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The Blood-Stained-Gate: An Archive of Emotion and Authenticity in the New Slave Narrative

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Slavery, Literature, and the Emotions

eds. Mads Anders Baggesgaard, Madeleine Dobie, and Karen-Margrethe Simonsen

Abstract: This paper suggests that the slave narrative employs metonym as an archive of memory when authors are unwilling or unable to articulate the experience of trauma explicitly. Drawing on Frederick Douglass's use of the "blood-stained gate" metaphor as a repository for his emotional suffering, the paper describes how blood serves as a metonymic vehicle for communicating authenticity in narratives in which affective descriptions run counter to the ambitions of the genre. Ismael Beah's *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (2007) and Emmanuel Jal's *War Child* (2008) present contrasting cases of blood's capacity to serve as a repository for the emotional content of war. The trope of blood is then used as a lens for understanding why audiences respond skeptically to slave narratives and suggests a less suspicious reading practice among scholars and activists.

Keywords: slave narrative, Frederick Douglass, Ismael Beah, Emmanuel Jal, modern slavery, child soldier, blood, new slave narrative, Sierra Leone, civil war

The slave narrative has reemerged in the twenty-first century as a genre of first-person eyewitness testimony that reveals the horrors of contemporary forms of forced labor and as a means to inspire social and economic change. Despite the differences in the forms slavery takes today from the forms of chattel slavery characteristic of the U.S. antebellum period, the "new slave narratives" of formerly enslaved people bear a striking resemblance to the narratives told by nineteenth-century African-American survivors of the American plantation system. Narrators tell stories of their innocent childhoods, their initiation into the violence of slavery, of vicious slaveholders and brave resistant freedom fighters. They articulate their dreams of liberation and depict their escapes in extensive detail, while casting much of the experience of the day-to-day labor and emotional trauma of slavery into the shadows.

Indeed, slave narratives – whether they represent slavery in the nineteenth-century or in the twenty-first – reveal and confront the silences that slavery imposes on its subjects. By articulating the experience of bondage, survivors of slavery gain power over their own pasts, over the traumatic experiences of enslavement. Yet in every slave narrative, some aspects of the experience slip into

oblivion, are muted by repression, or simply defy articulation. There are some emotions too traumatic to recount, some details too bizarre to assimilate, some memories too harrowing to express intelligibly. Trauma is often sequestered in the shadows of the psyche, left inarticulable and even inaccessible to the victims. On the other hand, writers sometimes intentionally avoid or obfuscate certain moments of their pasts as a method of controlling their own narratives. Their experiences of trauma, while articulable, remain intentionally unarticulated to make space in their narratives for their politics instead of dwelling on their subjection. These dynamic contours of memory and testimony reveal the way the genre is shaped as much by silences as by what is made evident on the page. By analyzing both the language and content formerly enslaved people employ in their narratives as well as those events and emotions that remain shrouded in silence, we can better comprehend the genre of the slave narrative across time.

In this paper, I use nineteenth-century narrative conventions as a lens for reading the contemporary slave narrative of Ishmael Beah. I begin by analyzing Frederick Douglass's description of the beating of his Aunt Hester to argue that he employs the trope of blood (in particular, the blood-stained gate) in his 1845 slave narrative as an archive for his emotional suffering. Blood serves as a metonymic vehicle for communicating authenticity at a time when expressing emotions was anathema to the genre's success among suspicious audiences. I then suggest that what we learn about blood's archive of emotion and authenticity from Douglass can provide a key to some of the more complicated questions that confront scholars of the twenty-first-century slave narrative, including the crises of legibility, authenticity, and veracity that haunt the form. Through reading Ismael Beah's *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*, I will demonstrate the trope's persistent capacity to articulate suffering and trauma when the pain of enslavement proves overwhelming for the new slave narrator and thus nearly impossible to communicate legibly to audiences. In an effort to distinguish the slave narrative from similar first-person narratives of unforced labor, I analyze the significantly different mobilization of blood in Emmanuel Jal's narrative of (self-proclaimed) voluntary child soldiering. This contrasting of the depiction of blood in two child soldier narratives that are often read together provides valuable insight into the challenges of articulating the realities of forced labor, which often provokes skepticism in audiences. The paper then turns to the crisis of veracity that has haunted the slave narrative for the entire history of its existence, and I argue that while the details of Beah's narrative were questioned by journalists, his use of blood as an archive represents one of many strategies of displacement that new slave narrators use to shield themselves from the voyeuristic tendencies of human rights audiences who demand "flesh and blood" evidence of their claims. Instead of revealing their most intimate

traumas or disrobing themselves to reveal the scars of slavery, as many enslaved people were and are encouraged to do, these strategies of displacement fill in some of the gaps and fissures in the narratives that are signs of both traumatic silences and an empowered survivor who determines the content of his own life narratives. Ironically, it may be these strategies of displacement are the very rhetorical turns that provoke the anxiety of authenticity that surrounds the slave narrators, and thus, this literary critical reading of the texts might contribute to a more informed approach to survivor testimony among activists and society at large.

In “‘I was Born’: Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature” James Olney introduces his generic analysis of the slave narrative by invoking an imaginary reader. This reader considers the vast potential of the slave narrative as a genre and predicts that each unique experience of slavery would produce a unique autobiography of an individual particularly altered and determined by their singular experience of bondage. Instead, the imagined reader finds the “overwhelming *sameness*” of the narratives. Olney sympathizes with this reader’s necessary resignation to the fact that the slave narrative follows a fairly standard narrative trajectory and structure (1984, p. 46). Olney does not necessarily intend to denigrate the imaginative capacities of this particularly literary and creative population of former slaves, so he reminds us in this oft-cited article that the slave narrative is no different than any of the polemical political treatises written by any other group of people determined to affect change. Regardless of who is telling the story, the slave narratives adhered to certain genre conventions precisely because certain experiences were central to the story slaves felt required to tell in order to convince American and British citizens of the urgency of abolition. As Olney puts it, the slave narrators and their editors were “captive to the abolitionist intentions” of the narratives (1984, p. 65).

Olney suggests, I think convincingly, that one of the most counter-intuitive conventions of the slave narratives was that they were largely emotionless. He argues that their affective terseness was a result of the fact that there was such a demand that the narrators tell “slavery as it is” that any recourse to emotional embellishment might call the veracity of their reports into question. Even Frederick Douglass, who is often characterized as the most erudite of the slave narrators, famously complained that his white abolitionist colleagues wanted to “pin [him] down to a simple narrative” and that he was explicitly told to provide the facts of his experience alone. (1969 [1845], p. 362). Even in his writing, which was increasingly less constrained by other abolitionists as he insisted on his own autonomy in narrating his life and politicizing his experience, Douglass is often emotionless,

reportorial even. An exemplary passage, which is often cited as a dramatic and affecting rendering of the horrors of slavery, is the one in which he narrates the torture of his Aunt Hester in his narrative of 1845. That passage is worth quoting at length to illustrate the way silences, elisions, and deferrals pervade the description of even the most violent scenes of subjection. Douglass writes:

I have often been awakened at the dawn of day by the most heart-rending shrieks of an own aunt of mine, whom [the slave owner] used to tie up to a joist, and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood. No words, no tears, no prayers, from his gory victim, seemed to move his iron heart from its bloody purpose. The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped longest. He would whip her to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush; and not until overcome by fatigue, would he cease to swing the blood-clotted cowskin. I remember the first time I ever witnessed this horrible exhibition. I was quite a child, but I well remember it. I never shall forget it whilst I remember any thing. It was the first of a long series of such outrages, of which I was doomed to be a witness and a participant. It struck me with awful force. It was the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass. It was a most terrible spectacle. I wish I could commit to paper the feelings with which I beheld it. (2018 [1845], p. 16)

Though Douglass describes Hester's shrieks as "heart-rending" and recounts vaguely that the event "struck [him] with an awful force," he admits here that he is unable to adequately express his emotional anguish at witnessing the spectacle. Douglass claims to be incapable of fully describing the emotional response of Aunt Hester, of her torturer, and even of himself as a child. There is no expression of his fear that he might be beaten himself; he doesn't describe his tears; he doesn't recount the nightmares this inspired or the traumatic responses he had to seeing a whip later on. Whether it was the generic conventions of factual precision or the mind's incapacity to articulate such emotional torment, Douglass largely allows the visual details of the torture to convey the emotional content of experience. The audience or reader is left to project their emotional response onto the young enslaved witness.

Douglass does, however, remark on how the scene was committed to his memory, and the language he chooses to describe that memory is "blood-stained." Upon re-reading, the pervasiveness of blood begins to emerge from the page, and we recognize that Douglas depicts blood in nearly every

sentence of that passage as a marker of the gravity of the situation, without having to reveal his emotional state. Hester is “literally covered in blood.” The slaveholder was motivated by a “bloody purpose,” that drove him to whip hardest “where the blood ran fastest,” with his “blood-clotted cowskin.” Douglass sums the spectacle up in a single, bloody metaphor, declaring, “It was the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass.” The sentences in which he does not use the word “blood” refer to the strength of his memory and the failures of language to describe those persistent recollections. Indeed, it seems that blood stands in for memory and language when both lack the capacity to communicate to others the sheer horror of slavery, as a sort of Lacanian metonymic displacement. He allows the blood to do the emotional work for readers, such that they are forced to visualize for themselves the scene, and thus create an identification that provides a scaffolding for their own emotional response to the brutality of slavery. Douglass’s intimate emotional work is thus not the spectacle described in this scene; he is not compelled to reveal his own tortured emotional state for the voyeuristic inspection or dissection of the audience. Instead, the blood serves as an emotional archive for the audience. Here, Douglass employs what I call a “strategy of displacement” common to the slave narrative (Murphy, 2019, p. 31). By displacing the emotional content of this scene onto blood, Douglass adheres to genre conventions and controls his own exposure in his narrative, while still imposing his own affective regime and providing a taste of that “flesh and blood” desired by the abolitionists audiences.

I am interested in the way blood (among any number of other metaphors might serve as a metonymic archive for emotions in narratives of slavery more broadly and how Douglass’s mobilization of that metaphor might provide insight into strategies of displacement used by new slave narrators. Ishmael Beah’s *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* reveals striking resonances with Douglass’ use of blood as a trope of innocence lost and the initiation into slavery’s violence. The narrative was a darling of the press and activists, a *New York Times* Bestseller, one of Oprah’s “40 books to read before turning 40,” as well as the inaugural book in the Starbucks reading club. Beah was appointed the first UNICEF Advocate for Children Affected by War for his efforts to address child soldiering worldwide. His first-person memoir tells the story of a child forced into becoming a soldier in Sierra Leone’s civil war. Though Beah never explicitly uses the word “slavery” to describe his captivity as a child soldier, he describes an experience of kidnapping into conscripted military service, which was forced upon him by violence and was unremunerated and inescapable. This

experience fits most definitions of enslavement, and his narrative has been read by critics (including me) as an iteration of the new slave narrative (Kaoma, 2017; Murphy, 2015).

As was the case for young Douglass, the violence Beah witnessed is deeply inscribed in his memory. Wartime memories recur to him in nightmares or in vomit-inducing flashbacks throughout the book. Beah claims to have “an excellent photographic memory that enables me to remember details of the day-to-day moments of my life, indelibly” (2007, p. 51). Those details include the brutal murder of a fellow recruit, the disappearance of his own brother, and the massacre of his family in a fire. Beah’s claim to have a photographic memory is his way of engaging in the “autobiographical pact” that Philippe LeJeune describes (1989, p. 11), essentially asserting the legitimacy and veracity of the story he is about to tell, and ostensibly dispelling any doubt a reader might have that he has been the victim of a gruesome human rights violation.

New slave narrators are admittedly somewhat less reportorial and more graphic and emotive than nineteenth-century narrators, as are twenty-first-century memoirists in general. And Beah is no exception to that limited revision to the genre. When he finds his parents had been burned alive in an attack on the village in which they had been hiding, he goes into a rage, as he screamed, cried, and kicked burning buildings without care for his own safety. He recalls, “I hissed and boiled, and my heart felt like it was going to explode” (p. 95). This expressive outpouring of emotion is rarely depicted in a nineteenth-century narrative and is not particularly common among twenty-first-century narratives either. Nonetheless, typically when Beah recalls his emotional state in the midst of wartime atrocities, those expressions quite often refer to the marked absence of emotion he feels, as in the many times that he indicates that he “felt nothing” or that “nothing happened in my head” (p. 120) or that he “couldn’t think” (p. 117) or that his “brain had shaken loose from its anchor” (p. 118) both during and after situations of extreme violence. Or consider the reportorial tone he uses to describe the sudden disappearance of his own brother, his last living family member, where he writes simply and with no explanation: “It was the last time I saw Junior, my older brother” (p. 43) Or the reportorial description of his first killing, after which he says his mind had “snapped” and “stopped making remorseful records, or so it seemed” (p. 122). Repression of the experience of trauma is immediate and persistent in Beah’s experience.

Reading Beah’s narrative in light of Douglass’ “blood-stained gate” metaphor, we can begin to track the way Beah also fills the spaces of the emotionless voids he experiences with vivid and emotionally disturbing images of blood, which often runs like a river, flows uncontrollably, or saturates the earth. For example, when Beah first witnesses the violence of war, he writes,

More than twenty people lay facedown in the earth. They were all lined up, and blood still poured out of their bullet wounds. A stream of it had begun running along the ground, making its way under each body, as if joining them together. Gasemu's sobs grew louder as he turned each body over. Some of their mouths and eyes were open in shapes that showed how much they had cringed as they waited for the bullets from behind. Some had inhaled dirt, perhaps while taking their last breath. (p. 94)

As it was for Douglass, blood is Beah's initiation into a loss of innocence. Just as Aunt Hester's blood ushered young Douglass through the blood-stained gate of slavery, so the sight of the blood of the community in which his parents took refuge is an initiation into the horrors of war for Beah. Though his friend Gasemu is sobbing, Beah reports the visual onslaught with literary detail but without personal emotional embellishment. In the place of emotion, the flowing blood stands in as the connective tissue between individual human beings, as Beah suggests that blood binds victims of violence to one another at the same time as it unites those individuals and the land. Though the sight of his own parents' death finally strikes a nerve in him, his initial response and his description of that moment allows the blood to speak as an affective response to the scene of brutality.

The commanders who eventually hold Beah captive understand that scenes of bloody violence like this act as the initiation into a soldier's life. When he forces Beah and other children to witness the murder of their friends and neighbors, an older soldier tells them: "We have to do this to show you blood and make you strong" (p. 34), but there is no sense that seeing the blood increases Beah's fortitude in war or even that it instills him with terror. Indeed, there is never a time when Beah integrates this notion of blood making him strong into his own way of thinking. Instead, the blood stands in as a sign of connection to humanity and community and the land. Furthermore, it fills in the emotional space to represent horror when the language to describe the affective content of horror is unavailable to him.

Before Beah directly witnesses the war's violence in combat himself, he sees the gory evidence of the atrocities committed by the rebels who captured him in their blood-stained clothes, and again he taps into blood's archive of emotions without affective language. He describes his first sight of the seemingly callous young rebels whom he was forced to join as they came back from a battle: "They had blood on their clothes, and one of them carried the head of a man, which he held by the hair. . . Blood dripped from where the neck had been" (p. 96). Again stripped of any emotional response, this

early reportorial description of the other soldiers nonetheless portrays the barbarity of the young soldiers' violence through the image of a gruesome decapitated head. Interestingly, a few pages later, Beah echoes those images of blood to connect with the humanity of these seemingly vicious child soldiers and to engage the readers' sympathies. He writes, "Some had blood on their uniforms and faces, which they didn't seem to notice or simply ignored. They quickly ate breakfast and were on their way back to where they didn't look as if they wanted to return" (p. 110). Beah reveals that these soldiers too are victims. Blood serves here as a proxy for the trauma and isolation these young soldiers feel instead of the violence that they have inflicted on others. Just as he describes himself as numbed to any emotion regarding the violence he later commits, these other young men are unable to express their emotions, and they are hardened to a war Beah deduces they do not want to fight. The blood embedded in their clothes serves as a metaphor for the shock and pain and horror that is now as embedded in their memory as it is in their clothes, leaving them both hungry and numb.

It is not long before Beah is sharing in these same blood-stained meals with his fellow child soldiers and in their affective archive captured in blood. He emotionlessly reports his wartime ventures: "We would stop to wipe the blood off our lips, arms, and legs only when the bell rang for mealtime" (p. 139), and he even describes a moment in which he and his fellow child soldiers wordlessly sit on the bloody bodies of victims as they take their meal. In repeating these blood-stained images, he is able to connect himself to the victim-perpetrators he had first witnessed when he was brought into the rebel group and similarly exonerates himself from the violence and exempts himself from the emotional response that a reader might expect from someone who has just killed innocent children. Blood may be a sign of the violence they have inflicted and satisfy the sensational demands of the genre, but it also acts a sign of the children's own vulnerability and victimization. The blood-stained clothing allows Beah to elide the scene of violence, and without having to engage the emotions that are associated with that scene, evoke the young child soldiers' ambivalent and conflicted participation.

From the moment of that initiation into the status of victim-perpetrator, blood begins to stand in as a provoker of memory, as the thread that connects victims to one another over the time he serves as a soldier. Of one battle he recalls, "My face, my hands, my shirt and gun were covered with blood. I raised my gun and pulled the trigger, and I shot a man. Suddenly, as if someone was shooting them inside my brain, the massacres I had seen since the day I was touched by war began flashing in my head. Every time I stopped shooting to change a magazine and saw my two young lifeless friends, I angrily pointed my gun into the swamp and killed more people" (p. 119). As was the case with

Douglass, memories of violence cannot be sullied, and for Beah, blood is the psychological trigger for their recurrence. Without any conscious sense of agency, he reenacts the scenes from his memory “as witness and participant,” as Douglass put it, but in this case also as perpetrator. Again, the symbol of the blood-stained shirt is linked to his role as the subject, not the agent, of war, whose conscience and desire are entirely subordinated. He and his fellow child rebels are merely blood-covered bodies at war rather than blood-thirsty soldiers. All of the massacres – those of his two young lifeless friends as well as all the others he has witnessed – haunt him and, as in a nightmare he cannot control, he continues shooting, “as if someone was shooting them inside my brain.” The traumatic repetition of war’s psychological damage to his young psyche is thus sublimated into the blood-triggered violence Beah is forced to enact.

Both supporting and complicating the use of blood as a vehicle for emotions, Beah writes later in that depiction of his engagement in automatic violence that the “water in that swamp had been replaced by blood. We flipped the bodies over and took their ammunition and guns. I was not afraid of these lifeless bodies. I despised them and kicked them to flip them” (p. 119). On the one hand, this scene repeats the image of water thickened with blood as a signal of the horrific violence and as replacement for an emotional response to it. On the other hand, we do get a glimpse here into the emotion of the moment – Beah now despises the enemy – he’s not simply emotionlessly following commands or killing in some kind of fugue state. This turn in the representation of emotions suggests that Beah begins to take on a sense of responsibility here, that he is forging a sense that his hatred is a motivator for the violence. However, he soon returns to the metaphor of his blood-stained clothes to represent his status as an automaton responsible only to the order of the adults who command him. “The blood of our victims and enemies was fresh on our arms and clothes. The lieutenant’s words still echoed in my head: ‘From now on, we kill any rebel we see, no prisoners’” (p. 137). The ambivalence represented by this moment is acute: shortly after Beah admits to a conscious activation as a soldier driven by his own hatred, he quickly exonerates himself by attaching responsibility to his commanders.

From this conflicted point on, Beah is haunted by his experience on the battlefield, and blood becomes the repository of the haunting memories of complicity that he cannot shake. “Whenever I turned on the tap water, all I could see was blood gushing out. I would stare at it until it looked like water before drinking or taking a shower” (p. 144). His role in the war becomes inescapable whether he is on the battlefield or in his private quarters after liberation, as blood begins to flow into the current of his memory. And as he reveals very early on in the narrative, his dreams also figure him as

a victim – in one of his nightmares, he sees a bloodied body wrapped in a sheet, and when he tears away the sheet, he sees that the shrouded body is his own. Victim or perpetrator – that becomes the crux of the conflict in Beah's narrative, and blood now signals his lingering anxieties about his role in the very atrocities and enslavement of which he is a victim.

Like Douglass, Beah uses repeated images of blood – blood-soaked clothes, bodies, and soil – as a strategy of displacement that empowers him to inscribe affective content into his narrative without dwelling on his own conflicted emotional state. Like so many of the courageous people who testify to the horrors of slavery, Beah turns the narrative focus away from his own body, his own emotions, and his own trauma at the very most horrific moments of his life. Beah instead employs blood as an unmistakable metonym for wartime violence and unspeakable atrocities, his own strategy of displacement that strikingly resonates with Douglass's. In this way, he signals to the reader the terror, fear, anxiety, and even guilt and shame he feels without having to commit those feelings to the gravity, visibility, and permanence of written language.

By way of contrast, we can look to a child soldier narrative that falls outside of what I'm calling "the new slave narrative" as a way of testing this claim about how blood figures as a strategy of displacement in Beah's new slave narrative. Emmanuel Jal, a former child soldier from South Sudan is a rapper whose music is dedicated to liberatory, anti-war messages, but whose narrative, *War Child*, was far less feted than Beah's. His relative lack of circulation in general, and even in human rights advocacy communities, is perhaps due in part to the very reason I cannot include his work in the canon of new slave narratives, that being the fact that in many ways Jal celebrates his participation in the war and, though he was a child, he takes complete responsibility for, and even pride in, his actions. Whereas Beah understands himself to have been held captive and forced into killing others, Jal expresses his own desire to avenge his parents' death and to fight for the freedom of his people. If we take Jal at his word (and I do), he was not enslaved, and thus I do not think it is appropriate to consider his text a slave narrative. His self-reported pride in his voluntary deployment in the Sudanese civil war puts him in clear distinction to Beah, and his representation of blood interestingly emphasizes and illustrates that difference.

In Jal's narrative, blood functions in distinction to its function in Beah. Even as it is employed as a marker of violence, it is simultaneously a metaphor for blessings and growth. The first appearance of blood is in a scene of animal sacrifice, in which Jal teaches us that the animal's blood spreading over the earth is a blessing (2008, p. 21). The next mention of blood is during an initiation ceremony,

and it signifies being a part of a community. As he watches the blood drip down the face of a young initiate, he explains that his culture's *gaar* ritual scarring of boys represents a transition to maturity, a sign that a young man is ready both for romance and for war (pp. 37-38). In another scene, villagers are forced to bleed their treasured cows, but it is done in order to keep themselves strong in the face of famine (p. 36). In all of the images of blood Jal inscribes in the first few chapters of his life narrative, the shedding of blood is established as a positive sacrifice for the blessing, sustenance, and transformation of the community and its members.

This rendering of blood can inform our analysis of Jal's representation of blood within scenes of wartime violence. Jal's "blood-stained gate" into the horrors of war is a moment of familial sacrifice. It was a quiet morning and all of his neighbors were gathering outside, when an "Arab" approached his family friend with a gun. When the neighbor would not submit to the Arab's demands, the Arab shot him, and he reports that neighbor "Gatluak's stomach had been ripped apart and his intestines filled out of the wound." Jal's mother tries to help, and her hands were "bright with blood as she tried to hold the skin together... I couldn't move, couldn't take my eyes away from the sight of Gatluak's guts – gray like a goat's – mixing with a sea of red" (p. 24). Gatluak is sacrificed in a scene that echoes the one in which his parents sacrificed the cow only pages earlier in the memoir. If we read the earlier story of sacrifice as a foreshadowing of Gatluak's sacrifice, however, the blood is a "blessing" – but what kind of a blessing? According to Jal's earlier formulations, blood is that which we spill in order to claim the land, to bless our lives, to mark community belonging. In repeating the language of the sacrifice when blood is drawn in wartime, Jal reminds us that this blood too is about land, life, and community. Drawing blood is a sign of agency even when his neighbor is a victim.

If this connection between earlier scenes of blood sacrifice and Gatluak's sacrifice at the hands of the nefarious "Arab" seems too a tenuous relationship, Jal soon explicitly affirms the value his community places on blood sacrifice in wartime. He is told by an elder that the South Sudanese "will never get their land back without blood being shed" (p. 64), which relates to the young Jal a community discourse that suggests that blood is a sacrifice worth making. Jal becomes enamored of becoming a trained soldier immediately thereafter, in the hopes that he can fight and even shed his own blood for the protection of his land and community (p. 64). Unlike Beah, who indicates that he was forced into fighting in the war, Jal takes responsibility for his actions during wartime, recasting blood not as mindless violence but as a necessary sacrifice. Later, an officer explains to him and a crowd of other young men that they are merely shedding blood as a reply to other bloodshed, as retributive justice. "Much blood will have to be shed. But is there anyone here tonight who can say they have not already

seen it spilled? Who can raise their hand and say they haven't seen their house burned, their sisters raped, their mothers beaten?" (p. 73). Unlike Beah, who ignored these justifications of blood shedding from his commanders, Jal finds comfort in the notion that blood shedding will provide him an opportunity to avenge his community's losses and the violence enacted upon them. This justification works within an archive of meanings for blood that have been instilled in Jal since childhood and that now activate him as a voluntary soldier, despite his being a young child. Jal is told by his commanders: "Together you will take back the blood of your mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, uncles and aunts, cousins and grandparents, which was spilled on the earth of Sudan. . . . Always remember: the gun is your mother and father now.' I looked at him. I had a family, a home again. The training was over. I was a soldier. I was going to war" (p. 92). Blood, then, functions not as a proxy for trauma but as an initiation into becoming a man and a soldier.

Once Jal enters the proverbial theater of war, his perspective on blood does not change, despite the atrocities he surely witnessed as a soldier. Jal admits that the day of the raid in Juba in which he killed many people "was one of the hardest to remember because I had never spoken of it before." But he continues: "I feel no guilt about that day because I was a child who took part in killings as the hatred and sorrow built up over years and was released in mob violence. I did not kill in cold blood; I killed in war" (p. 255). On the one hand, he seems here to be exonerating himself, much as Beah does, by placing the blame on the war not on his own violent motivations. Through his third person reflection on himself as "a child who took part in killings," he seems to suggest a distance from that child and a passivity on the part of that child. But when he embraces the "hatred and sorrow" that had built up within him as a child, he provides a glimpse of his personal justification for his engagement in the war rather than an exemption from complicity for it. Throughout the book, he repeats this refrain about his own hatred and sorrow motivating him to be involved in the war. In that same passage, he admits that even years later he barely keeps his anger at bay because "some bonds cannot be broken inside, and their stories [of his family members' suffering] are the ones that threaten to send me back to bitterness because we are tied together in blood" (pp. 255-256). The blood ties him with the people he's seen murdered and massacred, and those bonds maintain the bitterness in his post-war life.

Beah's negotiation of the doubleness of blood – that of the victim-perpetrator – aligns perfectly with what Ali Schultheis Moore suggests when she reminds us that Beah's therapist repeated to him the phrase "none of what happened is your fault." Moore suggests that exoneration "reinforces

the discourses in international humanitarian law and dominant NGO work of childhood innocence, and allows him to begin to build a restorative trust with those around him” (2008, p. 35) Like the majority of the new slave narratives published by survivors today, the Beah narrative does not explicitly expose the global or local structural inequalities that made his experience as a forced laborer possible. It does not even require that he attempt to undo some of the ideological programming that made him kill because he renders himself mindless, emotionless, even when covered in the blood of those he took part in killing. To probe these depths would be to confront one of the complex realities of enslavement today – that many of the people who are forced to work in today’s economy are forced into work they otherwise would not choose and which often forces them into extraordinary ethical compromises. The displacement of this conflict onto the archive of blood allows Beah to begin to work through these tensions without directly confronting his own engagement in atrocities.

On the other hand, Jal’s narrative does not get articulated in the form of a slave narrative, does not require him to be an innocent, hapless child, does not exonerate him from complicity in war, and does not impose a victimization narrative upon him. As a result, his narrative finds little purchase within the child soldier or human rights or modern slavery discourse. Oprah and Starbucks do not pay his narrative mind. Jal and his narrative do not conform to the conventions of the slave narrative but instead insist on a kind of retributive justice that requires vengeance and blood in order to cleanse, and thus is exiled from the lucrative humanitarian establishment. This bloody vision of justice is shunned in the rights industry, not because it reinforces the depictions of Africa that we are trying to avoid here but because it undermines the portrait of innocence that the genre requires. Beah’s blood archive, however, conforms to the conventions of the slave narrative in such a way that make his experience seem both accessible and affective without his having to confront either his own emotions or his own complicity.

Despite his reportorial affect, his persistent resorting to the blood of war, his adherence to genre conventions, and his subsequent elevation to a human rights hero, Beah’s narrative of his time as a child soldier came under significant scrutiny in 2008, only a year after the book was originally published. Two journalists were alerted to inaccuracies in the date of the attack on Beah’s village, and began a campaign to question the accuracy of his memory (Gare and Wilson, 2008, n.p.). Reporters from *The Australian* news outlet investigated Beah’s narrative of his time as a child soldier, only to find that many people in Beah’s hometown claimed that the battle in which Beah was kidnapped had actually occurred two years later than Beah reported. If his neighbors were correct, it meant that Beah

had served as a child soldier for only several months, not for years, and it was enough to bring down even further scrutiny by *The Australian's* reporters. They subsequently found some evidence that one other aspect of Beah's story – the murder of several children in a UNICEF camp – was also not true or exaggerated (ibid). These factual attacks undermined Beah's self-legitimizing claim that he recalled all of the events of his captivity so clearly because he had photographic memory. Still, Beah refused to back down from his original claims. He and his publisher, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, maintained that every single detail in his story was grounded in the truth as far as he could possibly remember it. He wrote in the press release responding to *The Australian's* coverage, "Sad to say, my story is all true" (Beah, 2008, n.p.). Furthermore, former neighbors who confirm that the most significant attack on his hometown occurred in 1995, two years after Beah recalls being initiated into the war, also later confirmed that there were smaller attacks made on the village for at least two years prior, during which time Beah may have fled into the woods and been captured.

As a literary scholar, I am not able to determine, nor am I particularly interested in, whether Beah's account is factual in its every detail. Whether Beah spent several months or several years in captivity and forced labor is not significant in determining whether or not he might be considered enslaved nor is it significant in analyzing the tropes he brings to bear to represent his narrative. It is certainly likely that he has misremembered some of the factual details, including dates; it is even possible that he succumbed to some pressures of the genre to exaggerate or embellish some of his claims, including the length of time he was held captive. Since no one at all has questioned the veracity of his basic claim of being a forced child soldier or any of the details of the battles in which he fought, these details seem to the literary scholar as minimally problematic in a reading of the tropes, forms, and structures of narrative. In a way, these potentially fabricated details are not unlike the distanced, reportorial tone that so many slave narrators adopt to conform to the generic expectations of the genre. It could possibly be that Beah exaggerated his time (or his memory inflated the time) he was held captive because the longer time met the expectations of his donors, sponsors, and interlocutors in the human rights field as well as conformed more closely to the gravity and intensity of the experience in his memory.

Instead of dwelling on the veracity of any slave narrative, we can use the challenges to them to better understand the readerly expectations of slave narratives and why slave narrators feel so compelled to adopt the language, forms, tones, and even content that is expected of them by human rights audiences. This may begin to illuminate why slave narrators deflect from (and thereby protect) their own emotional responses to their most traumatic experiences in bondage and invest them in

metaphors like blood. Interestingly, Beah likely understands the skepticism of people who hear stories of war because he was once a skeptic himself. He writes of the war refugees who found sanctuary in Matru Jong before the fighting reached his hometown that “it was evident they had seen something that had plagued their minds, something *we would refuse to accept if they told us all of it*. At times I thought the stories the passersby told were exaggerated” (p. 5, emphasis added). As a writer, then, Beah likely anticipated and, here, even actively engages with the suspicions of his audience. One of the tools at his disposal was under-statement and unemotional reporting. Another seems to be to embed his emotional content in images of blood that provide the gory bodily details of war without having to expose his own traumatic response. In this way, he both provides the voyeuristic reader with the bloody anecdotes that make a narrative of wartime violence sound true and protects his own conflicted positionality in the war from scrutiny – by himself or others.

Beah is not the first slave narrator to have his life story doubted or to have anticipated a skeptical reception. In fact, the history of the slave narrative has been plagued by skepticism. On this count, the nineteenth-century narrative tradition can help us to understand Beah as well. Despite its centrality to the abolitionist movements of the antebellum period (or perhaps because of its centrality), the slave narrative tradition has always been fraught with anxieties of authenticity. Even the earliest narratives of captive Africans are littered with necessary attestations to their veracity, which are included to preempt suspicions. Briton Hammon, insisted that his life narrative was only concerned with “Matters of Fact as they occur to my Mind” (1760, p. 20). Olaudah Equiano (1789) and Henry Box Brown (1851) and many others asserted in their titles that their narratives were “written by himself.” Solomon Northup’s *12 Years a Slave* is prefaced with the disclaimer that

Many of the statements contained in the following pages are corroborated by abundant evidence – others rest entirely upon Solomon’s assertion. That he has adhered strictly to the truth, the editor at least, who has had an opportunity of detecting any contradiction or discrepancy in his statements, is well satisfied. He has invariably repeated the same story without deviating in the slightest particular, and has also carefully perused the manuscript, dictating an alteration wherever the most trivial inaccuracy has appeared. (2013 [1853], p. 1)

Elizabeth Keckley, who was enslaved in Abraham Lincoln’s home, reported that in her narrative, “much has been omitted, but nothing has been exaggerated” (1868, p. xi). Nearly every slave narrator felt obliged to preempt skeptics by including some claim to truth – whether self-proclaimed or

supported by a white abolitionist – in order to assuage any doubts that what they reported in their narratives was unmodified fact.

Formerly enslaved abolitionist William Wells Brown suggests that the problem of veracity may emerge from the problem of the inarticulability of slavery's horrors and one's own intimate experience of them. Brown escaped slavery to become a famous abolitionist who travelled the world telling the story of his life as a slave and as a fugitive in antebellum America on many of the same lecture circuits as Frederick Douglass. By the time he addressed the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Salem, Massachusetts in 1847, he had assembled a collection of tales so harrowing that his speeches were a great shock to many audience members. He told the story of the beating of an enslaved man named Lewis, a young man who had been strung up to the beams of a warehouse so that his toes only barely touched the floor, in punishment for visiting his own wife. Brown also related an event he saw on a boat in which a slaveholder stole a young mother's baby right from her very arms and gave it away because the baby cried too much. He soberly recounted the rape of another beautiful young woman he knew and the unfortunate life she led as the mother of the children born of her violation (1847). All of these stories were told in a reportorial fashion, without emotion or embellishment. The mere fact of the violence was enough to make his case and satisfy his audiences of the horrors of slavery, and perhaps, they were as much as he was capable of uttering aloud. Even the telling of the stories of all these other enslaved people who suffered is a form of displacement, through which slave narrators can project their own pain onto the narratives of others. By referring to others' pain they can simultaneously pause the narrative of their own suffering and displace their trauma onto the stories of the millions of others who have suffered alongside them.

Even having narrated these horrific tales that revealed the depraved behavior of slaveholders and the appalling conditions imposed upon the people who were enslaved, Brown admitted to the abolitionist women of Salem that he could not tell his audiences everything he knew about slavery. He had not told them the worst of the things he had seen, and he had not told them the emotional toll those events had on his own psyche. He told the group of white women gathered there, "I may try to represent to you Slavery as it is; another may follow me and try to represent the condition of the Slave; we may all represent it as we think it is; and yet we shall all fail to represent the real condition of the Slave. Your fastidiousness would not allow me to do it, and if it would, I, for one, should not be willing to do it; -- at least to an audience. Were I about to tell you the evils of slavery, to represent to you the slave in his lowest degradation, I should wish to take you one at a time, and whisper it to you." He

proclaimed, "Slavery has never been represented. Slavery can never be represented" (2008 [1847], p. 108.)

Brown's provocation was seductive, it was thrilling, and it was a huge risk on his part. Nonetheless, he recognized that there were some experiences of slavery so shocking and disgusting that they were actually unspeakable – there were no words capable of expressing the magnitude of that experience. His remarks harken back to Douglass' "blood-stained gate" which is seared in Douglass's memory, but the emotions he felt in that moment and for his entire life thereafter were unspeakable. They resonate through the centuries with Beah's own blood-stained clothing and his foreshortened emotional response in the face of utter brutality. These memories were not unspeakable merely because propriety dictated that audiences should not hear such atrocious tales. They were also unspeakable because slavery, as Brown put it, "can never be represented" (ibid.). There are some experiences which defy logic and articulation, which escape our ability to represent them. William Wells Brown knew how to explain, with precision and an eye for practical detail, how Louis was strung up to the rafters, just as Douglass could describe Aunt Hester's whipping and Beah can depict in detail the decapitated heads of young soldiers. Still, some more personal and painful parts of the experience of slavery – including their own personal, intimate, emotional reactions to that violence – defied even Douglass's and Brown's and Beah's exceptional rhetorical skills. They simply could not be represented. The psychic and linguistic incapacity to articulate the realities of slavery leaves slave narratives vulnerable to those who would question their veracity at the level of the intimate and minute detail.

New slave narrators confront the same challenges to articulating the realities of slavery and their emotive responses to it as did the slave narrators of the nineteenth century. Slave narratives, and child soldier narratives in particular, seem to be a persistent target of doubters. In part, attacks on the truthfulness of these narratives stem from the way they are structured more than by the details. Eleni Coundouriotis argues that child soldier narratives are structured as therapeutic or recovery narratives, which rely on the innocence of the soldier as victim, and thereby play into Makau Mutua's notion of the savage, victim, savior metaphor. (2010, p. 191-206). When victimhood is featured in such a way as to obscure the complexity of wartime violence, the very facts of the experience are sometimes called into question. Essentially, child soldier narratives – whether fictionalized or first-person – tend toward a narrative teleology that hinges on transformation. The narrator is an innocent child who is transformed into a beast of war, and it is only through another, this time therapeutic, transformation that leads to Western self-conceptions anchored in individual subjectivity and agency that they are freed of their enslavement. When victimhood is featured in such a way as to obscure the complexity

of the child soldier's complicity in wartime violence – which in some ways is the effect of the figuring of blood or other metonymies of war as an archive of memory, as evidenced by Beah's narrative – the facts presented as evidence of the claims of the child soldier are sometimes called into question. These same trends can be seen in the generically-consistent narratives of innocent children forced into the sex trade who are typically redeemed in freedom from the depths of depravity (Murphy 2019, pp. 175, 187-188). These controversies are exacerbated by the mediation of the narratives by activists and organizations, who often shape the narratives either through their editorial advice, speech coaching, or through ghost writers. Their mediation seems to universally obscure the systemic and global structures that encourage the deployment and abuse of child soldiers or other kinds of enslaved laborers. Beah admits to not wanting to bog his personal narrative down in too much history or politics that might deter readers, no doubt in part due to his training as a creative writer and his experience speaking about his life as a child soldier on the UNICEF lecture circuit. His chronology appended to the end of the book jumps quickly from the first slaves being taken from Sierra Leone to the British abolitionists "return" of four hundred freed slaves to Sierra Leone, giving birth to Freetown. The ravages of colonialism are ignored and in their place are the British establishment of an anti-slavery naval base on Sierra Leone's coast and the establishment of first university on the west coast of Africa. He studiously avoids making overt claims about colonialism and global capital's role in the fomenting crisis in the Sierra Leone region, which makes way for his depiction of the conflict being entirely internal and driven by a struggle for power among its inhabitants. Beah's narrative, like so many human rights narratives supported by non-profits or international organizations turns away from the complex global politics and structural inequalities that are at the heart of Africa's conflicts. This is no mistake; it is a genre convention. In these many ways, the genre itself dictates the life narratives of formerly enslaved people, and the authors use strategies of displacement such as metaphors of blood to both conform to the sensational and voyeuristic requirements of the genre and to maintain their own power over their narratives at the same time. When they do so, however, they elide some of the "flesh and blood" detail that might satiate the desires of readers, and thus leaves their narratives vulnerable to skepticism.

Just as Brown, Douglass, and many other nineteenth-century slave narrators confront the silence that slave keeps by activating the imagination of their audiences through alternative means, these "strategies of displacement," Ishmael Beah and many other twenty-first-century slave narrators displace their traumas onto metaphors, images, other enslaved people's tales in order to maintain whatever they can salvage of an objective writerly distance and of their own private emotional lives.

They are terse and reportorial not merely so that their words will carry the tone of truth but so that they will carry the weight of truth. When it comes to the extraordinary emotional burden of slavery, slave narrators have long used these strategies of displacement. They are a testament to the inability of formerly enslaved people to communicate to the unenslaved the depths of the violence they have witnessed. Skeptics should take note that this is a genre convention in and of itself, and that it is a sign of a disclosure instead of a gap in the narrative. By doing so, we respect the measures slave narrators take to determine their own life story and we recognize them as authors and humans rather than simply specimen and evidence.

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