

An assemblage approach to liquid warfare: AFRICOM and the ‘hunt’ for Joseph Kony

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Abstract

The Western state-led turn to remote forms of military intervention as recently deployed in the Middle East and across Africa is often explained as resulting from risk aversion (avoidance of ground combat), materiality (‘the force of matter’) or the adoption of a networked operational logic by major military powers, mimicking the ‘hit-and-run’ tactics of their enemies. Although recognizing the mobilizing capacities of these phenomena, we argue that the new military interventionism is prompted by a more fundamental transformation, grounded in the spatial and temporal reconfiguration of war. We see a resort to ‘liquid warfare’ as a form of military interventionism that shuns direct control of territory and populations and its cumbersome order-building and order-maintaining responsibilities, focusing instead on ‘shaping’ the international security environment through remote technology, flexible operations and military-to-military partnerships. We draw upon assemblage as a heuristic device and the case of the US Africa Command (AFRICOM) to flesh out the complex and fluid nature of liquid warfare and the ways by which power operates across space. We outline how the forging of a transnational military assemblage in the name of ‘hunting Kony’ allowed for the buildup of an archipelago of military bases and operational capabilities across Africa, which serve as hubs for the monitoring, disrupting and containment of potential risks and dangers.

Keywords

AFRICOM, assemblage, critical military studies, liquid warfare, militarism, security

Introduction

In the Middle East and across Africa, an expanding conglomerate of armed actors is engaged in surveillance programmes, training operations, targeted killings and manhunts, often outside

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conventional war zones. These Western state-led operations mark a shift away from ‘boots on the ground’ deployments towards light-footprint military interventions, and involve a combination of drone strikes and airstrikes, special forces, intelligence operatives, private contractors, and military-to-military (M2M) training teams on the ground (Watts and Biegon, 2017: 1). Largely, these military interventions (and their lived realities) remain hidden from Western publics. And if they incidentally appear on our screens, the shadowy mix of alliances and actors involved makes it hard to trace lines of responsibility and underlying power constellations. This elusiveness is problematic for a number of reasons. For one, larger audiences are (effectively) confused into indifference, and, importantly, those at the receiving end of the violence are unable to hold governments to account.¹ War is rendered invisible and normalized. And even in the academic field of critical security studies, the turn away from state-centrism has produced a blind spot for the interconnectedness between Western state-led warfare and human insecurity (see *Security Dialogue*, 2018). Aiming to reinvigorate a focus on militarism and its co-constitution with (in)security, and drawing on the case of the US Africa Command, AFRICOM, we aim to do three things in this article. First, we emphasize the relevance of the term ‘liquid warfare’ as a way of naming a key feature of extrastate military operations in late modernity.² Second, we propose to investigate the fluidity and complexity of these operations by means of an assemblage approach. Third, we lay out for AFRICOM, and in particular its Observant Compass operation to counter the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), how liquid warfare plays out in practice.

Liquid warfare

Aiming to define the ‘new newness’ of interventionist warfare, scholars have entered into something of a coining contest. Drawing on the notions of ‘(counter-)netwars’ (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 2001), ‘network war’ (Duffield, 2002), and Hardt and Negri’s (2004) ‘global civil war’ (2004), we see labels such as ‘securocratic war’ (Feldman, 2004), ‘chaoplexic warfare’ (Bousquet, 2008), ‘coalition proxy warfare’ (Mumford, 2013), ‘transnational shadow wars’ (Niva, 2013) or simply ‘remote warfare’ (Watts and Biegon, 2017). In reviewing this debate, we notice how the ‘newness’ of war is attributed to three developments. First, scholars point out how the horrors of interventionist ground wars in Afghanistan and Iraq invoked a sense of risk aversion and war fatigue, ushering in a ‘post-interventionist’ or ‘pull-back’ era (Duffield, 2016; Kümmel and Giegerich, 2013; Mumford, 2013). As a reaction, the USA and its coalition partners (but also major powers such as Russia and Saudi Arabia) have combined a resort to ‘precision’ airstrikes with a shift to smaller, clandestine, more focused interventions (Mutschler, 2016; Schörnig, 2013). Second, scholars focus on the turn to military robotics (and drones in particular) as a key feature of interventionist warfare. We see the emergence of a subfield of ‘drone studies’, with a strong (and often highly abstract) emphasis on materiality, *dingpolitik*, the agentic capacity of drones, (in)corporeality and necroethics: the gruelling irony of ‘killing with care’ (see Holmqvits, 2013; Schwarz, 2016; Wall and Monahan, 2011; Walters, 2014; Wilcox, 2017). What is often implied by these debates is that somehow new technologies are the drivers behind new forms of warfare. Third, and equally prominent, is the debate on the networked nature of war. Simply put, the argument goes that because the ‘enemies of the state’ are now operating through shadowy networks and cells, the state has to resort to similar tactics. Elements within the US military and related agencies, legitimated (and ‘legalized’) by the War on Terror, have increasingly adopted more networked forms of organization, which has made possible the integration of drones and new technologies into so-called counter-netwars, in which ‘hybrid blends of hierarchies and networks ... mount strike operations across shadowy transnational battle spaces’ (Niva, 2013: 187). What is in fact implied is that ‘shadow warfare’ results from the state mimicking its enemies.

Although offering important insights into the design of warfare, the above perspectives overlook more fundamental, and classic, questions of war: how war is an alternative system of profit, power and protection. Wars are *produced*; they ‘are made to happen by a diverse and complicated set of actors who may well be achieving their objectives in the midst of what looks like failure and breakdown’ (Keen, 2008: 15). The changing nature of interventionist warfare cannot be attributed to reactive impulses or strategies alone. Rather, ‘war fatigue’, ‘remote technology’ and ‘enemy networks’ provide additional conditions of possibility for the spatial and temporal reconfiguration of war. As we intend to show for the case of the USA, they offer new opportunities to further what the US Department of Defense (1997: 6) articulates as ‘shaping the international security environment in ways that promote and protect US interests’. Paying tribute to Zygmunt Bauman’s (2000, 2001) liquidity vocabulary and Derek Gregory’s (2011) notion of ‘everywhere war’, we propose to use the term ‘liquid warfare’ to highlight how conventional ties between war, space and time have become undone. Liquid warfare is about flexible, open-ended, ‘pop-up’ military interventions, supported by remote technology and reliant on local partnerships and private contractors, through which (coalitions of) parties aim to promote and protect interests. Liquid warfare is thus temporally open-ended and eventful, as well as spatially dispersed and mobile.

Authors debating the temporal reconfiguration of modern war, and particularly US warfare, trace its origins back to the 1950s. For Boal et al. (2005: 80), the US doctrine of the past 60 years is that of a ‘long and consistent pattern of military expansionism in the service of empire’. Duffield (2007) talks of ‘unending war’, Filkins (2008) of ‘forever war’, and Bacevich (2010) of ‘permanent war’. In ‘everywhere war’, Gregory (2011) adds to this by emphasizing how we have to rethink late modern war not merely in terms of time but also in terms of space and territoriality. Whereas wars in the past were conducted in ‘resolutely territorial terms’, we now have to ‘supplement cartographic reason by other, more labile spatialities’ (Gregory, 2011: 239). War has become mobile. The concept of the battlefield in US doctrine is replaced by a multiscalar, multidimensional *battlescape* (Graham, 2010: 31). For Chamayou (2015: 57), the geocentric concept of war is now opposed to a target-centred one, attached to the bodies of the enemy prey.

Although the War on Terror is often seen as the starting point of this ‘mobile turn’, the above authors merely see the military interventionism that ensued from it as a climactic summation of a longer history of ‘globalizing wars’ in which the goal is not to take over territory but to ‘remove the obstacles on the road to a truly global freedom of economic forces’ (Bauman, 2001: 16). The power of the state in late modernity rests upon credit ratings, corporate capacity and global market shares, not on the capture of territory. Control over resources is of key importance, but access is arranged through free trade regimes, leasing and contracting, large-scale land purchases, forestry permits, and ‘accumulation by conservation’, rather than territorial conquest (Massé and Lunstrum, 2016). In contrast to the era of imperialist and colonial rule, ascendancy over a territory has ‘ceased to be the stake of the global power struggle’ (Bauman, 2001: 13). With a wink at Von Clausewitz, Bauman (2000: 12) states that today’s wars look like ‘the promotion of global free trade by other means’. Boal et al. (2005) labelled this ‘military neoliberalism’: a useful shorthand for the increasingly military means whereby the state seeks to make the world ‘safe’ for global capital. What we notice for the case of AFRICOM is that the major technique of interventionism is the rejection not just of geopolitical territorial confinement but also of biopolitical notions of controlling the life and death of populations, along with the related responsibilities and costs of order and nation-building. Instead, what is at its core is the notion of ‘shaping’ – pursued by ‘forward presence’ and ‘forward posture’ in military terms (McNeill, 2017: 49). As early as 1997, the US Department of Defense (1997: 6) articulated this idea as follows:

The DoD has an essential role to play in shaping the international security environment in ways that promote and protect US national interests. To do so, the Department employs a wide variety of means including: forces permanently stationed abroad; forces rotationally deployed overseas; forces deployed temporarily for exercises, combined training, or military-to-military interactions; and programs such as defense cooperation, security assistance, International Military Education and Training (IMET) programs and international arms cooperation.

We here include the above-mentioned temporal and spatial dimensions in the way we define liquid warfare as a form of military interventionism that shuns direct control of territory and populations and its cumbersome order-building and order-maintaining responsibilities, focusing instead on ‘shaping’ the international security environment through remote technology, flexible operations and M2M partnerships. Key to such an understanding of liquid warfare is its inherently indirect and assembled nature. Because of its reliance on remote management, it works through assemblages of heterogeneous and changing ‘partnerships’, which are often full of friction. In aiming to flesh out the complex and fluid nature of this type of warfare, and as a way of overcoming state-centrism, we turn to ‘assemblage’ as a heuristic device. In line with McFarlane (2009), we argue that the concept of assemblage allows for a rich analysis of zones of interconnected but often conflictual activity and heterogeneous elements. In the next section, we outline our use of the term.

Capturing liquidity: An assemblage approach

In her book *Expulsions*, Saskia Sassen (2014) makes an important observation when stating how the sheer complexity of the global economy makes it hard to trace ‘lines of responsibility’ for the violence it produces, but also how equally hard it is for those who benefit from the system to feel responsible for the harm done. With this, she highlights the problem of where to locate power in complexity: a problem prominently manifested in liquid war. We use the concept of ‘assemblage’ in order to understand the ways in which complex social and material formations that consist of heterogeneous elements still hold together and exercise power (De Goede and Simon, 2013: 317). The idea of an assemblage implies a more complex, unstable and fluid arrangement than, for example, the concepts of an ‘alliance’ (Kalyvas, 2006), ‘network’ or ‘discourse coalition’ (Hajer, 1993), which refer to transaction, bilateralism, coordination and coherence. An assemblage, in our view, is essentially a ‘governance formation’ that is neither ‘global’ nor ‘local’.³ Assemblage accommodates a multiplicity of bodies (segments of policy, corporate, military and development units) that ‘team up’, under the cloak of a particular ‘threat representation’, to achieve their objectives and have a governance effect.

Originally used in art, the term ‘assemblage’ refers to something that is created out of disparate elements, each of which has meanings or purposes that might be quite unrelated to the other elements. Together, they are brought into a new relationship with one another to create an arrangement that has its own distinctive meaning and purpose (DeLanda, 2006). In social theory, often inspired by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), assemblages have been conceptualized as emergent, which implies that they arise from the interactions of the often conflicting elements and external connections that constitute them (McKeen-Edwards and Porter, 2013). A key feature of assemblages is thus that they are unstable, contingent and mutable arrangements. Sassen (2006) and Collier and Ong (2005) have developed the notion of ‘global assemblages’ as a way of capturing the transformation of governance under neoliberalism. Sassen argues that contemporary globalization is best understood as a rearticulation of global and national structures. At the centre of these processes is the partial ‘disassembling’ of national states and the corresponding development of new ‘global assemblages’. Seen in this light, privatization and globalization are not simply forces

eroding the state, as states have themselves actively participated in their partial ‘disassembly’. The notion of the dual process of state disassembly and (global) reassembly provides a powerful tool for analysing today’s military interventions. Elements of what were previously strictly national are plugged into new transnational arrangements (under rubrics such as ‘security cooperation’ and ‘building partner capacity’) while retaining strong linkages to their previous functions. These transnational forms have their own specificities, which are neither purely global/local nor purely public/private.

Assemblages, boundaries and power: Aligning political economy and Foucauldian views

We examine extrastate military operations as assemblages, that is, as linked directly to a practice: *to assemble*. They hence result from the continuous work of pulling disparate parties (at different ‘levels’ and with different motivations, interests, identities) and elements (discourses, doctrines, laws, resources) together (Li, 2007). This produces questions on how an operation is drawn together, how connections are forged and how tensions are managed. It thus invites analysis of how the parties and elements of an assemblage might – or might not – be made to cohere and act; and, crucially, how this has consequences for individuals, communities and societies ‘on the ground’. In studying the act of assemblage, we draw on Li’s (2007) ‘practices of assemblage’. We have adapted these to guide the analysis of what we will call the ‘Kony military assemblage’, identifying five practices: (a) *forging alignments through a shared threat perception*: the work of linking together the objectives of the parties to an assemblage by means of a joint problem definition; (b) *rendering technical*: the production of technical descriptions of the problem/solution to overcome tensions and make the assemblage appear more coherent than it is; (c) *authorizing knowledge*: specifying and limiting the requisite body of ‘expert knowledge’; containing critiques; (d) *reassembling*: grafting on new elements and reworking old ones; deploying existing discourses, legal instruments, doctrines, to new ends; transposing the meaning of key terms; (e) *managing failures and contradictions*: presenting failure as the outcome of rectifiable deficiencies; smoothing out contradictions; devising compromises (see Li, 2007).

Together, Li’s practices help us to examine ‘what holds the assemblage together’ and how the parties of an assemblage are made *to cohere* and *to act*. These practices define the boundaries of the assemblage and enable it to govern. It therefore becomes important to study the rules of membership and practices of in- and exclusion that ‘make’ the assemblage. Evidently, assemblages such as the ‘hunt for Kony operation’ include diverse subjects, some very powerful and capacitated through their access to money, technology or expertise (AFRICOM, the Ugandan military), others figuring merely as mute legitimating characters (the ‘child soldier’, the ‘raped woman’). Despite our attentiveness to relationships, we thus acknowledge the difference between elements in an assemblage and the role of ‘relations of force’ – crucial components of political economy. By examining boundary rules and practices of particular assemblages, we join others who aim to align notions of compulsory power based on materialist analysis in political economy with a Foucauldian notion of productive power (Dittmer, 2014; Roberts, 2014). Compulsory power is ‘the direct, often coercive, capacity to control the action of others’; productive power is ‘the constitution of specific types of actors capable of effective action within a given social domain’ (Barnett and Duvall, 2005: 43). As Abrahamsen and Williams (2011) noticed in the case of global security assemblages, these two forms of power intersect. ‘Productive power makes some instances of compulsory power possible and legitimate, and, in turn, compulsory power shapes the terms of meaning that influence how actors see what is possible and desirable’ (Barnett and Duvall, 2005: 44).

Our choice for an assemblage approach is above all empirically motivated: it allows us to narrate fluidity and complexity in an era of structured inequality. As McKeen-Edwards and Porter (2013: 17) noted in their study of transnational financial associations, by not seeking to link outcomes to a single type of social actor or institution, nor to treat all actors and institutions as simple expressions of another underlying and more fundamental actor, assemblage ‘permits us to acknowledge the autonomous role of different types of actors and institutions, and then to explore how the interactions among these actors and institutions can explain outcomes’. Such an approach is especially useful in being able to survey a complex environment such as military interventionism, which is marked by ongoing asymmetries in North–South relations, and in which historical trajectories of a range of actors and institutions interact to produce effects. Assemblage analytics, in our view, should not fall into the trap of proving *that* the social world is ‘dynamic and fluid’ and that, in our case, institutions of war are ‘assembled and messy’ rather than ‘unified and coherent’. Such a focus will merely have us mistake our premises for results (see Stephen J. Collier in Acuto and Curtis, 2014: 36). Instead, we have to specify *how* particular military operations are assembled, *how and why* alliances are forged, *who* is included and excluded, and *how* parties to an assemblage act – *and have an effect*.

In the third section below, we take the shared problem definition of the need ‘to hunt down Joseph Kony by military means’ as an empirical point of departure to examine how heterogeneous units aim to achieve their objectives by rearranging themselves to cohere and act under the rubric of this ‘mission’.

The US Africa Command

The hunt for Joseph Kony, the leader of the LRA rebel movement that was at war with the Ugandan government for over two decades, features as one of the campaigns justifying US extrastate military engagement in Africa. Other recent examples are ‘destroying’ Al-Shabaab, ‘countering’ Islamic State and AQIM (Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb), and ‘blunting’ Boko Haram, as well as the open-ended campaign to contain the fallout from the 2011 military intervention that ousted Muammar al-Gaddafi in Libya. These operations are coordinated by AFRICOM. In 2008, AFRICOM became the leading organization responsible for US military and security policy towards Africa. According to its mission statement, AFRICOM ‘builds defence capabilities, responds to crisis, and deters and defeats transnational threats in order to advance US national interests and promote regional security, stability, and prosperity’ (US Africa Command, 2017a). The 2011 National Military Strategy stresses the importance of establishing partnerships between the US and African governments to help ‘facilitate the African Union’s many security challenges’ (Mullen, 2011: 12). In more unguarded moments, however, officials have been more straightforward: Vice-Admiral Robert Moeller, at a conference in 2008, declared that AFRICOM was about preserving ‘the free flow of natural resources from Africa to the global market’, while citing terrorism, oil disruption and China as major ‘challenges to US interests’ (Moeller, 2008).

The USA has been fighting wars in Africa since the 1950s – in Angola, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia, Morocco, Libya and Djibouti, to name but a few countries. In some cases, this has involved overt military operations using US troops, operating from large military bases such as Wheelus Field in Libya (stationing 4600 US personnel) and Kagnew Station in Asmara (home to 5000 US personnel at its peak years during the 1960s) (Busch, 2011). US military engagement during the Cold War also involved clandestine military operations and the financing and arming of local forces. Washington’s militarization efforts were accelerated after 9/11, when Africa became the ‘new frontier’ in global counter-terrorism operations, and were centralized under AFRICOM in 2008. AFRICOM’s mode of

operation represents a change from large deployments of US troops to more flexible and lighter operations. It has neither permanent combat troops assigned to it, nor even any permanent official bases housing US troops in Africa, with the exception of Camp Lemonier in Djibouti. Instead, it aims to work through African partners. As Branch (2011: 217) explains, 'AFRICOM is being built through informal base sharing agreements with African states and through the establishment of barebones facilities, so-called "lily-pads" or "cooperative security locations," which can be converted into functioning US military bases in 24–48 hours' – something we refer to as 'pop-up warfare'. Moreover, the focus is on security cooperation, including M2M training.⁴ According to data supplied by US Special Operations Command, there are 1700 people dedicated to assisting the US military's African partners, spread out across 20 countries, conducting 96 activities at any given time (Turse, 2017).⁵ AFRICOM claims 'these activities build strong, enduring partnerships with African nations, regional and international organizations, and other states that are committed to improving security in Africa' (US Africa Command, 2017b). In practice, this means that African troops are doing the actual fighting and dying on the ground while AFRICOM, often through private military corporations, performs most of the support tasks, such as logistics, medical support, surveillance and training (Forest, 2014; Olsen, 2014; Turse, 2015).

In tracing and mapping the materials, practices and bodies that make up the Kony military assemblage, we use a variety of sources. Building on a small body of academic work (Bachmann, 2014; Branch, 2011, 2012; Fisher, 2012, 2014; McNeill, 2017; Titeca and Costeur, 2015), we draw on the investigative journalism of key experts such as Nick Turse and Craig Whitlock, as well as a range of primary sources (US government websites, press releases, speeches, evaluation reports, NGO briefings, online videos, military magazines, online contractor documents). We gathered and triangulated information on facilities such as military bases, 'cooperative security locations' and 'forward operation locations', but also bureaucratic and military practices, M2M trainings and military assistance programmes, as well as private military contracting. In addition, information was gathered through interviews held with various actors involved in the assemblage during field research between 2007 and 2015 (Gould, 2015, 2016).⁶

Realizing that militarism and militarization are deeply embedded social phenomena (Jabri, 1996) and 'potentially everywhere' (Stavrianakis and Stern, 2018: 9), we rely on the following set of definitions and indicators to establish whether and when we see the one or the other at work. Militarism is about the normalization and legitimation of war, as well as the preparations for war (Woodward, 2005). In our case, militarism is expressed in discursive and institutional practices that rendered the AFRICOM-led military operation against Kony a necessary, inevitable and/or acceptable form of human conduct. Militarization, we argue, is about the increased deployment and/or geographical spread of military actors and materials and the extension of war-like activities to areas of social life that were previously sheltered from such forms of organized violence. We use three indicators to establish whether or when we speak of militarization: (1) an increase in military actors and materials in a specific period of time and geographical area; (2) the taking on of more civilian, developmental and/or policing roles by the military (also at times called the 'civilianization' of the military); (3) an increased mobile employability of military personnel across space, and across theatres of war. Finally, we speak of a 'military assemblage' when the parties taking part in the assemblage deploy a military strategy to counter a shared threat.

Directing our investigation are questions on how the Kony military assemblage was drawn together, how it evolved and mutated, who gained from participating in it, and how it had political consequences.

Forging alliances and rendering technical: Kony as 'end state'

In analysing the formation of the 'Kony assemblage', we see how a range of heterogeneous parties, each with different historical trajectories, motivations, interests and identities, and drawing on a variety of resources and capabilities, pulled together and forged alliances. Some of these alliances can be traced back to the early 1990s, when US institutions (mostly the US Agency for International Development, USAID) offered the Ugandan government humanitarian and security assistance against the LRA. In the wake of 9/11, soon after Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni pledged support for the Global War on Terror, the LRA was put on the US Terrorist Exclusion List. Subsequently, the USA started providing the Ugandan government with military aid for its 'war against the LRA'. With the establishment of AFRICOM, the USA became more directly and actively involved, providing intelligence as well as military advisers to the 2008 regional joint military mission to defeat the LRA, named Operation Lightning Thunder (see Van Puijenbroek and Plooijer, 2009). The operation, however, soon turned out to be a failure. The LRA was not defeated and retaliated in 2009 with a series of attacks, killing over 865 unprotected civilians in the DRC and South Sudan (Human Rights Watch, 2010: 5). The hundreds of dead were used by AFRICOM proponents to justify a call for a redoubled military effort to wipe out the LRA (see Branch, 2011: 228–229). Among these were NGOs such as Invisible Children, The Resolve and Enough, who intensively lobbied the US government to adopt the LRA Disarmament and Northern Uganda Recovery Act. Signed into US law in 2010, this calls for 'increased, comprehensive US efforts to help mitigate and eliminate the threat posed by the LRA to civilians and regional stability' and requires regular official reporting to Congress on how the fight against the LRA is proceeding.⁷ The law thus made the defeat of the LRA part of US foreign policy and provided for an annual budget of \$30 million for logistical support to Uganda.⁸

The Act laid the groundwork for the deployment of 100 security personnel and the establishment of a cooperative security location at airbase Entebbe (near Kampala) under the rubric of Operation Observant Compass in October 2011. The stated objective of this operation was to partake in security cooperation with the Ugandan military and assist in defeating the LRA, but not to 'engage LRA forces unless necessary for self-defense' (Obama, 2011).

This militarization move was further legitimated in 2012, when Invisible Children, an organization located in South California, released an online campaign dubbed *Kony2012*. The campaign merged a passionate celebration of the power of social media with the monstration of Kony, contributing to the recycling of colonial fantasies of savage borderland wars and Africans as violent and in need of discipline and rescue. Invisible Children proposed to 'make Kony famous'. This would result in pressure on the US government to maintain its military commitment to Uganda. Notably, Luis Moreno Ocampo, then chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC), featured in the campaign. He pleaded for AFRICOM's help in enforcing the ICC's arrest warrants against Kony and his commanders Dominic Ongwen and Okot Odhiambo – despite the fact that the USA does not recognize the court and has not ratified its founding Rome Statute. *Kony2012* became one of the most viral videos in history, drawing a massive, but short-lived, following among (predominantly) youth from around the globe. On 23 April 2012, less than two months after the *Kony2012* film was released, US President Barack Obama announced, with explicit reference to the campaign, that he would continue to commit 100 AFRICOM security personnel to assist in the mission to bring 'this madman to justice and to save lives' (Obama, 2012).

Another alignment that occurred soon after the *Kony2012* campaign was the establishment of a regional task force under the mandate of the African Union (AU). On 23 March 2012, it was made public that Uganda, the DRC, Southern Sudan and the Central African Republic (CAR) had committed to providing 5000 troops for a regional task force to address the threat of 'Kony and his

team' (United Nations, 2012). The AU-led task force would be commanded by Uganda, backed by the UN, and would receive support from AFRICOM.

Here we see how a diverse set of actors drew together under a threat representation in which the complex and protracted civil war between the LRA and the government of Uganda was reduced and sanitized to acts of war crimes by a selection of 'madmen', with rebel leader Joseph Kony featuring as the source of all evil. Through this threat representation, the violent conflict turned technical. Capturing Kony was now presented as both 'end state' and solution. This depoliticization move facilitated the embracement of a military solution by all parties involved. As Brian Losey, commander of Special Operations Command Africa, explained in an interview: 'So in the end bringing everybody together, sharing common understanding, coordinating or integrating operations activities with what our understanding is, is what we seek to do.... Very clearly, the LRA is embodied by Joseph Kony. It's the one measureable end state that perhaps has been identified' (US Africa Command, 2012). In many ways, the commander summarizes what we argue are the core practices of the military assemblage.

Authorizing knowledge and reassembling: Power at play

The pulling together of disparate parties under the frame of 'Kony as military end state' relied on a continuous and careful authorization of knowledge, containment of critiques, and negotiation of entry rules. The Museveni regime, for example, is renowned for its careful use of 'image management strategies' to influence outsiders' understanding of the conflict and the need for a military solution (see Fisher, 2014). Such strategies include the careful restricting of movement by US diplomats and analysts in the country. The regime also made sure that after it referred the case of Uganda to the ICC, the Court did not investigate the crimes committed by the Ugandan military throughout the conflict (Freeland, 2015). Moreover, members of Invisible Children and The Resolve revealed in interviews that critical views of the role of the Ugandan army in the conflict fell on deaf ears. They soon learned that a move away from 'peace talk' to pushing for a military approach gained access to the Museveni regime and opened doors to the Obama administration (Interview 2).⁹

We see how the Kony military assemblage could only come about owing to the development of new legal doctrines and institutions embodied in the Rome Statute (1998) and the establishment of the ICC in 2002. In the wake of the ICC arrest warrants against LRA commanders in 2005, the US and Ugandan governments slowly moved away from a counter-terrorism discourse towards the need for international criminal law enforcement. Reassembling – by forging new alliances with the ICC and NGOs – thus allowed for the insertion of a human security agenda to now further normalize militarization in the name of international criminal law enforcement.

One can also observe strong inclusion and exclusion practices and friction between the parties forming the core of the military assemblage (AFRICOM and Uganda) and regional countries affected by the presence of the LRA. The DRC, for example, has frequently undermined the threat representation of the LRA, claiming that the LRA is among the least dangerous armed groups within its borders (Titeca and Costeur, 2015: 103). This can be explained by the fact that Uganda has repeatedly used the mobile LRA threat as a justification to send its military onto DRC territory, where prior interventions have led to exploitation of natural resources and atrocities against civilians. After the failure of the regional 2008 Operation Lightning Thunder, for example, an informal agreement permitted a small number of Ugandan intelligence personnel to stay on Congolese territory, ostensibly to chase Kony. These 'small numbers' turned out to be an estimated 3000 soldiers, who remained in the DRC until 2011. This created tensions with Congolese troops, who accused the Ugandan military of involvement in illicit ivory trade and complicity with the LRA – for example, through staging LRA attacks and supplying the LRA

(Titeca and Costeur, 2015: 105). Ultimately, the DRC banned Ugandan forces from entering the country. The idea of a regional task force was therefore originally met with fierce opposition by the DRC.¹⁰ Mike Bugason, adviser to the AU's special envoy on the LRA, explained in an interview that 'Invisible Children's campaign, although outdated, brought the international attention, engagement, and pressure that was needed to launch the task force two months after the campaign's release' (Interview 3).¹¹ Since the establishment of the regional task force, the DRC has been put under renewed pressure by the USA and Uganda to allow Ugandan soldiers back on its territory in the name of capturing Kony (Fisher, 2014: 693).¹²

Here we see how the portrayal of the LRA as constantly on the move offered not just a problem but opportunities too. The move from a geocentric to a target-centric military strategy rendered the enrolment of the DRC and the CAR into the assemblage as urgent and necessary. In fact, this is how war is being transformed by the 'slippery spaces within which and through which it is conducted' (Gregory, 2011: 239). In our case, the compulsory and productive power to assemble and reassemble legitimated and allowed for the spatial reconfiguration of war. It translated into an increased mobile employability of military personnel 'in the name of' hunting Kony.

Militarization and human (in)security

Once established, the Kony military assemblage enabled AFRICOM to engage in 'shaping' the African environment through 'forward posture' and 'presence'. This included M2M training, financial support, airlifts, communications and intelligence support to the roughly 3000 AU regional task force troops. In 2014, the Pentagon deployed an additional 150 special operations forces, along with several CV-22 Osprey aircraft.¹³ From the 'cooperative security location' in Entebbe, US private contractors flew covert surveillance missions using white turboprop airplanes to collect intelligence from the airspace over Uganda, the DRC, South Sudan and the CAR. In addition, teams of special operations personnel were flown to 'forward operating locations' in LRA-affected areas, eventually leading to the establishment of 'combined operation fusion centers' (COFCs) in Obo and Djema (CAR), Dungu (DRC), and Nzara (South Sudan). Initially, these were small offices used to facilitate communication and plan joint military operations. The COFCs also worked closely with NGOs, such as Invisible Children, and the UN to inform local communities about hotspot areas of LRA activity and movements in order to improve civilian protection (Forest, 2014: 33). Invisible Children, for their part, utilized and refurbished high-frequency radios and satellite phones to collect data on LRA whereabouts and incidents (a programme known as the LRA Crisis Tracker).¹⁴ Later on, the Pentagon assigned private military contractors to rebuild the COFCs into relatively large air-conditioned base camps along the Iraq/Afghanistan model. This intervention was criticized by members of the special operations teams for creating physical and psychological barriers between US personnel and their African military counterparts, and for making it harder for them to be seen as 'roughing it, like the locals' (Forest, 2014: 33, 62). Nonetheless, the base camps remained.

The assemblage approach allows us to investigate not only how parties engaged in liquid warfare cohere and act, but also how they have an effect. Reports by regional and military specialists demonstrate that the deployment of a large number of troops in 2011 and 2012 did not correspond with the LRA threat on the ground. The last major reported LRA attacks were in retaliation for Operation Lightning Thunder. After 2010, however, and thus prior to the active involvement of AFRICOM, the level of LRA violence and abductions declined dramatically, reaching an all-time low in 2011 and 2012 (Branch, 2012; Forest, 2014; Schomerus and Vries, 2014; Titeca and Costeur, 2015). From then onwards, the LRA counted only an estimated 250 armed fighters, and its trademark attacks became much smaller scale and much less frequent (Titeca and Costeur, 2015: 100).

Despite the decline of the LRA, the Kony military assemblage engendered the militarization of the region. This coincided with the further unravelling of the rebel organization. In 2013, Invisible Children reported that several LRA camps were destroyed and 16 of its estimated 250 combatants were killed or captured, while another 16 defected (The Resolve and Invisible Children, 2013). In August 2014, LRA top commander Dominic Ongwen (second on the ICC list) released 74 women and children abductees, and in January 2015 he surrendered in the CAR and was handed over to the ICC. In March 2015, it was reported that a corpse exhumed by the Ugandan authorities was identified, through DNA testing, as being that of Okot Odhiambo (third on the ICC list) (ICC, 2015).

Militarization, however, also contributed to a worsening in local security dynamics. The very soldiers who were deployed to fight the LRA and protect civilians were reportedly posing a threat to the local population. For years, the Ugandan military has been renowned for its human rights abuses and looting of resources across its borders in the DRC and South Sudan (Schomerus, 2012). True to its reputation, the Ugandan military has faced allegations that soldiers committed rape and sexual violence against women and girls in the CAR during their hunt for Kony (Hattam, 2017). Congolese soldiers stationed in LRA-affected areas also did little to protect the civilian population and, at times, committed violations (including looting, sexual violence, murder and unlawful arrest) on a level greater than that of the presumed attacks carried out by the LRA (Titeca and Costeur, 2015: 111). An array of other actors, including bandits, poachers, armed groups and again soldiers, allegedly disguised themselves as LRA, mimicking the rebels' repertoire of violence. This not only scared the local population into submission and facilitated looting but also misdirected blame to the LRA (Titeca, 2013). In addition, owing to the overemphasis by the COFCs and Invisible Children on the security threat posed by the LRA (publicized through radio programmes and warning posters), local communities in South Sudan and the CAR reported being afraid to leave their homes and villages (Interview 4).¹⁵ Finally, in return for US military support, Ugandan regional task force troops have been covertly redeployed to fight Al-Shabaab in Somalia (Fisher, 2012; Titeca and Costeur, 2015). An evaluation report by the US Special Operations Command, for instance, mentions that US special forces provided training on urban counterinsurgency to Ugandan counterparts deploying to Mogadishu (Forest, 2014: 30). Troops from the Ugandan regional task force also fought alongside President Salva Kiir Mayardit's troops in South Sudan.¹⁶ Hundreds of Ugandan soldiers were killed in both struggles. In 2010, Al-Shabaab retaliated directly for Ugandan involvement in Somalia by detonating two bombs in Kampala, Uganda, killing 74 people and injuring hundreds. All this makes it safe to conclude that the Kony military assemblage has perpetuated the same problems it claimed to be fighting: human insecurity and retaliation against civilians.

Managing failures and contradictions

Despite these failures, none of the actors within the military assemblage have been held accountable for the lives lost and damage done. Neither the Ugandan military nor AFRICOM were held accountable for leaving over 865 Congolese and South Sudanese civilians unprotected in the wake of their 2008 joint military mission Operation Lightning Thunder. Since the launch of Operation Observant Compass, the lines of responsibility have only become more diffuse. Key issues related to the increased militarization – including mission creep (the deployment of Ugandan troops to other theatres of war), an increased sense of insecurity and human rights abuses – are left unattended. An interview with Invisible Children's director of civic engagement illustrates that those within the Kony military assemblage are quick to pass the buck: 'We are not responsible for the crimes committed by soldiers under the AU command, because we only lobbied for US

intervention' (Interview 2). AFRICOM, in turn, has repeatedly blamed failures on the lack of discipline of its local partners (Turse, 2015).

Mission not accomplished

In March 2017, six years after the launch of Operation Observant Compass, AFRICOM announced that it 'will remove US military forces specifically focused on counter-LRA and transition to broader scope security and stability activities that continue the success of our African partners' (US Africa Command, 2017c). While the exact nature of this deassembling move is unknown at the time of writing, it once again reinforces the notion that we should not assess the operations against the LRA in terms of their stated human security objectives. The global 'hunt for Kony' mission never corresponded with security realities on the ground. The militarization move and active enrolment of AFRICOM into the assemblage (in 2011–2012) took place after a significant decline in LRA numbers and attacks. In turn, AFRICOM's deassembling of March 2017 is not a 'mission accomplished'. The LRA remains weak (an estimated 150 combatants), and Kony still is thought to be hiding somewhere in the jungle of the eastern CAR, posing a threat to neither the Museveni regime nor the USA. This does not mean there is no logic to all this. The Kony assemblage allowed a multiplicity of actors, each with their own motives, capabilities and specificities, to further their trajectories and objectives.

For AFRICOM, much has been achieved in terms of establishing operational capabilities and 'know-how' for a liquid military footing in a volatile and resource-rich region without deploying large amounts of boots on the ground. As discussed, AFRICOM has built an archipelago of military bases in Uganda, the DRC, South Sudan and the CAR, which serve as hubs for surveillance, airlift, intelligence and reconnaissance operations across Africa. According to AFRICOM Commander General Thomas Waldhauser, security cooperation with regional parties will continue despite the official ending of Operation Observant Compass (Maasho, 2017). In turn, the Museveni regime's close military collaboration with the USA under the cloak of 'the hunt for Kony' has offered a number of key benefits. First, this role has been crucial to avoid donor censure and accountability for Uganda's worsening democratic and human rights record, as well as corruption (Fisher, 2012). Second, as explained, the hunt for Kony legitimized sending Ugandan troops into neighbouring countries, where interventions have led to massive capture of resources. Third, the 'counter-LRA operations' earned at least US\$30 million annually for the Ugandan military, an institution that figures as a key power-base for the Museveni regime (Freeland, 2015: 307). The AU, another military contributor to the Kony assemblage, was keen to (re)position itself as a regional conflict-solving mechanism (Interview 3).¹⁷ The hunt for Kony provided an opportunity to pursue this course of action under the sympathetic eye of the international community (Gould, 2015). Finally, Invisible Children's *Kony2012* campaign, and the ICC prosecutor's participation in it, reinforced the threat perception that legitimized and increased the compulsory power of the military actors within the assemblage. The campaign's framing of the protracted civil war in terms of gross human rights abuses against helpless child victims by a cynical war criminal was instrumental to how Invisible Children and the ICC justified why they can claim rights on behalf of others. In addition, the prosecutor's appearance in *Kony2012*, pleading for US military intervention, is the discursive embodiment of the newfound relationship between the ICC and the USA. Faced with the reality that many state parties have failed to deliver indicted war criminals to the ICC, the prosecutor went from merely trying to avoid US condemnation towards actively seeking collaboration with AFRICOM to enforce its arrest warrants. While Kony is still at large, the military assemblage did arrest LRA rebel commander Dominic Ongwen. The former child soldier is now being put on trial at the ICC in The Hague and hailed as an ICC success story.

Over the past few years, US military attention and resources have shifted to the Sahel and Maghreb region, where arrangements similar to those outlined for Central and East Africa are being rolled out (particularly in Mali, Mauritania, Chad and Niger). Here we see the same instrumental deployment of flexible military partnerships and operational capabilities through which potential risks and dangers (however defined) are monitored and, if necessary, disrupted or contained. Here, too, political and military elites secure their often authoritarian regimes through plugging into AFRICOM's military assemblage (Reeve and Pelter, 2014).¹⁸ This roll-back/roll-out movement, we argue, is a key feature of liquid warfare. It shows the shift to 'mobile and open-ended war', in which people are harmed and killed, but which remains elusive and unaccounted for.

Conclusion

The current global conjuncture requires us to bring war and militarization 'back' into the field of security studies. Western-led warfare and tactics to counter security threats at a distance intimately intersect with (in)securities across new battlespaces. We have analysed Operation Observant Compass as part of an assemblage of governing through which heterogeneous elements and actors became aligned and were able to protect and promote interests in local settings across East Africa. Our lens of the assemblage helped us to flesh out the labile spatialities and temporally open-endedness of interventionist warfare, bringing into view a number of things. Despite the many frictions and tensions, and the important fact that the formation of the 'Kony military assemblage' never corresponded with security realities on the ground, the assemblage was able to hold together and have a series of effects. Of these, we identify the building of a flexible infrastructure of partnerships and operational capabilities for the protection and promotion of US interests and the containment of potential threats as of key importance. Although AFRICOM was a key player, the military assemblage was not an expression of a single type of institution or logic. Rather, we see how a diverse set of actors – governmental, nongovernmental, intergovernmental, corporate and non-profit – rearranged themselves according to the circumstances and demands of the 'mission'. We have shown how different actors and elements were included and excluded and how they played different parts in making the assemblage cohere and work. Human security discourses (ICC arrest warrants, Recovery Acts, the *Kony2012* video and Crisis Tracker) became crucial in ensuring the diffusion, circulation and reproduction of specific kinds of legitimizing expertise and knowledge. The productive (re)assembling of certain actors and threat perceptions, metaphors ('Kony as war criminal'), and knowledge practices allowed for the perpetuation of coercive military strategies of intervention that, as it turned out, served often unrelated military and economic goals and had substantial security effects. In addition, our analysis directs attention to the mutability of transnational governance arrangements and helps us capture 'mission creep'. It illustrates how the Kony assemblage mutated into other military arrangements and deal-makings, such as the deployment of Ugandan troops to fight Al-Shabaab. The shadiness of these military arrangements, particularly when legitimized by 'discourses of rescue', enabled permanence and depoliticization and diffused lines of responsibility for the 'collateral' damage done.

The mobility and temporal open-endedness of what we here have termed liquid warfare makes it hard to trace and pin down. This elusiveness both facilitates and is facilitated by dominant narratives of military operations in Africa as necessary interventions to 'keep us safe'. By addressing the lack of evidence on the histories, production, dynamics and impacts of liquid warfare, and by mapping local repercussions and tracing lines of responsibility, we have here aimed to contribute to 'making visible' and 'making strange' these contemporary forms of militarism and militarization.

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Notes

1. See Airwars and Remote Control (2016).
2. Extrastate military operations involve the fighting by a (coalition of) state(s) outside one's borders against the armed forces of another, non-state party. We here alternate between this term and 'interventionist warfare'.
3. We define 'governance' as 'the attempt to direct conduct and intervene in social processes to produce desired outcomes and avert undesired ones' (Li, 2007: 264).
4. Security cooperation encompasses all US Department of Defense interactions, programmes and activities with foreign security forces to build relationships that promote US interests; to enable partners to provide the US with access to territory, infrastructure, information and resources; and/or to build and apply their capacity and capabilities in ways consistent with US defense objectives (Watts and Biegon, 2017: 2).
5. In 2006, just 1% of all US commandos deployed overseas were in Africa. By 2016, that figure had jumped to more than 17% (Turse, 2017).
6. Interviews were held with representatives of the African Union, Invisible Children, the International Criminal Court and the Ugandan military (Gould, 2015, 2016).
7. See the Lord's Resistance Army Disarmament and Northern Uganda Recovery Act of 2009, Pub. L. No.111-172(2010).
8. In principle, this is paid to private contractors, but in reality, as regional specialist Kristof Titeca explained, the Ugandan military makes a list of goods it needs, which is then allocated to military contractors (Interview 1).
9. See also Fisher (2014: 694) and Titeca and Costeur (2015: 110).
10. The CAR initially welcomed the Ugandan military's engagement in operations against the LRA but increasingly expressed concern that it was profiting from the CAR's natural wealth and repeatedly called for limited Ugandan engagement (see International Crisis Group, 2015).
11. In 2009, an action plan for a regional task force had already been adopted during a special summit in Tripoli (see International Crisis Group, 2015).
12. This position was reiterated by various representatives from the African Union, Invisible Children, the United Nations and the European Union during the conference 'The Lord's Resistance Army Conflict: Where State Security and Human Security Meet', held in Brussels on 2 October 2013.
13. A month later, AFRICOM announced that it was pulling the aircraft out of the mission. For a description of these events, see Titeca and Atkinson (2014).
14. Available at <https://lra-crisistracker.com> (accessed 25 May 2017).
15. See also Schomerus and de Vries (2014).
16. This was confirmed in an interview with a commander of the Ugandan military (Interview 5).
17. See also International Crisis Group (2015: 12).
18. In 2012, for example, a US-trained military leader overthrew the democratically elected government of Mali in a coup (Whitlock, 2012).

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4. Conversation with Assistant Professor Lotje de Vries, regional specialist, Utrecht, the Netherlands, 8 September 2016.
5. Interview with a commander of the Ugandan military (confidential source), Gulu, Uganda, 6 January 2015.

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