, Baba confesses to every killing done during their partnership, even those committed

by Freddy. Through Baba, a refugee, the series references the millions of displaced people globally<sup>6</sup> who, like him, yearn for breaking loose from oppressive conditions and return to the situation preceding displacement, despite the impossibility of restoring the place and the pre-trauma innocence.

## Conclusions

*We Hunt Together* merges three genres: crime fiction, a (perpetrator) trauma narrative, and a war story, expressed through a visual narrative. While war narratives ‘can interrupt crime plots and subordinate criminal behaviour to militarised norms of duty, patriotism and discipline,’ and crime narratives frequently ‘disrupt war narratives by bringing into play individualised, morally corrupt agendas’ (Deer 345), the perpetrator trauma narrative of a former child soldier profoundly complicates both the crime and war narratives. Unlike in most crime fiction, the trauma narrative is not subordinated to the crime-solving plot; the crime narrative is interrupted by both the perpetrator trauma narrative and the child soldier narrative that problematise any easy distinctions between victim and perpetrator/criminal, raising ethical and political issues of guilt and responsibility, and expanding the treatment of ethical and political issues in crime fiction. Much like the African child soldier narratives in Uraizee’s study that portray children as fighters who are nonetheless affected by war, and consequently generate contradictory reader engagement (4), *We Hunt Together*, by employing traumatic hallucinations and flashbacks to Baba’s child soldiering days, depicts his ambiguous agency regarding present crimes, thus complicating viewer response. Like the narratives in Uraizee’s study, which depict ‘individual stories of abuse while also evoking larger histories’ (4), Baba’s story in *We Hunt Together* comments on processes of colonisation and the harm created by the growing global employment of child soldiers to which the international community has often turned a deaf ear and a blind eye. Hull claims



that *We Hunt Together* is ‘not political or exploring the places where he [Baba] was a child soldier’ (Fletcher), but by employing the figure of a traumatised African former child combatant, global links are forged between colonialism, practices of Western corporations, and corruption. Thus, Baba becomes a tool to reveal oppressive forces while simultaneously blurring the lines between victim and perpetrator. Viewers must ultimately decide what the degree of Baba’s shifting and unsteady agency is in the murders he performs in the present, as well as in the past.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The series was recommissioned for a second season in 2021.

<sup>2</sup> The Congo Wars is a reference to two complicated conflicts between 1996-97 and 1998-2003, caused by the hostilities between two ethnic groups, the Hutus and the Tutsies (Prendergast). The Rwandan genocide in 1994 was the spark for a refugee crisis in the Congo that created violent military groups that harassed the local population. Baba is probably from a local family and forced to participate in violence against his own ethnic group.

<sup>3</sup> Freddy’s real name is Lily Jenkins, but she assumed her best friend’s name after she killed her by pushing her into a river while at boarding school.

<sup>4</sup> The recruitment and use of child soldiers is a war crime and a serious violation of international law and of the children’s rights, as stated by Unicef’s the Paris Principles (from 2007) and Convention of the Rights of the Child (from 1990).

<sup>5</sup> Hull says, ‘I’ve always been interested in the idea of free will and how much control we have’ (Fletcher).

<sup>6</sup> The number of forcibly displaced people worldwide was record-high by June 2019; over 70 million (Ballengee 217).

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