

1 Introduction

AGAINST HUMANITY

She is sitting on a worn papyrus mat. The shade of a towering mango tree shields her from the hot sun. She finishes making up her daughter's hair, her hands expertly weaving the strands in and out, twisting them together. Reaching for a knife, she begins to peel the skin off soaked cassava, preparing a meal for her children and elderly mother. Her daughter moves to stand behind her and now braids her mother's hair into cornrows. They watch as the neighbors' goats scurry across their homestead, past the rusty iron-sheet door to their hut.

Gunya is a woman in her late twenties who works as a waitress at a roadside restaurant. She lives with her family on this quiet homestead at the edge of Gulu town in northern Uganda. Soldiers of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) abducted her when she was eleven years old and forcibly conscripted her into the rebel ranks. Gunya spent a little more than a decade with the rebels before deserting. While there, she gave birth to a son with Onen, an LRA soldier who is still fighting in the "bush" (*lum*).

I take a deep breath, preparing myself for what I imagine will be a difficult first conversation with a woman I expect to match the description of what scholars, media, and NGOs have called "sex slaves"—young girls abducted by the LRA to be wives to rebels. I await a grim narrative about

rape, stigma, and victimization at the hands of what has been widely characterized as a violent, brutal army of inhuman rebels with an irrational belief in the spirits possessing its leader, Joseph Kony. Indeed, as I come to join her, it crosses my mind that she seems to embody a form of agentless, feminine victimhood. Such women who have returned from the LRA are often spoken about, particularly by NGOs, as having become animals in the *lum* and needing “re-humanization” on their return to civil society.

As we sit and chat for the first time, I am quickly disabused of my preconceptions. Gunya identifies herself as a former LRA captain. Though abducted, she expresses her continued support for the LRA and their tactics, admitting that she sometimes thinks of going back to the *lum* when life becomes hard as a civilian at home. She tells me stories about using rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) to attack gunships and jet fighters of the Uganda Peoples’ Defence Forces (UPDF), the Ugandan national army. She defiantly, almost proudly, shows me what remains of old bullet wounds—scars faintly etched across both of her ankles. They are usually hidden when she goes barefoot with a hoe to till her soil, the caked mud concealing the bodily memories of her past from those around her. She dismisses claims that the LRA are finished as a rebel force, insisting that Kony is gaining momentum and will in the coming years return to Uganda and overthrow the government. She dreams of the end of Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni’s reign, which began by coup in 1986. A change in leadership, she hopes, will bring development and freedom to her people, peace of mind for her, and education for her children, whom she wants to see grow up as doctors or lawyers. My respect for her suffering as a victim is replaced with awe of her courageous agency and will to fight.

Over the course of a little more than a year, I became good friends with Gunya, sometimes just hanging around at her home, other times joining her for clan funerals. We often shared meals, and before we dug our millet bread (*kwon kal*) into bowls of black-eyed pea or cowpea leaves (*boo*) and beans (*muranga*), she always knelt before me, pouring water into a basin for me to wash my hands, as was customary for Acholi women to do for men. I joked with her that she, not I, should be the one attended to—as was the case when she was an LRA officer and had house girls prepare her meals and take care of her children. I insisted that she was the proverbial big man

between the two of us, but she laughed in disagreement. Nonetheless, I refused to take my first bite before she took hers.

I also frequented the restaurant in town where she worked. Her boss suggested to me that former rebels like Gunya were valued by employers for their strong work ethic, an ethic contrasted to that of their age mates who grew up during the war in refugee camps for internally displaced persons. According to the popularly circulated narrative, camp residents got “used to free things” and were prone to laziness, while rebels labored hard like brutes in the *lum*.

Gunya and I spoke regularly about Onen, who had remained with the LRA in the *lum*, and of the relationship they once had together, having courted each other when they met in the LRA. She knew that if he ever came back to Gulu, he would go live with Amito, another of his wives. Even so, she maintained contact with his family in rural Gulu District, taking their kids to see their paternal kin and the land that they will one day inherit by patriarchal right. Short on cash and without other support, she was also keen for his family to pay the fine due for unsanctioned sex (*luk*) for the children, who were born outside of formal marriage.

Gunya often impressed me with her military tactical knowledge and her fascination with weapons. She once mentioned that she enjoyed watching American war films, which played often in video halls in town, and asked me if I knew any. One night, I bought a bootleg copy of *Black Hawk Down*, a chronicle of the 1993 American military intervention in Somalia. Gunya and I sat down to watch it after the end of a workday. She gave me a running commentary on the battle scenes, critiquing the positioning of gunners on tanks and the imperfect techniques of rocket launchers aiming their RPGs at helicopters. “Mmm hmm,” she nodded approvingly, when an RPG was shot at a cluster of American troops in the film. They are stupid to crowd together like that, she asserted. She called the American soldiers “lazy” and said that the LRA would have no problem dealing with the one hundred US military “advisors” deployed to central and eastern Africa in 2011 by President Barack Obama to fight the LRA on the ground.

One day in September 2012 I came to see her, excited to share the latest copy of *Rupiny*, a weekly Luo-language newspaper. Its cover story

reported that the LRA had abducted fifty-five people in the Central African Republic (CAR). A picture of two LRA soldiers, said to be seventeen and twenty-four, caught Gunya's eye as she pored over the paper. They are not fighters, she said, but porters—people briefly abducted by rebels to help carry supplies and set up camps. She insisted that what they report in the paper is not what actually happens on the ground. She suspected the story was fake, but was nonetheless glad to hear that the LRA were still a strong force. Examining the content of the article itself, Gunya was struck by the description of a young child “rescued” by the UPDF. She did not see merit in his so-called rescue. Gunya worried about the kind of interrogation that this child would receive at the hands of the government soldiers, and lamented that he was taken away from his parents, who were likely LRA rebels in the *lum*.

“This child wasn’t ‘rescued,’ but abducted and torn from his parents,” she wryly remarked. Rather than envisioning the child as being a “captive” of the LRA, she wanted me to understand that to her, the LRA was his family, his life-world. Coming “home” to civilian life in Gulu would in fact mean a forcible separation from his family in the *lum*. While it was true that the LRA beat or killed those who tried to escape, there were also many who chose to remain with the LRA, and who were unwillingly captured even after having been themselves abducted into the LRA. The way in which “captivity” was imagined as a brutal violence from the outside did not always match the meaning it was given from within, particularly when contextualized within the structural violence of everyday life experienced by Acholi peasants and workers. Indeed, Gunya was one of many of my former rebel friends who had escaped or been captured but now lamented the conditions of life they experienced as they rejoined civilians in towns and villages across Acholiland. She and others wondered whether they would have been better off staying on the front lines in the *lum*.

As with all names that appear in this book, “Gunya” is a pseudonym. Gunya chose her pseudonym, which means “chimpanzee,” because it reminded her of code names that rebels used for one another. She asked me to use it because, as she put it, “The LRA were there in the *lum* as gorillas [*sic*]. . . . It was gorilla warfare [*sic*] there.”

This book is a collection of the lives of Gunya and other LRA rebels—lives that are too complex to be understood through the simple moral lens

of humanity. The rebels and their associated violence were often characterized as brutal and inhumane, but as I came to hear these stories, it became clear that these characterizations did not well describe the ways that rebels actually lived. The violence they had committed and the violence they suffered was not simply horrific, immoral, or “against humanity.” When humanist accounts of the LRA and its violence give it cruel names, speaking about “abduction” into and “captivity” within the LRA, they hide away the meaning and complexity of that violence and of the rebellion itself. The coming chapters tell a tale of the new forms of ethical life that arose in the course of the rebellion—forms of life beyond humanity. Life within the LRA offered all kinds of transformative experiences. Rebels forged new kinship relations. They reconstructed their relationships with God, as they witnessed miracles and reached new depths of spiritual consciousness. They reconfigured their understandings of politics as they resisted and fought against the Ugandan government. Rebels returning from the front lines of war often developed a more profound discontent with the everyday violence of peasant life in Acholiland. These experiences transcended the boundaries set by the notion of humanity, and by doing so, brought the very category into question.

HUMANITY AS A PROBLEM, NOT A SOLUTION

I had no interest in thinking or writing about “humanity” before I began long-term ethnographic research in northern Uganda in 2012 with former Lord’s Resistance Army rebels. Indeed, I came to Uganda expecting to explore questions about violence and ethics—particularly the moral justification and condemnation of LRA violence: abductions, mutilation and killing of civilians, and so forth. But I could not avoid the way in which discourses about humanity constantly pervaded everyday conversations and memories about the rebels, who were characterized as outside the human in so many ways. “Humanity” appeared not only in official discourses and accounts of the war and the LRA, but also in the daily lives of combatants themselves during and after the war.

Of course, “humanity” has always been a troubling issue for Africa. As Achille Mbembe puts it: “Africa is never seen as possessing things and

attributes properly part of ‘human nature.’ . . . Discourse on Africa is almost always deployed in the framework . . . of a meta-text about the *animal*—to be exact, about the *beast*.” As the absolute other to the West, he argues, Africa becomes a way for the West to define itself as different, to create a self-image that poses a problem to the “idea of a common human nature, a humanity shared with others” (2001, 1, 2).

The LRA were appropriated to fill this savage slot, against which the very definition of the human was produced and reproduced. They became irrational, brutal, Black animals committing inhuman violence. This depiction gained an unprecedented level of attention when the NGO Invisible Children launched a campaign called “Kony 2012,” which sought to create enough pressure to arrest LRA commander Joseph Kony by the end of 2012. Invisible Children’s campaign was brought to international attention through a viral video that has been viewed more than 101 million times on YouTube and set a record for the most ever single-day views of a YouTube video at more than thirty million. The video juxtaposes an image of Kony alongside Osama bin Laden and Adolf Hitler as an embodiment of pure evil. As a scholar-activist, I was compelled to intervene, and together with Ayesha Nibbe, I organized a group of scholars working in and around northern Uganda to piece together “Making Sense of Kony,” a series of more nuanced academic accounts of Kony and the LRA. This project was partly motivated by a desire to complicate the black-and-white picture created of Kony, to disrupt the simplistic narrative of good and evil that had emerged through an activist campaign led by mainly white young Americans.

But scholars were not the only ones challenging this narrative. Rebels had also resisted their expulsion from humanity over the course of the war. For example, in a famous 2006 interview, Kony declared to a journalist who visited him in the *lum*, “I am a human being like you” (Schomerus 2010, 115). He was hitting back at discourses constructed by the West and by Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni that had expelled him from “humanity” as a savage, barbaric animal and terrorist.¹

As I discovered in the course of my ethnographic research, this attempt to reclaim “humanity” was surprisingly common. A rebel friend of mine shared the picture in figure 1 with me and asked me to include it in this work. She explained that it was a photo of an LRA family in Sudan, resting



Figure 1. A family resting at an LRA base in Nisito, Sudan, in a temporary grass hut (*bolo*), having just arrived from Juba. The husband sits atop a box of AK-47 bullets. The woman is smiling at her husband and child. Photographer unknown.

in the rebels' Nisito base in a temporary shelter (*bolo*) after arriving from Juba. The father, holding his daughter, sits on a box of AK-47 bullets. His wife, sitting next to him on the ground, gazes longingly into their daughter's eyes. My friend reflected on the photo: "Some said the LRA were not human beings. Some people thought they were animals or some other thing. This [image] will help show that they were also human beings."

The question of the humanity of LRA rebels was an uncomfortable one that surfaced over and over again in my time in Uganda. "Do they see them as the rebels or do they see them as human beings?" a rehabilitation officer asked about her fellow staff who had been assigned to help defecting rebels "reintegrate" into civilian society. "They are the same human beings like us," she insistently answered. A hotel manager in Gulu once told me of former rebels, "They will all need some form of counseling," before quickly asserting that she was not discriminating against rebels, but rather

approaching them with the attitude that “this person is a human being.” My rebel friends who lived for long periods of time in the *lum* asserted that they did not live with their fellow rebels in harshness or ferocity (*gero*), but rather “like human beings” (*calo dano adana*). A former rebel speaking on the radio airwaves, trying to convince current rebels to defect, urged her former comrades: “Return home so that you can become a human being” (*Dwogo cen paco wek odoko dano*). Friends of mine resisted this characterization. “[Civilians] think you eat human meat. They imagine you have fur, your claws are long, and you don’t have toes anymore . . . but people in the *lum* are really human beings,” one insisted.

This book is not about crimes *against* humanity. It is not about the indictments of Joseph Kony and Dominic Ongwen—senior commanders of the LRA—by the International Criminal Court (ICC) on charges of crimes against humanity. It is not a story of enslavement, rape, inhumane acts, or murder. It is not a story of the suffering, survival, or resilience of former child soldiers abducted and forced to kill in the name of God. It is not a story about how violent and animal-like former rebels are, or how they should be humanized, reformed, and reintegrated into a peaceful civil society. Nor is it an attempt to rationalize or explain a “bizarre,” “irrational” rebellion through a scholarly uncovering of its history, politics, and spirituality.

Rather, this book is about coming to terms with the problem of “humanity.” The need to speak out and about the humanity of LRA rebels suggested that their standing in humanity was indeed under threat. A chorus of voices—consisting of both scholars and rebels—sought to defend or reassert the humanity of the LRA. In doing so, they echoed the sentiments of anticolonial voices speaking back to the ways in which Europeans had expelled Africans from humanity. Jean-Paul Sartre wrote of this resistance in his preface to Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961):

The black and yellow voices still talked of our humanism, but it was to blame us for our inhumanity. . . . “You are making monsters out of us; your humanism wants us to be universal but your racist practices are differentiating us.” (xlili–xliv)

Rather than joining these voices in attempting to reclaim the LRA’s humanity, I instead aim to critically examine the very category of human-

ity itself. In the ethnographic material that follows, I show how claims to humanity are often too limiting, simplistic, and moralizing to capture the complexity of the social lives of former rebels. On this basis, I consider the possibility of being “against humanity,” of recognizing it as a problem rather than a solution in ongoing struggles toward emancipation.

AGAINST HUMANITY

What does it mean to be “against humanity”? It is a question often posed skeptically to me. How can a reasonable person claim to be “against humanity,” particularly in the aftermath of the Holocaust and the rise in the white, Euro-American consciousness of the category of the “crime against humanity” as an unassailable evil? After all, “humanity” has today been elevated to the sense of the highest moral good. Our global society prosecutes people it sees as committing crimes against humanity—including LRA commander Dominic Ongwen, who at the time of this writing sits in jail in The Hague, on trial by the ICC. Some of our most respected historical and peaceful world leaders, from Martin Luther King Jr. to Mahatma Gandhi, discuss ways to uplift humanity or to build faith in it.

To be against “humanity” is undoubtedly an unsettling proposition. In an attempt to deconstruct humanity, I should make very clear that being “against humanity” does not imply making a moral argument for genocide, ethnic cleansing, mass violence, rape, or similar so-called “crimes against humanity,” directly or indirectly. It does not suggest camaraderie with mass killers. It does not entail a movement toward xenophobia and ethno-nationalism such as that which is currently gaining traction across America and Europe. Rather, being “against humanity” is a way to bring into question the kinds of work humanity is called upon to perform.

“Humanity” or the “human” has become subject to widespread scholarly critique and attention in recent years in different ways within a variety of disciplines, including Black studies, postcolonial/decolonizing studies, anthropology, and science and technology studies. A large literature in anthropology concerned with humanitarianism and human rights has extensively critiqued humanitarian action and reason in its various forms and practices. Humanitarian and human rights interventions have been

interrogated for their logical aporias (Fassin 2012); eliding the political (Ferguson 1994); being complicit with military interventions (Fassin and Pandolfi 2010); commodifying and exploiting the suffering of others (James 2010); hampering the growth of true democracy (Englund 2006); and satisfying the needs of those who perform humanitarian work (Malkki 2015), among other analyses.

Rarely, however, do these critiques extend to humanitarianism's presumed philosophical root—humanity itself. By contrast, “humanity” is often an important organizing concept that ethnographers use to help readers understand forms of life that arise in the midst of violence and suffering. Medical anthropologists in particular tend toward the concept in their attempts to describe or narrate the “good” in generally grim tales of suffering, disease, illness, and pain, in ways that resort to the concept's affective and moral power.² This is not a new practice or usage as such, but one that has often been made absentmindedly through the lens of liberalism, as though humanity was a naturally occurring and universal category synonymous with the moral good. It is only in more recent anthropological work that humanity has begun to be thought of as a problem in itself (see for example Feldman and Ticktin 2010), given its dangerous deployments as a category with multiple meanings, a long history of exclusions, and a range of governmental effects. Though critical of the concept of humanity, Ilana Feldman and Miriam Ticktin contend that “almost everyone agrees that humanity should be considered sacred,” and suggest that “we may not be able to do without [humanity] . . . because there does not seem to be any way to make it go away” (2010, 1, 25). In response to their claims, and based on what I learned from former rebels, I believe that there may be value in desecrating the category of humanity, and indeed in doing away with it completely. In this sense, my work attempts to fill in a gap between the pitfalls of existing attempts to heal the world based on the concept of humanity and a new horizon of alternative forms of progressive social action that eschew humanity.

In science and technology studies (STS), and specifically within what has been referred to as the ontological turn, the “human” is identified as a concept limiting anthropology from seeing and attending to alternative nonhuman worlds, worlds inhabited by creatures, spirits, cyborgs, or animals. In this turn, drawing from the work of Bruno Latour and including voices like Donna Haraway (2008), Eduardo Kohn (2013), and Eduardo Viveiros de

Castro (1998), there is concern for revealing the human as a biological concept or cosmological symbol that excludes broader perspectives of seeing the world, other ways of being. For Kohn, who writes toward an anthropology “beyond the human,” “the goal here is neither to do away with the human nor to reinscribe it but to open it” (2013, 6). My approach blends both an ontological and a critical deconstructionist approach. Through the ethnography, I try to present alternative realities that I became familiar with in my time with my LRA friends that put pressure on the established form of thinking known as humanity.³ Yet I also point to ways in which “humanity” creates really existing political and ethical problems in the world as an ideological tool constructed within particular material, sociopolitical, and economic conditions. In this sense, I identify my work as part of a militant anthropology both “against” and “beyond” the human.

My critique joins with “darker” voices in postcolonial/decolonizing and Black studies, which are, unsurprisingly, often neglected in scholarly discussions of humanity. For scholars like Alexander Weheliye, following the work of Sylvia Wynter, most current perspectives on post-humanism, particularly in animal studies, often exclude discussions of race and rarely consider “cultural and political formations outside the world of Man that might offer alternative versions of humanity” (2014, 8–10).⁴ These perspectives usually take the human as universal and synonymous with Western Man, and with it, ignore the racist and colonial legacies that built this liberal concept. Sylvia Wynter (2000) refers to this Western bourgeois idea of the human as merely a specific ethno-class genre of being human, one that takes the name of the good and “over-represents” itself as if it were the human itself. This move falls within what Lisa Lowe calls “the violence of liberal universality” that “continues to be reproduced in liberal humanist institutions, discourses, and practices today” (2015, 7, 41). Following Saidiya Hartman, I am interested in the “forms of violence and domination enabled by the recognition of humanity,” the ways that certain “encroachments of power” take place through humanity (1997, 6).⁵ This book joins these and other critiques of white liberal humanity.⁶ Yet while they seek to salvage humanity, I remain skeptical of the possibilities of finding genres of the human beyond the world of Man, of reinventing the human in a way that decentralizes Man, in ways that do not create their own forms of violence.

Being “against humanity” is a heuristic to think about the problems posed by the uses of humanity, a social construct much like “race” that must be critically interrogated rather than taken as a natural category.⁷ It is an anchoring principle around which to rethink humanity and the missions that are organized around it, ranging from the International Criminal Court to human rights campaigns. It is part of an anthropological tradition that deconstructs categories like “rationality” and “development,” molded by the lens of white Enlightenment social science.⁸ And it is an attempt to break out of a prison that, like “human rights,” chains us to specific notions of the good while disposing of alternative visions of freedom and justice—visions that often offer a clearer path to the common good.⁹

Drawing from James Ferguson (1994), I do not only seek to point out that humanity is a poor concept in empirically describing the richness and diversity of life, destroying with its moral prescriptiveness the meaning and truth that certain practices and beliefs bring to rebels (as “development” did to historical and political realities on the ground in Lesotho). I am also interested in pointing to the real effects that humanity has as a discourse and practice in this world—namely, expanding a certain notion of the good through which particular versions of time, violence, logic, being, and so forth become hegemonic and thereby unquestionable.

As I show in the coming chapters, humanity unsuccessfully attempts to monopolize control over compassion, justice, and the moral good. Indeed, under some of the most innocent and well-meaning uses of humanity lie moralizing agendas that obfuscate the experiences and social relations of life on the ground. A concept useful for simplification, binarization, and distillation, humanity loses its value when it denies meaning and value to experiences, thoughts, or actions that disrupt the smooth way in which it divides good from evil, purifying the complexity of experience through the lens of what are ultimately value judgments.

Humanity is not a neutral or non-ideological term. In the ways it is actually used, it divides the spectrum of violence into good and bad forms. When LRA rebels kill in a certain way, they are charged with crimes against humanity; when American drones kill in a different way, they are hailed as life-saving technologies.¹⁰ Humanity divides forms of being into human and nonhuman, assigning proper spaces for each kind of being. Rather than embracing the continuity of animals and humans and their shared habitats,

humanity proclaims one group sacred and excludes all others in both name and place. Because the LRA fought in the *lum* where animals and spirits roamed, they were disparaged as animals themselves, eating food meant for monkeys, not humans. Humanity also divides what is reasonable from what is unreasonable. When LRA rebels kill in ways not immediately understandable to outsiders, they are seen as irrational and therefore inhuman. Humanity is a modern discourse and a modern philosophical feeling, not the inevitable end of human action against perceived injustice. For these reasons, it made little sense for rebels to think of or speak about their own killings in terms of humanity. These and other binarizations of thought and experience simply do not do justice to the lived realities of the LRA rebels that are told in this book. Here, being “against humanity” means beginning to think about the richness and diversity of human life that exists outside certain limited notions of the good—life beyond humanity.

The lives and experiences of the LRA rebels that are narrated in the chapters to come dislodge master narratives about humanity in ways that cut across these binaries. The construction of “humanity” as a moral sentiment in line with the “humane” is revealed to be a peculiarly modern concept built against forms of “horrific” violence, including mutilation and forced marriage. Humanity as a form of being distinguished from animality is questioned through LRA experiences in the *lum*. The Western concept of rationality as a key construct of the human, particularly compared to the (African) “savage mind,” is critiqued through LRA magic and science. The ethnographic evidence breaks down humanity in these and other iterations. All the while, humanity unsuccessfully attempts to govern or discipline the beliefs and experiences of rebels in different ways—including processes of re-humanization aimed at reintegrating what are seen as violent animals into a peaceful civil society of humans.

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC CONTEXT: UGANDA, ACHOLI, AND THE LORD’S RESISTANCE ARMY

Uganda is a landlocked country in east Africa bordered by South Sudan to the north, Kenya to the east, Tanzania and Rwanda to the south, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo to the west. It was colonized by the

British in 1894 and became independent in 1962. It is home to sixty-five legally recognized ethnic groups, including the Acholi, who are considered a Luo Nilotic group.¹¹

Acholiland extends from north-central Uganda up into South Sudan. In Uganda, Acholiland is to some degree divided into East Acholi (consisting of the present-day districts of Kitgum, Pader, Lamwo, and Agago) and West Acholi (consisting of the present-day districts of Gulu, Nwoya, and Amuru). Topographically, Acholiland consists mostly of grassy plains and hills. The Acholi are ethnically bordered by the Karamojong to the east, the Langi and Iteso to the south, and the Madi, Lugbara, and other West Nile groups to the west. The majority of Acholi are agriculturalists working customary land—rural farmers whose daily work life focuses around caring for their fields. Among the staple crops grown are millet, sesame, potatoes, beans, groundnuts, and peas. In urban areas like Gulu town, trades of all kinds thrive. Many people in Gulu town hustle for a living, making ends meet in different ways. Popular working-class professions include motorcycle taxis (*boda boda*), petty hawking, and manual labor of all kinds. A petty bourgeois class includes civil servants and teachers, as well as traders who sell various goods, ranging from housewares to motorcycle parts. A more elite bourgeois class consists of organizational directors, government officials, and businesspeople who often travel to Kampala and other global metropolises, including London (where a sizable Acholi expatriate community lives). As a result of colonial-era evangelization by the British Church Missionary Society (CMS) and the Italian Verona Fathers (Comboni Missionaries), Protestantism and Catholicism are the most popular religions, though a small number of Acholi identify as Muslim. “Traditional” Acholi spiritual-religious beliefs (*tic Acoli*) are commonly held but often publicly hidden or disavowed.

On the whole, the Acholi have lived a fairly marginal existence at various points within the histories of pre- and postcolonial Uganda. They were not included as part of the territory of the original Uganda Protectorate in 1894 (Girling 1960, 150). The seat of industry and government was established in the south, and the British were initially uninterested in incorporating the Acholi—whose territory they found unimportant; whose work ethic they questioned (Girling 1960, 174–76); and whose political organization they found difficult to colonize, since they were not

already neatly amalgamated into a chiefdom as the Baganda were in the south. Historically, Acholi men were recruited for military service into the colonial King's African Rifles (Finnström 2008, 61). They also became labor migrants working on plantations, industries, and other businesses and organizations in the south (Girling 1960, 178–80; Mamdani 1976, 52). Since 1986, under the presidency of Yoweri Museveni, the Acholi have felt particularly disenchanting and marginalized. This is partly explained by the feeling that Museveni has unevenly developed the country in ways that have excluded the Acholi. But more often the resentment stems from Museveni's response to and treatment of the Acholi throughout the course of the rebellion waged against his government by the Lord's Resistance Army.¹²

The Rise of the Lord's Resistance Army

The Lord's Resistance Army was formed in the late 1980s by Joseph Kony. Kony was born in the early 1960s in Odek, a sub-county in Gulu District in West Acholi. Kony's LRA rose to prominence in the aftermath of the defeat of other Holy Spirit movements in Acholiland, most notably that of Alice Lakwena, which resisted Yoweri Museveni and his National Resistance Movement/Army's (NRM/A) 1986 defeat of Tito Okello by coup (Behrend 1999, 23–26). Following their coup, the NRA committed mass violence in Acholiland, carrying out extrajudicial killings, raping men and women, and looting cattle in what has been seen as a form of retaliation for the Ugandan army's counterinsurgency campaign against the NRA in the Luweero Triangle in central Uganda. It was held that the Acholi soldiers in the army—many of whom fled back north following the coup—were responsible for the violence carried out in Luweero (see Finnström 2008, 67–75). Museveni, who hails from southwestern Uganda, has remained in power as president ever since his 1986 coup, and enjoys little support among the Acholi people.

How and why did the LRA arise? From a historical perspective, the LRA war has been interpreted as the latest iteration in a series of military struggles among different ethnic and regional groups for control of the national postcolony.¹³ This struggle was often embodied through the ethnicization of the national army. Independent Uganda's first leader, Milton Obote, was

seen to have filled his army ranks with members of his own ethnic group, the Langi, when he took power in 1962. When Idi Amin ousted Obote from power in 1971, Amin violently purged Langi and Acholi from the national army, replacing them with men from his own West Nile. By the time Yoweri Museveni began his “bush war” in 1979 to overthrow Obote (then in his second term), he filled his own rebel ranks with fellow Banyankole from southwestern Uganda. Museveni preached loudly against ethnic divides in national politics. However, in practice, his NRM vilified northerners, Nilotes, and Acholi—especially in retaliating against the Ugandan army, Obote’s Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA). Museveni’s highest-ranking military officers in today’s UPDF, many Acholi point out, are his own people; Acholi UPDF soldiers feel discriminated against and passed over for promotions to the highest levels of military leadership. Widespread distrust of Museveni and the NRM remains within the LRA and also among Acholi, with suspicion that Museveni is trying to steal Acholi land and destroy the Acholi people. Within this narrative, the LRA appears as the latest iteration of historical attempts at enacting violent regime changes in the ethnicized postcolony—a place where fair, democratic elections bringing about uniform sociopolitical change for all Ugandan ethnic groups are an exception rather than the rule.

More specifically, as other scholars have suggested, the LRA arose to meet the challenges of specific political and moral problems facing the Acholi people in the postcolony. Adam Branch argues that two particular political crises facing the Acholi spawned the spiritual rebellions in Acholiland after Museveni’s 1986 coup. The rebellions, he suggests, responded to these two crises—the first, an “*internal* crisis stemming from the breakdown of authority within Acholi society”; and the second, “a *national* crisis brought about by the destruction of the political links that had tied the Acholi in the district to the national state” (2010, 25). The rebellions, Branch explains, attempted to solve these crises by instilling an Acholi political identity against the NRM/A—creating an internal Acholi order that sought to violently resolve the national crisis through military struggle. The rebellions have so far failed to achieve this order, leaving a rural Acholi peasantry—who lack a legitimate, mediating Acholi political authority—unrepresented at the national level.

This political understanding of the roots of the LRA should be supplemented by a more theological or moral understanding. As Heike Behrend describes, the Holy Spirit movements arose in the conflict between Acholi elders and returning soldiers retreating from Luweero in the immediate aftermath of the coup. Behrend argues that the returning soldiers had come back impure, haunted as they were by the spirits (*cen*) of those they had killed. They refused to undergo ritual purifications prescribed by Acholi elders, increasing internal discord by bringing impurity back to Acholi, and thereby provoking catastrophes such as AIDS, war, and drought (1999, 2). This violation of moral order catalyzed continual violence and suffering, and—Behrend argues—spawned the creation of the Holy Spirit movements to fight evil and restore purity to Acholi society. In this narrative, God had sent spirits to the sinful Acholi to save them from the evil that had infected them. In its initial phase, Joseph Kony—as a spirit medium—declared that he had been sent by God to “liberate humanity from disease and suffering,” in part through fighting against all the evil in the world, including not only the NRA but also witches, spirit priests (*ajwagi*), and other authorities perceived as immoral (Behrend 1999, 179). According to this framework, Kony is a messenger of God, and the LRA are carrying out orders that, though often violent, are nonetheless divine.

A Brief History of Joseph Kony and the LRA

As long as Yoweri Museveni has remained in power, Joseph Kony has remained a rebel, fighting up to the time of this writing (currently about thirty years). As Behrend (1999) details, Kony began operating around his home of Odek in present-day southeast Gulu District. Raised a Catholic, he was said to have come from a family of spirit priests (*ajwagi*). At some point in the late 1980s, Kony became possessed by, or filled with, several spirits—Juma Oris, Silli Silindi (a female spirit), Jim Brickley, and Ing Chu, among others. A medium of these spirits, Kony initially focused on healing and preaching before being instructed to gradually build a rebel army consisting of brigades like Condum, Stockry, and Gilver. The LRA grew as a predominantly but not exclusively Acholi army.

My friend Labwor, a former rebel about whom we will hear more in the coming chapters, wanted me to set some misconceptions about Joseph Kony straight: “Kony is a human being, a person, who talks like we are talking now. He works not for himself, but follows the [spirits’] rules like we do. . . . When commanders die for failing to follow the instructions, it’s the spirit that kills them. It’s not Kony, because Kony doesn’t fight in a worldly manner.” Like many spiritual rebellions before it, the LRA was guided in its tactics, actions, and beliefs by the instructions of the spirits that spoke through Kony. New fighters, who were almost always forcibly conscripted rather than being recruited or self-volunteered, were anointed and purified before going to battle. Holy Spirit precautions or rules issued by the spirits governed the behavior of rebels. The spirits issued prophecies, directed fasts, revealed medicinal treatments, and otherwise helped and protected the rebels, who risked injury or death by breaking their rules and losing the spirits’ protection. Certain rebels known as controllers and technicians mediated the spiritual aspects of the war, often from a sacred space known as a yard.

Taking to the “bush” (*lum*), the LRA carried on a war that has lasted more than thirty years.¹⁴ In the early 1990s, Museveni launched military operations like Operation North against the rebels and began to organize extra-military community defense groups like the Arrow Brigades. The rebels became largely alienated from civilian peasants, whom they began to persecute and punish by mutilation and killing when and as they collaborated with or informed the government of their whereabouts, movements, weapon stores, and other strategic information. Peace talks in 1994 failed, and by the mid-1990s the LRA insurgency had become part of a proxy war between Uganda and Sudan. The Sudanese government, led by President Omar al-Bashir, supported the LRA with supplies and safe haven in response to Museveni’s support for the Sudanese People’s Liberation Army (SPLA). Continuing efforts to negotiate peace failed.

By the late 1990s, the Ugandan government began forcing civilians into internment camps or concentration camps—what they called “protected villages,” even though they were hardly protected except by poorly armed and community-organized Local Defense Units (LDUs)—for “internally displaced persons,” a poignantly apolitical term (see Branch 2011, 99–100). Camps were ostensibly meant to provide civilians with “safety” from rebel

attacks, but were more widely understood as a strategic move to cut off rebels from resources.¹⁵ Humanitarian organizations like World Food Programme (WFP) became complicit in this form of state structural violence. Such was the violence of this displacement that it was labeled by Ugandan politician Olara Otunnu (2005) as an attempt at genocide. Mortality levels in camps reached one thousand per week,¹⁶ and people were largely denied access to their fields and homesteads, ruining livelihoods for years to come. Trawling through numbers documenting causes of death during the war, it struck me that while almost all accounts of the war were concerned with the spectacular violence of the LRA rebels—abduction of children, mutilation of body parts, “sex slavery,” and so forth—the structural violence of the primary humanitarian-government apparatus, the so-called internally displaced persons camps, had inflicted deaths that, the numbers showed, far exceeded those caused by rebel violence.¹⁷ In the words of a respected historian of Acholi, Ronald Atkinson, “The structural violence of camp life produced a far greater number of deaths than those caused by the LRA, just more quietly and unobtrusively” (2010a, 305). As important voices¹⁸ critiqued government and humanitarian actors alike for participating in a form of what Chris Dolan (2009) termed “social torture,” I wondered how and why the violence of the LRA had garnered more attention than that of the camps. In total about a million people lived in the internment camps, including most of the Acholi people (Branch 2011, 92). Many suspected the government of trying to grab Acholi land by displacing the people off of it (see Finnström 2008, 178–80). Indeed, during my own fieldwork, in a time when camps had closed, conflict over land had become an extremely important and sensitive issue.¹⁹

In 2000, the Amnesty Act was introduced as a way of encouraging defection by introducing blanket amnesty for all rebels fighting the Government of Uganda (GoU), including LRA rebels. By 2001, and after the attacks of September 11, the LRA found itself on the US Patriot Act’s “Terrorist Exclusion List,” blacklisted together with other “terrorist” groups like al-Qa’ida, Hamas, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), and the Shining Path (Sendero Luminoso).²⁰ In 2002 the Ugandan government negotiated with the Sudanese government to carry out Operation Iron Fist, destroying LRA bases in Sudan and forcing the LRA south and east

into parts of Lango and Teso. In 2003, President Museveni referred the rebellion to the ICC, which in 2005 issued arrest warrants for LRA commanders Joseph Kony, Vincent Otti, Dominic Ongwen, Okot Odhiambo, and Raska Lukwiya on charges of crimes against humanity and war crimes.²¹ Around 2005, the LRA began moving from southern Sudan into the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), where they established bases at Garamba National Park (see Atkinson 2010b, 207). The last major LRA military operations in Uganda took place in 2004 (Allen and Vlassenroot 2010, 15).

Further peace negotiations took place in Juba from 2006 to 2008, but failed, and in December 2008 the Ugandan army, the UPDF, began Operation Lightning Thunder, bombing LRA camps in Garamba. From 2009 to 2015, the LRA split into several groups communicating primarily in person via messengers, across the Central African Republic (CAR), Sudan, South Sudan, and the DRC. In large part due to pressure exerted by various lobbying nongovernmental organizations, including Invisible Children, the Enough Project, and The Resolve, US President Barack Obama in 2010 signed the Lord's Resistance Army Disarmament and Northern Uganda Recovery Act, which provided military, financial, and logistical support for anti-LRA operations, including about one hundred troops sent to act as "advisors" in 2011.²² NGO field intelligence analysts with privileged access to military and other informants estimate that the LRA in the early 2010s consisted of about 250 core fighters, having grown weaker over the previous six to seven years.²³ Reports on Kony's whereabouts suggested that he and his particular group of LRA fighters were periodically sheltered by Sudanese Armed Forces in the contested Kafia Kingi territory enclosed by South Sudan, Sudan, and the CAR, as recently as early 2013.²⁴

As my former LRA rebel friends believe and convinced me, it is unlikely that the LRA will be eliminated anytime soon, whether or not the spirits are still speaking to or through Kony. Invisible Children's "Kony 2012" campaign failed in its goal to have Kony arrested. Shortly after the launch of "Kony 2012," its director, Jason Russell, was detained in San Diego for allegedly masturbating while naked on a public street and vandalizing cars before being hospitalized and diagnosed with "brief reactive psychosis." One rebel friend, together with whom I watched the "Kony 2012" viral video with Acholi subtitles, was convinced that Kony's spirits had

something to do with Russell's breakdown. Most were confident that the LRA would outlast the US "advisors" and indeed all other forces conspiring against the LRA. Their predictions came at least partly true as, on December 15, 2014, Invisible Children announced that it would be shutting down in 2015, an announcement that came less than two years after its unsuccessful campaign to arrest Kony. "I know he might continue to fight for thirty years, even one hundred years maybe," one ex-rebel friend told me when I last saw him in July 2013.

I once asked Labwor how he wanted the LRA to be remembered in one hundred years, after we all have died. He instructed me to share this history:

Write that when the LRA started as rebels [*adwii*], it was because of the disturbances that Museveni brought to people. Because government soldiers were defecating in cattle's mouths and in flour, sodomizing men, sleeping with women [rape], and were also using smoke to suffocate people in their huts. Because of this, the LRA went to the *lum* to fight. Kony was just a student at that time, and seeing all these bad things, he started fighting. He became a rebel leader of the LRA because he wanted to bring change and good leadership to Uganda. He was dedicated such that even if he were to be eaten up by guns [killed in action], he wouldn't mind it, as long as good leadership were to come. Fighting took many years—more than twenty now—and it's still going on. At some point, the government of Uganda solicited support from other countries to have a joint operation against Kony. But they failed to defeat Kony. This is something important that people should know. Even the ones born in the future will read it and know it.

The Inhumanity of the Lord's Resistance Army

Globally, within Uganda, and to a large extent within Acholiland, the LRA became known as an inhumane force operating against or outside the human. Upon signing into American law an anti-LRA bill in 2010, then-President Barack Obama reproduced a widely held global humanitarian and scholarly discourse about the LRA:

The Lord's Resistance Army preys on civilians—killing, raping, and mutilating the people of central Africa; stealing and brutalizing their children; and displacing hundreds of thousands of people. Its leadership, indicted by the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity, has no agenda

and no purpose other than its own survival. It fills its ranks of fighters with the young boys and girls it abducts. By any measure, its actions are an affront to human dignity. (Obama 2010)

In this narrative, the LRA committed inhuman(e) violence, killing and mutilating government collaborators and disobedient rebels, including with “primitive” weapons such as logs and axes, beating and hacking them to death. They operated in the *lum*, a dangerous space of nearly impenetrable vegetation filled with deadly animals and spirits. They fought “without a clearly articulated political agenda—or at least a very strange one,” following the seemingly whimsical commands of spirits (Allen and Vlassenroot 2010, 11). When rebels defected or were captured (“rescued”) by the UPDF, they needed to be “reintegrated” into a peaceful civil society, transformed from brutal killers into useful, productive citizens. Among the obstacles they were said to face in this “reintegration” included the problems of having been “sex slaves,” having been victims of “rape,” and/or returning with “unwanted” children from “forced marriages” in the *lum*. They were seen sometimes as perpetrators deserving of scorn and punishment; sometimes as victims deserving of charity and sympathy; and sometimes as both.

This was not merely a discourse circulating among international heads of state, humanitarian NGOs, or moralizing liberal scholars. It was also one commonly heard within Uganda, particularly outside of Acholiland. President Museveni and his National Resistance Movement (NRM) government often played up this image of the LRA as barbaric animals as part of what Sverker Finnström refers to as the “official discourse” of the war (2008, 100). Museveni has, over the years, called the LRA “terrorists” and “hyenas,” using rhetoric that allowed him to collect foreign aid to fight the LRA and to enjoy relative impunity for his own crimes and those of his army and government.²⁵ This discourse was not used only by the Ugandan government. Acholi working and living in the capital Kampala routinely complained of being stigmatized and abused with the epithet “Kony” by Ugandans of other ethnicities, especially the Baganda. National papers—based in the south—often depict and speak of Kony as a primitive and violent animal living in the “bush.”

Perhaps more surprisingly, Kony and the LRA had in many ways been expelled from humanity even by their Acholi kinsmen. Absorbing colonial

discourses about humanity and anxious about prospects for modernity and development, many Acholi—including former rebels themselves—contested the humanity of the LRA through different avenues, including in imaginaries about the *lum* in which the LRA lived and in comparisons between LRA and state violence.

In both “local” and “global” imaginaries and discourses, the LRA has become the proverbial “heart of darkness,” a violent specter against which certain notions of humanity and the good are constructed. Operating in the wild “bush,” carrying out “brutal” killings, abducting and forcefully conscripting children—all without a clearly discernible “reason”—the LRA appear to most as inhuman monsters carrying out horrific and irrational violence. But if these notions contradict actually existing rebel cosmologies and experiences, what does one do with “humanity” in the shadows of their “inhuman” lives, experiences, and ideas?

This question has consistently posed a problem for scholars of and within northern Uganda. In struggling to deal with it, they have revitalized discussions of humanity and personhood. Many adhere to narratives in which the LRA have become inhuman or commit inhuman acts. Heike Behrend writes that the LRA “accelerated the process of dehumanization and despair they claimed to be protesting against” (1999, 189). Tim Allen (2006) has been outspoken in his support for the ICC and its indictments of LRA leaders on charges of “crimes against humanity.” Indeed, he and Koen Vlassenroot have written about the possible killing of Kony by Ugandan forces as a hypothetical “lucky break,” and have described the LRA as committing “horrific violence” and possessing a “weird spirituality” (2010, 12, 20).

Others are more critical when it comes to the (in)humanity of the LRA. Chris Dolan condemns the dehumanization of the LRA within a context of historical racism and ethnocentrism against the Acholi (2009, 202). Adam Branch attempts to explain how and why Westerners come to identify the suffering of Africans as the suffering of humanity, and then come to act based on the ethical demand of “humanity” (2011, 4–7). Sverker Finnström (2008, 225) refers to J.P. Odoch Pido’s (2000) discussion of Acholi humanity and personhood in trying to understand the cultural context of when “child rebels” can be held as perpetrators morally responsible for their acts, rather than victims of abduction. Opiyo Oloya discusses

how what he calls “child-inducted soldiers” tried to “free their humanness” by asserting themselves as human beings (*dano adana*), which he defines as the “Acholi cultural notion . . . universally recognized by all cultures as the ‘human person,’” and which he compares to *ubuntu*, which “in the Xhosa and Zulu cultures of South Africa . . . describes the essence of humanness” (2013, 17, 21). Erin Baines cites Oloya and also draws a comparison between *dano adana* and *ubuntu*, using the concept as a humanist argument to complicate the “reprehensible” idea that formerly abducted men and women should be as responsible as orchestrators of the rebellion for the violence that was perpetrated by the rebels during the course of the war (2011, 490–91). In different ways, these and other scholars all attempt to push back against the manner by which the LRA have been expelled from “humanity,” some through an explicitly humanist move that attempts to bring rebels back into the “human” as *dano adana*.

I do not share in discourses whereby the LRA are made part of or said to commit acts of inhumanity. But nor am I trying to “humanize” or “re-humanize” the LRA, to try to argue—as Finnström, Oloya, Joseph Kony, my rebel friends, and others do—that “terrorists” are also “human beings.”²⁶ Instead of reclaiming the humanity of rebels, the chapters that follow expose some of the limits and instabilities of the concept of humanity, namely, dictating in moral terms how a life should be lived in ways that: claim universality; present as a science instead of an ideology; and dismiss the rich meaning of lives actually lived.

I am not suggesting that there is no cultural concept of personhood or “humanity” among Acholi. Nor am I arguing that rebels did not attempt to assert themselves as human beings in ways that resisted their expulsion. Rather, I aim to show that the intersection between these discourses and those of Western (in)humanity are constructed morally and in encounter—and thus by no means natural, universal, or stable. That is to say, they are discourses of humanity that are repurposed or reinvented to enter a discursive space to meet the shadowy demands of different discourses (colonial, modern, humanitarian, and so forth) originating in the West, including moral claims on technology, rationality, freedom, and so forth. Much like the concept of *ubuntu*, which Achille Mbembe (2011) suggests was invented to meet the demands of liberal discourses of humanity circulating internationally, *dano adana* or other concepts of

Acholi humanity are, I suggest, being mobilized to respond to specific demands that the discourse of humanity puts on them—a discourse that has, since at least the time of European colonization and Christian missionary attempts to make Men out of beasts, demanded a response in its own image.

I do not think it is worth engaging this demand of humanity. Rather than humanizing the LRA as a response to the friction between the LRA and humanity, I question the criteria of humanity itself. In this reversal of most scholarly approaches, I ask not how or why the LRA were or were not part of humanity, but—through a critical investigation of its defining criteria—why humanity would exclude the LRA. Instead of squeezing or reforming the lives, experiences, and narratives of my LRA friends into the normative framework of the human, I treat rebel lives as the norm and ask what can be learned from them. As the subtitle of this work suggests, there are important lessons that the LRA offers that might push us to reform or abandon inadequate concepts of humanity.

To be able to open this space, I positioned myself squarely on the side of LRA combatants. I refused to obscure my political sympathies or the way in which my knowledge was particularly situated. I wanted the rebels to be the revolutionaries they saw themselves to be, to overcome the injustice and poverty that faced them and the Acholi people—even though their mission had seemingly gone quite awry so far. This ethical stance allowed me to carefully hear complex stories and narratives that escape most humanitarian and scholarly accounts of the LRA. Many of these accounts start from a space of horror and/or pity at the Other's suffering and thus tend to focus on the tragedy of children becoming soldiers. My account starts from a space of empathy at the Other's attempts to challenge existing structures of power; thus, it tends to focus on the disjunctures between their worldviews and the ideological apparatuses of power that try to deny them. It provides a grounded, qualitative, and in-depth ethnography of insurgency not often found in political-scientific studies of civil war and rebellion.

Some readers may mistake this openness as an attempt to defend or apologize for the LRA, or to minimize the forms of physical and structural violence that they committed and suffered. I am often asked by critics engaging my work, "Where is the blood? Where is the violence? Where is

the suffering?" I do not deny that suffering, pain, and deaths did take place. Indeed, my rebel friends and I lament them because they often detracted from other narratives of the LRA, bringing disrepute upon the rebels and their forms of being in the world, and often discouraging rebels who otherwise wanted to continue the struggle. I discuss LRA violence in some complexity in chapter 2. But I choose not to add to moral voices condemning or judging the LRA.²⁷ Instead, my purpose is anthropological: to show the damage done by crude presentations of the LRA through the discourse of humanity. I aim to offer accounts of the political lives of soldiers during and after the war—what they were fighting for, how they understand their lives today, and how they were harmed or misrepresented by human rights and humanitarian discourses.

SOME NOTES ON METHOD

The ethnographic material upon which this work draws stems primarily from thirteen uninterrupted months of research undertaken in and around Acholiland in northern Uganda, from July 2012 to August 2013, following a shorter spell of research from June to August 2009. I spent most of this time learning from networks of former LRA rebels who knew one another during their time fighting.

I started meeting former rebels through friends and family of theirs, creating several of what statisticians might call "snowball samples." Over time, these networks grew as they introduced me to other former rebels—their friends, their wives, their husbands, their children, their brothers, their sisters. The men and women they loved. The children they birthed and raised. The comrades they fought with together, side by side. In total, I met about sixty former rebels who became my teachers, and learned a great deal about many others who were killed in action or who were still fighting with the LRA. They included men and women who had spent varying amounts of time as or with the rebels, ranging from a few days to more than two decades, and with varying ranks, ranging from no rank up to high-ranking commanders. Not all of them appear in this book, which focuses primarily on a network of rebels who spent substantial amounts of time in the *lum*—roughly five or more years—but they all instilled

different values and lessons in me through their stories, lives, and experiences. I chose to tell the stories of those who spent substantial time as LRA rebels because I found that more often than not it affected their memories, friendships, and present-day lives in more profound ways, not least of which included having rebel spouses and/or children born within the LRA. Taken together as a group, these rebels had participated in almost all phases of the war, including from the beginning and up until the present. Not all former rebels personally struggle with or engage in the questions I explore, but they are questions that almost all of them understand or relate to in different ways from their time in the *lum*, no matter how short or long.

While these rebels were often quite close together while fighting in the *lum*—spatially and spiritually—they scattered to different places after leaving the front lines of war. Many ended up in Gulu town, the largest urban settlement in Acholiland and where I permanently lived during the course of my work. Others returned to rural village lands or smaller towns and trading centers around the region, where I consistently visited them. In focusing on a group of friends and family rather than a specific site, my research became spatially wide, taking me through all seven districts of Ugandan Acholiland—Agago, Amuru, Gulu, Kitgum, Lamwo, Nwoya, and Pader.²⁸ As I was often interested in the past experiences and memories of my friends, much of the day-to-day ethnographic work consisted of long and usually private chats in my friends' homes. But it often involved participating in their day-to-day lives: hanging out with them at work—be it a restaurant where they served tables or a small shop from which they tailored; working on rural fields—digging, weeding, and harvesting; building huts; attending funerals and weddings; going to clinics for medical treatment; going to church; playing and watching football; sitting around drinking cassava gin and sorghum beer; watching movies; chatting around the fire at night (*wang oo*).²⁹

In the course of everyday life, I also spent time talking with and learning from other people important to the lives of my friends—their civilian friends, families, employers, pastors, local government leaders, elders, and clinicians, among others. Through them, I made my way into new spaces, including rehabilitation centers, clinics, and churches. I made a point of visiting sites important to the LRA, including Awere Hill (Got Awere) in

Odek, where Joseph Kony grew up and first began to preach; grounds where battles and other military actions had taken place; sites of former LRA sick bays; as well as a concealed hill from which the LRA collected sacred soil known as “camouflage.” I unfailingly read the two most prominent Ugandan daily newspapers, the *Daily Monitor* and *New Vision*, together with a popular weekly Luo-language paper, *Rupiny*.³⁰ I often listened to local radio, with particular attention to the weekly broadcasts of the Mega FM show *Dwog Cen Paco* (Come Back Home), aimed primarily at LRA soldiers with the purpose of encouraging them to defect.

My command of the Acholi language reached a level that allowed me to share in everyday conversations with my friends, although longer, complex stories and narratives often eluded me. For this reason, I worked together with a research assistant, Jimmy Odong, with whom I traveled and worked to ensure accurate transcripts and translations of the stories and conversations that appear in this book. Throughout the text, I offer readers the original Acholi of my English translations when translations are difficult, inexact, and/or when the syntax is important. At times, I use only the Acholi when I find that the concept or phrase is too difficult, for historical, political, and cultural reasons, to be translated into English. The glossary serves as a reference for unfamiliar Acholi terms that may come up in the text. I follow a conventional Acholi orthography, though at times I revert to the more phonetic of multiple possible spellings.³¹ Responsibility for the precision and accuracy of the Acholi-to-English translations remains mine alone.

My real and perceived positionalities or subjectivities sometimes posed deep challenges to this work. I was often told that my questions were “deadly” to the Ugandan government and that I could be arrested as a rebel collaborator; accordingly, I took caution in choosing what I would talk about, with whom, and in what location. As a South Asian American, military-age man getting to know former LRA rebels, I initially encountered different forms of resistance and suspicion. At various points, I was accused of being an intelligence officer or spy for the United Nations Security Council or for the American government, both of which have opposed the LRA through indictments, arrest warrants, and/or military and financial support for anti-LRA activities.³² Other times I was mistaken for a Ugandan Asian businessman looking to buy (or grab) land or sell motorcycles.³³ More commonly, in the aftermath of an enormous if

fragmented humanitarian response, it was assumed that I was operating some kind of aid project that would provide money, jobs, and/or goods to beneficiaries. These impressions often wore off in time as my friends and others got to know me and what I was up to.

Time posed a different problem. This work remains limited by the present historical conjuncture or epoch—namely, one in which the war is ongoing. Because of this, certain truths or experiences could not be spoken; others have not yet happened. In my work, I attempted to stay close to what could be said and spoken of openly in this moment. Future work, perhaps when the war has come to some kind of resolution, may explore other important questions—including the positionality of former rebels now serving in the UPDF, a matter in which I was greatly interested but had difficulty exploring in depth.

It perhaps would have been easy to talk to former rebels by approaching NGOs that employed or benefited them. But I did not want to begin my work from or through an institution. In focusing primarily on the everyday lives, both past and present, of LRA rebels, I explicitly sought to deinstitutionalize my ethnographic work. Rather than working primarily within an institution or from inside a specific site, such as a hospital, clinic, or NGO—as Paul Farmer (1992), Vinh-Kim Nguyen (2010), Julie Livingston (2012), Peter Redfield (2013), and other medical anthropologists have recently done—I decided to center my work on different networks of former rebels. This was in part because I was already familiar with the kinds of discourses and practices at work within these types of institutions. But it was largely because I was interested in how former rebels negotiated, navigated, and understood these discourses as they lived their lives beyond the walls of such institutions. In this way, my work was a different form of “studying up,”³⁴ one that sought to understand not the inner workings of a controlling process or discourse, but rather how people experienced meaning under this kind of discourse—sometimes as resistance, sometimes as compliance, sometimes as obliviousness. Too often, I felt, did studies of such discourses end up reproducing their power by overstating their importance in the everyday lives of ordinary people. Following Harri Englund (2006), I tried to understand how LRA rebels lived amid these discourses. Their narratives and experiences not only deconstruct but also disempower the concept of humanity.

The ethnographic material was accompanied by archival work in both Uganda and England. Archival work in Uganda included study at the Makerere University Library (Kampala); the Uganda Society Library (housed in the Uganda Museum, Kampala); the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Resource Center (Gulu); the Institute for Peace and Strategies Studies (IPSS) Library of Gulu University (Gulu); the Gulu Support the Children Organisation (GUSCO) archives (Gulu); the World Vision Children of War Rehabilitation Center archives (Gulu); the Human Rights Focus (HURIFO) library (Gulu); the Catechist Training Centre (CTC) library (Gulu); and the Comboni Spiritual Centre Layibi library and archives (Gulu). Additional archival work was undertaken in England from June to July 2014, studying documents and records pertaining to British colonial rule and missionary activities in Acholiland, within the Uganda Protectorate, and in other parts of east Africa. These archives included the Church Missionary Society (CMS) archive held at the Special Collections of the Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham (Birmingham); the Royal Commonwealth Society archive and other collections at the Manuscripts Department of Cambridge University Library (Cambridge); the Bodleian Library of Commonwealth and African Studies at Rhodes House, University of Oxford (Oxford); the Imperial War Museum Library (London); and the Manuscripts Collection at the British Library (London).

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

A Note on Pictures and Anonymity

The pictures I decided to include on my own accord are sometimes of places or objects or activities that help the reader envision a situation in ways supplemental to words. Many are photos that I solicited as a practice of democratic ethnography. Near the end of my longer spell of fieldwork, I explicitly asked my friends if they wanted me to include photos they had or to take photos that they wanted me to include in the text. I collected many of these, together with the captions they wanted me to include, and have tried to insert as many relevant photos as possible. Uncertain of how the text may be used, and unwilling to risk my friends' safety, I have not

included many pictures of people, despite their wishes to have them inserted.

Given that the war is ongoing at the time of this writing and that the Ugandan government could yet retaliate against former rebels, the names that appear in the coming chapters are pseudonyms. Almost all of my friends asked for anonymity and chose their own pseudonyms; only when my friends had no preference for what name was used did I provide one of my own making.

On the Character List

Unconventionally for an ethnographic text, I offer a list of characters at the beginning of the text as a reference. I include it primarily for reading convenience. The text may be read selectively rather than from cover to cover, and for those reading in this fashion, the list can be helpful to characterize unfamiliar people. This list should not be read as a way of fictionalizing, simplifying, fetishizing, or in any other way reducing or misrepresenting the people therein. Instead my attempt is to create a kind of accessible nonfiction that can be read by both specialists and non-specialists.

It may seem paradoxical that a book “against humanity” should focus on people. This is not a mistake or a thoughtless deferral to a traditional ethnographic method. Rather, it is a way of demonstrating through concrete stories, narratives, and experiences of people the ways in which humanity limits, imposes, mischaracterizes, moralizes, and/or fixes the meaning and values of people’s lives. In practice, this “people-centered” approach is designed precisely to displace Man in the process of its movement.

Chapter Organization

In order to illustrate the problems posed by humanity, I deliberately organize each chapter around a particular criterion that has historically, philosophically, or otherwise been thought to constitute the idea of the human or humanity. The chapters are thus structured by the constraints of some existing notions of humanity, and struggle against them through

ethnographic evidence. Each chapter embodies a particular dialectical conflict through which humanity is constructed and deconstructed, reproduced and negated against its others.

Rather than building a linear argument through the chapters, I posit them as stand-alone illustrations of my thesis against humanity, offering complex narratives of the instabilities and liminalities of life in times of unusual violence. For the reader's convenience, I often drop the ersatz quotes around "humanity" in the chapters that follow. However, it should be clear that "humanity" is a concept that is relentlessly contested throughout the text, without any guaranteed meaning, significance, or, indeed, value.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 focus on rebels' wartime experiences, present-day memories of those experiences, and the transformative qualities of those experiences and memories. While memories and experiences of rebellion are also important to chapters 5 and 6, these later chapters are more attentive to the aftermath of the war, and in particular aspects of rebel lives and beliefs upon their return "home"³⁵ from the "bush."³⁶ This structure allows me to give a certain chronology to the story, one that appears to offer a transition break from violence to peace. The illusion of this break is destroyed when the return "home," rather than being a time of joy, belonging, and normalcy as is often imagined, is shown to be as or even more destabilizing and uncertain as the abduction to the "bush"—a reality that troubles the presumed opposition between violence and humanity. This destruction is highlighted in the interlude between chapters 4 and 5, which deconstructs and critiques "reintegration," the process by which returning rebels are presumed to be transformed from violent, lawbreaking, killer animals into peaceful, productive, citizen humans.

Chapter 2 explores how violence and humanity bifurcated into opposites in the course of the LRA war. This chapter investigates how it came to be that LRA violence was labeled as "dehumanizing" rather than "humanizing." It shows how the erasure of other moral frameworks by which to understand LRA violence led to its characterization as "against humanity" and thereby ignored the complexity and meaning of that violence. It offers alternative ways of understanding violence through ethnographic and historical evidence, drawing on narratives of colonial violence,

mob justice, “traditional” violence, and LRA violence. It excavates ways of seeing and understanding violence outside the shadow of modern moral sensibility that split violence and humanity. It also explores the contours of this modern moral sensibility and the ways in which LRA violence was seen to violate it. Many of these violations disrupted modern expectations of the relationships that technology, reason, time, and development should have with violence. These violations were not felt merely by Western aid workers or scholars, but also by rebels and Acholi civilians as part of postcolonial wrenchings toward and anxieties about “reaching” modernity. As a result, the complexity and productivity of LRA violence was elided. It was not only condemned, but also seen to oppose modernity and humanity.

Chapter 3 investigates the ways in which humanity was constructed against animality through the space of the “bush” (*lum*). Whereas Acholi civilians and others saw the *lum* as a dangerous, evil space of animals, the rebels occupied the *lum* and came to endow it with very different meanings. In what became a contestation over what I refer to as an “anthropo-moral geography,” the LRA collapsed an analytic separating animality and humanity, unsettling a spatio-moral definition of the human against animality. Rather than reinforcing a colonial-era notion of the *lum* that had been evoked through the course of the war, the LRA found the *lum* to be a site of life, sacredness, and development. In doing so, they dissolved some of the spatio-moral infrastructure of humanity itself.

Chapter 4 argues that the LRA transcended the question of rationality by binding together science and magic in their rebellion. Moving past a scholarly debate that either condemns LRA beliefs and actions as “irrational” (and therefore “barbaric” or otherwise inhuman) or attempts to explain them as “rational” (and therefore human), this chapter takes LRA beliefs and actions in their singularity in ways that expose the limits of “rationality” and “humanity” as concepts by which to understand them. Releasing “rationality” and “humanity” helps better conceptualize how the LRA held at once military and spiritual tactics; magical-prophetic and modern-scientific time; Christian and traditional Acholi religious practices; and spiritual and political reasons for fighting. By holding together logic and faith in this way, they transcended the category of “rationality” undergirding many concepts of humanity.

The interlude transitions away from the first part of the book, which explores the memories and experiences of rebels fighting in the war, including problems of violence, the *lum*, and beliefs/logics. It sets the stage for the second part of the book, which is more attentive to the lives of rebels who have returned from the front lines, including the problems of love, kinship, and politics that they encounter and negotiate in different ways. The interlude itself attends to the concept of “reintegration,” whereby rebels leaving the front lines were to be reformed and readjusted to live peacefully among civilians. It highlights the ways in which civilians and NGO workers conceptualized rebels as animals needing to be humanized, and the ways in which rebels in turn resisted this disciplinary process. It shows that rebels did not want or need to have their heads “repaired,” as was often assumed and said of them. Rather, it was civilians for whom the process of “reintegration” was ritually healing, allowing them the opportunity to heal their own sicknesses by projecting them onto rebels. Whereas the “reintegration” process offered rebels a chance at cleansing through the pure concept of humanity, I offer the interlude as a dirtying process of disintegration, rejecting with my friends the healing offered by humanity.

Chapters 5 and 6 are thus offered as dirtying experiences of healing from the injurious concept of humanity. Chapter 5 explores how new relations involving rebels were forged through rather than outside of or in the face of violence. These relations, which included marriages, brother- and sisterhoods, clans, and other forms of mutual belonging, challenged humanity as a form of kinship and as a sentimental community of humankind. Militant kinships drew boundaries between insiders and outsiders in a way that humanity cannot except by expelling other humans from humanity. Moreover, these kinships thrived with real meaning in the fertile ground of violence, even as they were condemned from the outside as forced, enslaved, or otherwise inhuman(e). Militant LRA kinships thus operated “against humanity” in the sense that humanity morally denied the meaning of these kinships and simultaneously drew boundaries of mutual belonging that excluded the LRA.

Chapter 6 engages recent anthropological debates that argue that categories like “victim” and “charity case” deny actors their political agency and reduce them to a form of bare life. By examining how LRA rebels remained political militants even as they accepted charity and humanitar-

ian aid, this chapter shows how these anthropological debates ignore the complex ways in which rebels speak and act in the trenches of these kinds of discourses. Their experiences expose humanity as a concept historically constructed in the opposition of the “ethical” and the “political,” a relationship that ultimately belongs to a particular experience of postmodernity. In the postcolony of Acholiland, “ethics” and “politics” had different meanings and could coexist. Rebels accordingly revealed humanity to be a premature fixer of political and ethical meaning, precluding dynamism and multiplicity of meaning in a global society in uncertain flux.

While there are indeed deeply meaningful forms of life that emerge in and often specifically because of violence, humanity does not help us understand these life-forms properly *analytically* because it tends to delimit norms that exclude these life-forms. Rather than approaching the LRA as a set of possibilities, humanity looks at the LRA as a set of problems, as a set of inhuman enemies needing reform. Humanity is evoked, in these cases, in ways that ask it to give meaning beyond, and indeed against, its scope of producing an ideological anthropo-morality that distinguishes between human good and inhuman evil. Humanity comes to represent the emotive force underlying the good–evil axes of humanity and its others (for instance violence, suffering, or animality).³⁷ What we risk in using humanity as this organizing concept is collapsing the science of medical anthropology (and indeed, social science at large) into a liberal, moral-affective framework—in other words, forsaking knowledge for emotion. Evocations of humanity ask us to abandon inquiry for an assumed shared feeling, a mutual understanding of the emotional imagery provoked by its name—a mutuality that may not be shared beyond a liberal humanist discourse.

In arguing that we should think beyond humanity, I speak not only to scholars in anthropology, political science, philosophy, and other disciplines, but also to liberal practitioners seeking a different world—NGO workers, activists, and clinicians, among others. The narratives and arguments presented in this book may help such readers recognize and rethink the ways in which humanity narrows the possibilities of what constitutes a moral life and thereby fixes the politics of liberal humanitarian interventions. Unanchored from the foundation of humanity, we might begin to formulate new ways of thinking and doing anthropology, medicine,

activism, and intervention in ways that bring us closer to the common good. The concluding chapter explores anti-humanism as a possible vehicle by which to arrive at different and more radical forms of healing, including an anti-humanist medicine.

Thinking from the Demonic Ground of the Lum:

A Suggested Methodology for Reading

Following Laura Bohannan's (1966) reading of Shakespeare in the "bush," I invite readers to metaphorically imagine themselves in the *lum* with the rebels as they move through the chapters.³⁸ As explored in detail in chapter 3, the *lum* is the space that the rebels inhabit in the course of their war. One form of ethnographic reading is to enter into and think in the *lum*, as LRA rebels did. The chapters that follow accompany rebels in the *lum*, leave with them from the front lines, and then navigate life at "home." From the outside, the *lum* seems a "wild" space, feared for being violent, dangerous, and difficult to pass through. It evokes, even for Acholi civilians, the kind of "heart of darkness" to which Joseph Conrad refers. Yet I believe it is precisely the kind of "demonic ground" that Sylvia Wynter refers to in conceptualizing possible spaces from which to abolish the figure of Man.³⁹ Indeed, from within, the *lum* was not the evil, dark space of death that it appeared to be, especially when it was left behind by captured or defecting rebels. In fact, it was a space of life, in which rebels found love, made new families, and encountered the sacred. To think with rebels from the space of the *lum* is to be open to unexpected lessons from the LRA—lessons about forms of life existing beyond humanity.