

RECOVERING THE ETHICS OF READERSHIP FROM IMMEDIACY:  
HOLOCAUST AND DECONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM'S SPECTRE IN  
ANGLOPHONE AFRICAN TRAUMA NARRATIVES

by

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## ABSTRACT

Anglophone African Trauma Narratives is a title that classifies a growing subgenre of Lost Boy and child soldier narratives. This corpus is represented by works such as: *A Long Way Gone*, *What is the What*, *War Child*, *Beasts of No Nation*, and *They Poured Fire on Us From the Sky*. Such works market the memories of violent childhood as an empathy-creating nexus for Western audiences. Despite the humanitarian appeal, the aesthetic architecture of AATN creates serious problems for ethical readership. The virtuality created by these texts (to varying degrees) has the effect of transporting the reader's consciousness into the "presently happening" mind of the narrator. The result of this intimate spectatorship is that readers' ethical discriminations are lessened because of the close proximity to scenes of violence. Such frames of reading are argued to create false empathy, numbness, and complicity to violence.

If this subgenre inherently creates problems for ethical reading, an outside ostension of ethical paradigms is needed. My thesis argues that recovery from the problem of presence in AATN can only derive from ethical-literary recognitions of absence.

The works of Primo Levi and Theodor Adorno argue for aesthetic representations that recognize ethical absence and distance. Such Holocaust critics deny narrative testimony's inherent right to frame events through abject or sublime expressions. Holocaust critics set important ethical demands for AATN's presentation of aesthetic excess.

Secondly, my thesis asserts that deconstructive ethical criticism shares similar ethical aims to Holocaust values of absence. Levinas' concept of alterity, and Derrida's deconstructive mourning each create a deeply motivated ethical value of absence. These frames of reading otherness may deny readers the ability to create unethical empathies and equivocations. My thesis confirms that Holocaust and deconstructive ethical lenses are structured in such a way that they create a double-demand to otherness. The aporia created by this double-demand makes for the most ethical recognition of absences in traumatic narrative. The scope of my argument suggests that meaningful relationships to the past can alter the way that "presence" is responded to in reading.

## CHAPTER 1

THE DOUBLE DEMAND OF OTHERNESS IN  
ANGLOPHONE AFRICAN TRAUMA NARRATIVESIntroduction

*'Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika.*

Call oh small boy, with the long tremulous cry that echoes over the hills....  
Call and dance, Innocence, call and dance while you may. For this is a prelude, it is only  
a beginning.  
Strange things will be woven into it, by men you have never heard of, in places you have  
never seen.  
It is life you are going into, you are not afraid because you do not know.  
Call and dance, call and dance....

--Alan Paton, *Cry the Beloved Country*

*You don't have anything if you don't have the stories.  
Their evil is mighty  
but it can't stand up to our stories.  
So they try to destroy the stories  
Let their stories be confused or forgotten.  
they would like that  
They would be happy  
Because we would be defenseless then.*

--Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*

The child's mother warned them not to look, to turn their heads away, but it was too late.

The innocent eyes of Emmanuel Jal, author of *War Child*, describes the horror of seeing a woman whose eyes had been ripped out by vultures: "Her memory was carved into us. / Death was part of us now" (Jal 19). The psychological excess of this text confounds Western readers beyond an immediate responsiveness. For just as Jal recounts

the trauma being carved in to himself, the reader's shock may be confounding, leaving them with an empty sense of horror. Like the boy soldier, Jal, the reader has been given access—a type of immediate and spectacular access—to viewing the victim from whom all recognizable life has been taken from. Just as the author describes memory being carved into the victim-viewer, to a much a lesser extent, the reader may be emotionally drawn to the eye-witness scene and inscribed with a second-hand trauma.

To a great extent, *War Child* represents a disturbing trend in recent forms of the war narrative genre: aesthetic depictions of children enacting or experiencing violence. This body of literature, as it has been shaped by the dynamic forces of traumatic memory and the external markets of publishing and readership, emphasizes constantly-cathartic suffering without the ethical framework through which to interpret its own sublime message. The terror of the subject draws the reader in, but the closer that readers get to knowing intimate, violent details, the more difficult it is to make important ethical discriminations. I will argue that is the problem of presence in reading Anglophone African Trauma Narratives (AATN).

This problem is not merely an issue of a reader's sensitivity, nor is it a critique of the facts of violence and the necessity of raising awareness. It is an issue of ethical readership. But what does that mean? When the process of reading is an ethical focal point, it is important that criticism carefully identify who and what is actually being implicated in ethical reading.

This question has become more complicated as criticism has questioned assumptions about readers and authors. Certainly, the construction of the ideal reader

and authorial intent have been questioned in their ability to prescribe indefectible reading relationships. Authors inevitably create new humanisms that forget about other ethical values. They can not look past their own cultural lenses. On the other hand, ideal readers, in their hypothetical construction, will always be lacking the deconstructive ability to ethically question the intended interpretations and outcomes that they *should* understand from the text. Both of these frames of reading rely on the culturally approved ethical lenses of a particular time and place. With the many self-referential assumptions on what ethical reading is, it is imperative to frame reading as a process that recognizes the limits of ethical authorship and ideal readership.

The supposed demise of reading for ethical formation has been gradual and multi-faceted. In the last century, the wake of postmodernism and the Holocaust, has crashed more doubts on the shores of our common assumptions. The didactic role of the narrative has lost ground from narrative tropes and cultural criticisms. As a vast generalization, this lost ground has been expressed as a narrative's ineffable nature (the Holocaust), to narratives culturally particular context ("Shakespeare in the Bush"), to the furthest liminal, and fragmentary modes of narrative, where stories are unwound to such an extent that readers cannot imagine a that any particular lesson or self-applicability is modeled for them. These expressions have had the general trend of moving readers away from the universal applicability of narratives, to more ethically particular situations. Arguably, this has had the effect of moving ethics further away from narrative analysis. At the least, this movement of ethical particularity has made ethical criticism more complex and necessary.

As the authors of *Mapping the Ethical Turn* claim, a neohumanist revival of ethics is taking place, that recognizes the need for complex ethical evaluations to address the cultural exchange between the past and “what is alive and in process at the present” (Davis x). It is in that same spirit that my reading of AATN seeks an ethics of the past to reinterpret the demands of present literature.

Before entering further analysis of child soldier narratives, or giving motivation to my study of the problematic ethical reading of these narratives, it is important to respect the *raison d’etre* of their creation and the singular experience of individual victims. Jal’s narrative is important in that it is part of a growing subgenre of narratives written about boy-soldiers and refugees from Rwanda and Sudan. The publishing of these narratives—which I label Anglophone African Trauma Narratives, AATN—have led to speaking engagements, political repercussions, and financial help for refugee groups. There is an imperative for the victims that is more immediately significant than any ethical imperative for outside readers. Certainly, the ethical and moral demands for *nobless oblige* have never been greater: for the most vulnerable members in our world community are being forced to kill. Tragedies surrounding child soldiers should move us to action, recognizing historiographical truth and just response, and part of that response is spreading awareness. The 2007-2008 MSU speaking engagements of Benjamin Ajak and Ishmael Beah made me realize how powerful narratives may serve as political vehicles of change and how demanding justice may take the spotlight from all other ethical discourses. It is important to acknowledge this because it represents the normative and humane response to traumatized victims. I will let these facts stand as contrast to the

paradigm shift I am arguing needs to take place. Outside of building an awareness of this subgenre, this project is not politically motivated. The ethical shift I am arguing for does not deny political realities, but it cannot achieve its ends within that heuristic. Before political instrumentalism is sought and acted upon readers need to acknowledge their own process of ethical formation.

Recent history of literary criticism shapes and informs the need to acknowledge the fact that ethical judgements are formed through the complex imagined relationships between readers and the victims or perpetrators that they encounter. *Narrative Ethics*, *Mapping the Ethical Turn* and many works of cultural criticism have argued for more strenuous awareness of the moral distinctions that readers make in the process of reading other's stories. Jal's narrative is significant to understand because it carries with it a natural ethics of human response, and before the test of public justice, the initial relation between a reader and portrayed victim is formed. This imagined relation is *mimetic* in the text's ability to model an ethical structure for readers, and it is *substitutive* in its efficacy of making readers place themselves in the shoes of the protagonist. These two practices of story-reading are important is that each provides a virtual placement or vantage point for readers. The proximity of this placement allows readers to understand and judge a character's situation.

The storystuff of any narrative—conversational or internal dialogue, moral pondering, footnotes, historical background—helps create the presence or absence within that narrative. My argument relies on this *a priori*: that authors create, through their craft, an imagined level of distance between the protagonist and the reader, and this

imagined presence is an ethical one. Hence, the question: “What does it mean to ethically read Jal’s story?” is a call to understand what ethics is, as much as it is a journey to comprehend Jal’s story.

Since I have stated the emergence of this subgenre (AATN), and given basic outline of the “problem of presence” through how it is formed in reader-relationships, I will now define my view of ethical responsibility be defined. Rather than redevelop a string of history of what ethics have been from Aristotle onwards, or engage in an exhaustive defense of the postmodern aestheticizing of ethics, it is more expedient to simply give working definitions, so that my chapters argue for specific ethical effects of AATN and the problem of presence within each of these stylistic choices in composition.

Applied to the reading of AATN, I will define ethics as the responsibility of a reader to remember the difference between themselves and the textual victim or perpetrator. The root of this definition is based on the values of absence between the self and the other. Ethical philosophy made a dramatic, and personal turn when critics began to value the difference of the textual other over the assumed sameness of ethical situations. Cultural criticisms, Deconstruction, and trauma studies all emphasized the limits of universal ethical prescriptions. The ethical concern for alterity is best represented by Levinasian ethics. In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas defines ethics as “the putting into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other” (43). The alterity and difference of the other calls the reader into question. The reader must answer the question of how to relate to that difference. The reader can not forget the other, nor can the reader attempt to reduce the other into sameness.

This first part of my definition emphasizes that readers of AATN have a responsibility in the reading process: to neither outrightly reject, nor to use the victim for their own purpose. Readers have a responsibility to maintain a resistance against tribalistic, reductive, racist, sexist, or presumptuous biases that may come through the encounter of reading, just as they have responsibility to not apathetically turn away from a person who has experienced pain. My whole argument and motivation relies on such humanistic assumptions.

The second part of my definition is applied more directly towards ethical depiction, and implicates authors of AATN. In “Exactly and Responsibly” Martha Nussbaum argues for a Jamesian viewpoint that “responsible ethical thought demands the prose of the artist...” (Nussbaum 60). This is important because Nussbaum is denying the reality that literary art may be aesthetically detached from its own product. Instead she understands that an artist’s skill and ability to “make a contribution to a public victory over obtuseness and emotional deadness” (60). Applying this to the tragic demands of relating to AATN is extremely important because of the subject matter. There is possibility for moral obtuseness and numbness even when relating to genocide and the phenomenon of the modern child soldier. My argument is that authors also bear a responsibility in their aesthetic depiction. The aesthetics of narrative are powerful in their ability to contribute to or deny a readers ability to engage in ethical discussions while reading.

The ethical responsibility of the reader and the author alike are significant in understanding how presence is an issue for literary ethics. The prose of the author has a

role in engaging the public in a way that does not simply offer trauma as a textual experience for the reader. Aestheticizing descriptions of violence and traumatic hyperbole emphasize the presence or presentness of a narrative to a susceptible reader. These narrative values may obscure the author's ability to contribute to ethical interpretation.

Similarly, readers have a responsibility in their own ethical, and imaginative proximity to textual characters. Following Levinas' definition, a reader's recognition of the alterity of the other, allows them to maintain a resistance to equivocating themselves with perpetrators or victims. A reader's resistance to a text's presence maintains the structural awareness that allows them to make independent, ethical judgments. While the limits of ideal readers and intending authors has been stated, the problem of presence can only be addressed through recognizing mutual responsibility.

Recognizing the ethical responsibilities and constraints of reading is not something that comes naturally to readers. Narratives have the beckoning power and promise to take us away from our normal lives—even from our normal ethical recognitions. That is part of the allure. Furthermore, students and teachers of literature are taught to read, identify, and value the aesthetic. Along with Oscar Wilde, who believed literary works are neither moral nor immoral, students of literature generally do not aspire to be moral philosophers, or to apply ethical criteria on art. This tension is also expected within my scholarship—as I too was drawn to the power and aesthetics of AATN.

In analyzing the characteristics of AATN I make the necessary generalization that the writers of this subgenre have made their writing less ethically clear by making their compositions more aesthetically appealing. The dominance of aesthetics within such a morally demanding subject, makes any navigation of values difficult for criticism.

To understand why the “problem of presence” is a serious issue for ethical and literary discussion, it is necessary to further develop how it is problematic for criticisms that ethically value absence. It is not simply that theory may be conveniently applied, or “read into” AATN. More importantly, the event of understanding the victim in AATN (found in the interaction of writing, reading, and coming to new meanings) is in need of an ethical recovery. Ironically, the ethical recovery from the “problem of presence” in AATN involves two paradigms that posit the value of absence.

Absence, as it is recognized by Holocaust and deconstructive criticism, offers a ethical recovery by acknowledging the structure of reading relationships. The tension introduced by these paradigm denies readers the immediate ability to substitute themselves, or mimic the moral perspectives they observe.

Both of these schools of thought remind readers of the instability of relating to victims of trauma. Deconstructive criticism’s reminder comes through a recognition of the instability of language as it describes victimhood and mourning. Holocaust criticism is a collective reminder of historical genocide. It too tells a history of otherness. Both of these history’s of naming and recollecting begin with an absence of understanding the victim.

It is not a realistic goal of my thesis to expect that dominance of “presence” in AATN aesthetics will shift towards a writing style that emphasizes ethical distance for readers. However, by acknowledging these critical lenses on otherness, AATN, at the very least, may be read with a more ethical understanding (that is: the responsibility of a person who encounters another person). It is with that intention that the concept of otherness be explored as it defines the primary relationship of AATN towards lenses of ethical recovery found in Holocaust and Deconstructionist criticism.

How are readers to ethically approach the marginalized and traumatized other? This question, often taking shape as an “ism,” has been in the forefront of ethical philosophy since the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In literary study, this issue inherently deals with the relationship between a responsible reader and a particular victim or group of victims. Otherness should be understood as an essential problem in readership.

Essentially, the question of otherness is uncomfortably couched between two experiences in reading: I must relate to this character-victim because of their traumatic experience; and conversely, I cannot comprehend or relate to what this character has suffered because it is their singular experience. Otherness becomes a critical issue for literary study when it brings readers to an impasse between these two experiences in reading. Otherness carries with it a double demand: “I cannot relate” and “I must relate.” Scholarship has disputed this in discourse that oscillates between poststructuralist ontology and the demand for a politics, signature and the demand for co-signature, the limits of knowledge and the impetus: *that one must act even* amidst the morally confounding world. Strangely, this irresolution, this obligation and impossibility in

knowing how to respond to the traumatized other, justifies the central importance of otherness as a necessary concept in ethics.

Western readers have an unprecedented number of virtual relationships in their awareness. Media saturation ensures that every type of potential victim (AIDS victims, “lost boys,” child soldiers, and genocide refugees) has a voice. Nancy Miller has suggested the literary aftershocks America’s culture of trauma: “Narratives of illness, sexual abuse, torture, or the death of loved ones have come to rival the classic, heroic adventure as a test of limits that offers the reader the suspicious thrill of borrowed emotion” (2). In these cases the demands of knowledge echo within the ears of the privileged audience.

Otherness is essentially linked to the traumatic and is theoretically centered on the “I cannot relate.” When readers encounter abject terror, cultural shock, profound loss, and the absence of assumed metaphysics, there is often a disorienting psychological affect. This takes place when a person is not able to speak after walking through a Holocaust museum. The impasse (“I cannot relate....”) is an experience with the traumatic. It is not that readers are victims themselves of the traumatic; it is that the traumatic otherness has made it impossible for knowledge to bridge the chasm of difference. This is why much of post-Holocaust ethics must first address the issue of traumatic otherness. Empathetic, instructive, allegorical, pedagogical and logo-centric relationships, all markers of normative ethics, are immediately questioned when they are used as lenses to interpret traumatic otherness. We are right to question how such an impasse—that is, a reading experience based in traumatic otherness can lead to an ethics.

Ethics, of course connotes the broadest of meanings, encompassing: "the good life," Kantian moral imperatives, meta-ethics—concerned with meaning and truth, and post-critique ethics. Traumatic otherness, though, cannot be simply universalized or systematized into an applied ethics where there is always a directly humanistic connection between the reader, the text, and an immediate political response. An impasse of the trauma blocks any such direct application.

Postmodernism carries with it an entire history of epistemological denials. Postmodern tropes in literature rely on unusual stylistics, distancing aporia, and shifting time and space to give the audience at least an initial experience of "I cannot relate." This is the starting place for literatures of traumatic otherness. It is also the initial demand of the double demand of otherness that is necessary for ethical reading—an ethics that begins with absence. This ethics beyond ethics has its rhetorical efficacy in lack: lack of justice, lack of relationship to the other, lack of humanistic empathy, lack of an immediate politics. This ethical "lack of," I would argue, is best explored in literature exploring the traumatized other. More significantly, I would argue that political lack, that is, situations where humanity is denied its normative features, (love, conflict and resolution, family, sex, community, faith, joy) is best explored through philosophical-ethical lenses of lack. The most extreme human situations are best addressed by an ethics familiar with the language and experience of trauma.

Scholars have often argued that the Holocaust proves the failure of humanism and Empiricism. There is a telling philosophical symmetry between the failure of rationalism—I am assuming that the machinery of death, the Nazi-project was

immensely rational—and the effected Holocaust representations which deny relatable objectivity. *Bilderverbot*, the ethical prohibition of speaking of the Holocaust, represents a discourse of lack in its paradoxical structure: that one honors memory, the memory of the Shoah, sacred through silence.

Although the Holocaust has been identified as “the era of the witness” (Annette Wieviorka), it is also an era when witnesses refused to speak. It was an era of denial, disbelief and epistemological impasse. Holocaust representation employs narrative techniques that do not allow the reader to empathetically substitute themselves into the situation of the protagonist. Celan’s cryptic language, Wiesel’s use of apocalyptic, and Primo Levi’s concern for clarity of history, are all examples of authors who used narrative techniques that deny an immediate virtual identification between the reader and the historically and stylistically distinct victim. These examples show an ethics based on absence, where lack of relation is the initial reading experience.

Deconstruction also questions readers’ relationships to the traumatized other. Although often criticized as politically disengaged and cryptically irresponsible, this literary lens is a significant expression of the West’s postmodern identity, and as I will argue later, intimately related to the ethical double demand present in key Holocaust texts. Robert Eaglestone has suggested that the Holocaust invented a different sort of demand for the reading of testimonial literature. This double demand is restated as an aporia containing both an “epistemological impossibility and ethical probation against identification” (37). Deconstruction criticism also works on a similar premise; a

structural undecidability exists within every ethical action. In many criticisms of Derrida and Levinas, the double demand of reading the other is the main ethical task.

In his work *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida & Levinas*, Simon Critchley poses one expression of this double demand: “how is the ethical relation to the other person to be inscribed in a book without betraying it immeasurably?” (48). This undecidability, that is, the concern of whether or not one has betrayed the other, is similar to the aporia that is faced when representing and relating to the Holocaust. It is important to understand that the language of deconstruction is language that is never sure of itself; it is always asking for a reevaluation of what it means to act ethically towards the other. Thus, it denies the kind of calculative humanism that tells us “Through reading we will understand the other, and then change the world.” The type of reading that deconstructive ethics calls for denies readers an immediately empathetic connection with the victim.

Derrida’s characterization of justice suggests why ethics should be thought of as a *to be possibility*, not an immediate absolute:

The undecidable remains caught, lodged, at least as a ghost—but an essential ghost—in every decision, in every event of decision. Its ghostliness deconstructs from within any assurance of presence, any certitude or any supposed criteriology that would assure us of the justice of a decision, in truth of the very event of a decision (25).

Although Derrida here speaks of justice before the law, the structure of ethical reading should be conceived to follow this pattern. Deconstruction should be seen as a mode of evaluation where readers are continuously forming, and reforming, relating and

re-relating to the other. This is how identity relationships should be constructed between the reader and the victim portrayed in a text.

If “the undecidable” is understood as a marker in ethical reading, then to do justice to an other is to continually question one’s own decisions in relationship to that person. To translate this in the negative prohibition, readers should not try to close the question of right relationship by forming a regulative ethical prescription. Reading the traumatized other, in this sense, includes negotiating the double demand (I must relate/I cannot relate) through an admittance of doubt, or ethical aporia.

Each of these bodies of literature and theory stem from a unique set of historical happenings; yet, as they relate to ethical reading, the separate discourses share a similar discursive space. Holocaust and Deconstruction tropes arise from the same philosophical movement, and share similar ethical tropes though they employ their own unique language. The first part of my argument is that Holocaust and deconstructionist criticism an ethics of lack and ethics of absence is justified. Furthermore, I argue that these lenses may form a meaningful synthesis as they relate to traumatic otherness.

The second part of my argument deals with the application of this lens to a contemporary body of literature dealing with traumatic otherness. In analyzing such a body of literature, I assume that the ethical concerns present in deconstructionist criticism and Holocaust literature do not, and should not inhabit a dead space. They continue to be *read into* new literatures of trauma. It is clear that this is happening in many fields of ethical criticism, because references to these ethical lenses are used widely in commentary relating to AIDS testimonials, South Africa’s TRC, and within comparative

literature studies. “Recovering the Ethics of Readership from Immediacy” examines how and why specific boy soldier and lost boy narratives (AATN) should be read through Holocaust and deconstructive modes of thinking.

It is significant that the Holocaust is often represented as the theoretical “center” for the West’s relationship to the traumatic. This relationship shows us that the Holocaust was not simply a matter of grotesque history, this Event redefined the way that language is used in the genre of testimony to describe the unspeakable. With this understanding, I would suggest that good scholarship on literary trauma should glance backwards. It is not just a matter of homage to begin discussions on traumatic otherness with the Holocaust. A new ethical language framed trauma narratives; part of this language involved recognition of where language had failed. Literary expressions, in some way, had to explain away why such an immense “evil” had taken place. Many authors found that there was no such language, so they adopted a language of traumatic loss, prohibition, and aporia. Language could not be used to rationalize a relationship between readers and texts. There were no simple answers language could offer through providing healing knowledge. There is a double demand within Holocaust testimonials, that readers *must relate* to atrocity and *yet cannot relate* using the typical modes of ethical reading. This instability in the text is an instability that becomes internalized into the identity relationships constructed by the reader.

In its literary context, the Holocaust demanded a sort of deconstruction of normative ethics, precisely because knowledge as a basis for empathy, and empathy as a basis for politics, failed. Normative ethics demonstrated their limit in history. As I will

argue, Holocaust and deconstructive ethical criticism are not just aesthetically popular, or similarly appropriate ways to view new literatures of trauma. Through language, these critical lenses deny immediate human solutions so that “injustice” remains an imperative and a future possibility.

In contrast to purely instrumental approaches to reading, those characterized by modeling, equivocation, and moral lesson giving, Holocaust and Deconstructionist paradigms have a way of undoing the moral imperatives that seems so clear in other social-historical criticisms. Writers such as Paul Celan, Elie Wiesel, Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida might issue readers a similar injunction as they come into relationship with victims of atrocity. Strangely, their ethical injunction may emphasize the absence of the victim, an initial lack of empathetic connection, and an impasse where we might expect a moral answer. Such critics move the reader to recognize a language of *absence* and ethical expectation of *void* as prerequisites for justice. Other artistic renderings of traumatic history have attempted to offer assurances of human connectedness—stories that offer a close proximity to the reader. This is the language of *La Vita e' Bella*, Oscar Shindler's “I could have done more,” and the museum-born speculation that “I too...am a Holocaust victim.” While human connectedness is valuable in its connection to empathy, compassion and personal reactive action, Holocaust and Deconstructionist critics have questioned the value of such narrative accessibility to victims of atrocity.

Inevitably, models of synthesis are reductive of history, misapply original intention, and generalize the particular. Firstly, I have attempted to briefly introduce and

suggest a synthesis between two discreet discourses. In the most simple language possible, I have suggested that certain Holocaust testimonials and theory may be aligned with the aims of Deconstruction. As I will argue, these two literary lenses are exemplary and unique in their demands for the ethical reading of testimonial literature. It is my assumption that there is rich potential for literary study through the crosspollination of Deconstruction and Holocaust theory; each one contains a piece of our identity as postmodern readers. Each criticism has a founding relationship to the double demand of otherness.

My opening definition of ethics deals with the relationship between a responsible reader and the alterity of victims portrayed in texts. In examining anglophone African trauma narratives, what is observable is an ethics of presence not an ethics of absence. This is apparent in the redemptive endings of trauma, instead of the recognition of mourning and irretrievable loss. Presence is also emphasized by the aesthetic value of virtual experience instead of self-distancing voice of ethical interpretation.

AATN appeals to American culture's fetish with presence, immediacy, empathy as substitution, and universality. In questioning responsible readership, I assume that there is some lack of ethical awareness in the reading culture of America—specifically relating to literatures of trauma. There are ethically appropriate, and ethically less-desirable reactions in reading, comprehending and critiquing literary trauma. My argument relating to responsible readership is that Deconstruction and Holocaust narrative tropes may be used to recover practices and recognitions of ethical readership, and ethical authorship.

In examining AATN, I wish to underscore the potential misreadings of trauma literature while highlighting a recovery of ethical reading practices from Holocaust and deconstructionist theory. The misreadings I wish to address happen in the process of reading. In the process of identity formation, the Western “I” must come to terms with the otherness of victims of third world violence; this is perhaps the most demanding otherness for the dominant culture to understand. Child soldiers and lost boys may be said to bear the resemblance of fictionality and excess; they are the most distant and strange type of person for a Western audience to encounter. Yet, in a very immediate sense, these others call for a recognition of specific human qualities, rights, and demands. The potential for fictionality and the demand for responsibility and accountability on the part of the reader constitute what ethical reading is. Ethical reading is an issue of maintaining a right relationship between the reader and the victim in a particular memoir or narrative. An ethical relationship is maintained when the reader is able to remember, and articulate the difference between themselves and a textual victim.

One way of envisioning the right relationship between the reader and the narrating subject is in terms of proximity. This is, perhaps, the easiest way to understand the affects of presence and absence. A close proximity would allow for easy empathetic relation, having the illusion that one was inside the role of the victim. Closeness is closely linked with virtual reality; that is, through narrative the reader is given sensations and perspectives that diminish the seeing and experiencing distance between the reader and the African child-victims experience of war. The presence of the other is collapsed

into the consciousness of the reader. The other pole of this proximity is a distant proximity; this relationship establishes the absence of the experience to the reader. Another way of articulating this is that keeping the difference between reader and textual subject is related to the imagined distance between the reader and the victim.

Absence denies the reader from easy empathy in the sense that it does not allow for an easy equivocation or access into the experience of victimhood. Rhetorically, absence is like a void between the reader and the victim; presence is a virtual-portal to the experience of the other. Recovering readership from the values of presence to ethical lenses of absence, is the structural intent of my thesis.

In this introductory chapter I have suggested that AATN is a unique genre that addresses the significant issue of child soldier and lost boy narratives. Second, an understanding of the ethics of reading has been defined in terms of the imagined proximity between the reader and the victim, or perpetrator within a text. To address proximity as an issue of literary ethics, Holocaust and deconstructive criticisms have been argued to be exemplary ethical frameworks that value absence over presence. Each lens sets important precedents in addressing the double-demand to traumatic otherness.

My second chapter, Aesthetic entry in *Beasts of No Nation*, makes the claim that aesthetics have an undeniable effect on the realm of the ethical. The reader's imagined relationship to traumatized other follows the aesthetic and lyrical suggestions of the text, allowing ethical discriminations to be made. In this chapter I analyze how two critical metaphors for the aesthetic, Burke's concept of the sublime, and Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject, are appropriate in describing the psychological allure of excess trauma.

Uzodinma Iweala's prose privileges the aesthetic experience of trauma over dialectical, and interrupted modes of narrative telling. The effect is that the aesthetic entry into the text privileges presence over absence.

The recovery suggested for the aestheticizing of trauma, is that ethical representation needs the narrative distancing measures. Primo Levi's writing represents significant concerns on the ethics of representing trauma. His oeuvre focuses on the moral validity and clarity of the witness, over the aesthetic value of closely representing the pathos and hyperbole of the victim. Primo Levi's ethical work shows a clear contrast to the aesthetic values in AATN. In this chapter, I argue that Holocaust precedents of narrative self-distancing may recover an ethics of absence from the dominance of aesthetics in AATN.

My third chapter focuses on how deconstructionist ethical reading suggests how reading can be a practice in mourning, and how mourning is part of ethically encountering traumatic narratives of loss. In Derrida and Levinas' criticism mourning emphasizes the process of reader-identification with otherness. I would argue that deconstruction, understood as a language of mourning, gives an ethical focus on that AATN that is otherwise overlooked. This paradigm of deconstructive mourning, would demand that narratives of loss be read in such a way that responsibly remembers the absence and continued loss of victims. In attempt to highlight my human tendency to value presence over absence I also write about my own experience encountering a lost boy, Benjamin Ajak and his story in *They Poured Fire on us from the Sky*.

In my conclusion I argue that a presence-based ethics is less compelling than an ethics of lack, an ethics of presence. The double demand of traumatic otherness found within Holocaust and deconstructionist criticism is the most strenuous sort of ethics for readers to follow. In a presence based ethics, the virtual, and aesthetic access blots out the prohibition, and the other is rendered to knowable acceptance.

My conclusion also summarizes the key works of the AATN corpus. This body of memoirs may emphasize the literary presence of victims and perpetrators, but it does so in surprisingly unique ways. The ethical and aesthetic challenges of these texts should be accepted as a binary shut case. Rather, AATN needs be addressed by criticism searching to offer compassion, as well as critical evaluation.

Other's stories are significant to us because people call out that we may respond to them. In this sense, others' stories are a summons for our engagement—recognition of human response to others...as the basis for ethics. It might be held by some that the way to approach another human being is also the way to ethically read a book; ergo, presence offers us the most desirable negotiation to approaching the other because it is the closest. This is the very paradigm I call into question. My mode of inquiry will, in each chapter, take form as an analysis of the problems of presence. For each possible ethical quandary I examine through AATN, I will propose a negotiation that highlights: A) how presence is emphasized in AATN; B) why presence is problematic for ethical reading; and C) how Holocaust and Deconstruction narrative tropes may recover our relationship to ethical dialogue.

## CHAPTER 2

DECONSTRUCTION'S ETHICAL DOUBT IN  
*THEY Poured FIRE ON US FROM THE SKY*

*If we greatly transform ourselves, those friends of ours who have not been  
Transformed become ghosts of our past: their voice comes across to us like  
The voice of a shade, in a frightfully spectral manner—as though we were  
Hearing ourselves, only younger, more severe, less mature  
-Nietzsche*

Although tragedy continues to reinvent its own shock appeal, Western cosmopolitan culture has very little room for the language of mourning. It seems that the immediate demand and market for spectacle—even the spectacle of tragedy and death—denies us the time to process what has happened, to recognize what we are mourning, and to ethically recognize our responsibility to others whom we have lost. The spectacular presence of trauma does not confer a meaningful relationship to historical loss. This is the problem of presence as it relates to mourning.

Alessia Ricciardi's *The Ends of Mourning* tracks the “radical devaluation” of postmodern culture's ability to meaningfully relate to historical loss (1). Although Ricciardi's work analyzes this inability to mourn through movements in psychoanalysis, she also aligns the loss of mourning as taking place within postmodern social exchange. Stating the danger of “interpretive horizons abandoned by postmodernity,” Ricciardi forecasts the future as an abandoning of “nuanced, ethical claims to the past” (2). This is a significant opening critique that questions postmodern ethical responses to traumatic loss.

Ricciardi is right in noting the tenuous horizon of mourning within current Western cultures, yet postmodernity—understood as systems of thinking—may be the wrong locus for defining our problematic relations to mourning. If postmodernity is impart defined by its relationship to deconstructive thinking, Ricciardi may be correct in diagnosing our culture, but she refrains from fully addressing Derridean and Levinasian mourning as their *ouvres* create a deeply affected, nuanced, and profoundly ethical relationship to histories of loss.

My argument is that deconstructive mourning, as it is practiced through ethical readership and authorship, offers a radical reevaluation, not a devaluation, of current understandings of mourning. Deconstructive understandings of mourning do not attempt to falsely recover or restore the other. Rather, the mourning hermeneutic suggests a recognition of otherness in death where the mourner must speak and articulate a loss that cannot be restored, but it must be spoken and written nonetheless. The reevaluation of mourning I am arguing for is best articulated through literature of traumatic loss. In order to test the reevaluation of mourning suggested by Deconstruction, we need a literature that meets both the criteria of spectacular trauma and historical loss. Benson Deng, Alephonsion Deng, and Benjamin Ajak's joint memoir *They Poured Fire on Us from the Sky* fulfills these criteria, giving ample material to question how the deconstructive modes of mourning may recover ethical readership.

My analysis of *They Poured Fire on Us from the Sky* argues for a re-appropriation of mourning through the recognition of deconstructive ethical aporias. Essentially, Deconstruction's ethical doubts (aporias) offer readers a meaningful mode of mourning

through recognizing the alterity and singularity of the lost. The aporias introduced by Derrida and Levinas call presence-based readings into question.

In my analysis, the less ethical, presence-based approaches include: the immediate humanistic approach (where we are taught to equivocate or metaphorize the victim's experience), Freudian assumptions of "working through" trauma, and the comfort of visual presence that makes us forget about loss. All of these tendencies in reading *They Poured Fire on Us from the Sky* may offer readers a type of comfort. However, Deconstruction's rhetoric of mourning reminds readers that to be ethically responsible we have to confront the undecidability of how to address absence and loss.

The first section of this chapter will address a deconstructive reading of the theme of mourning within *They Poured Fire on Us from the Sky*. Metaphors of relatability and instrumentalism are called into question through deconstructive recognitions of ethical mourning. The second section of this chapter, "A Meeting Place," suggests how my own experience of meeting Benjamin Ajak mirrors the problematic presence-based approach of reading the other. The final section of this paper is a more theoretical defense of deconstructive aporias as they form the basis for mourning.

### Humanistic Readings of Presence

*They Poured Fire on Us From the Sky* is a joint memoir of Benson Deng, Alephonsion Deng, and Benjamin Ajak. Compiled by Judy Bernstein, and published in 2005, this memoir is cover-page advertised as "The true story of three Lost Boys from Sudan." But prior to any true story, before any retelling of their traumatic journey as

Lost Boys, a frame of reference is constructed for how readers might first identify with the authors.

In the introduction to the memoir, Bernstein gives her first hesitations of meeting the young men (Benson, Alephonsion, and Benjamin) who had grown up without parents: “I conjured up visions from William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*. Relax, I told myself” (ix). In the same paragraph Bernstein relates the boys to the Coca-Cola bottle that drops out of the sky into an alien place. Here, Bernstein relates the boys to “foreign objects” referencing the *The Gods Must be Crazy*. As they are sitting at the table, Bernstein muses about having the heroic survivors next to her: “It is as though Lewis and Clark just stopped in for a bite” (Bernstein xv). Bernstein uses a slough of metaphors to reckon the subject into commonly known cultural referents. To metaphorize an other is an act of ethical representation because each referent creates a type of relational access and proximity for the reader to understand the victim.

Bernstein’s introduction follows a normative mode of narrative; it appeals to literary tradition, and humanistic assumptions of the values of the reader. Bernstein follows Aristotle’s prescription for narrative form: recognition is prior to reversal. Literary metaphors of American explorers, untamed adolescents, and a coke bottle each have a way of metaphorizing a potential connection between the reader and the radically different subject. In terms of humanistic values, the introductory section does not reveal the serious and motivating intentions of the author until the ending several paragraphs where Bernstein writes that she wants “the world to hear of their tragic and remarkable experiences and to know what is happening in Sudan” (xxi). However, this highly ethical

motivation to responsible reading is preceded by framing the victims in terms of their metaphorized qualities. In the process of reader identification, Bernstein's metaphors may also be identified in terms of their value to idealize (Lord of the Flies characters), assimilate (like Lewis and Clark), and universalize (the instrumental turn: how knowledge of genocide may help the world). This is assumed to be an ethical mode of telling by many literary traditions.

The oeuvre of Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida gives readers a rhetoric of mourning that addresses these inherent values in Bernstein's introduction. Here, I do not assume to betray the polemic of Deconstruction by simply a systematic *modus operandi* that consumes the potential meanings of interpretation. But as a starting place to understand historical mourning, Derrida has a great deal of commentary on the humanistic assumptions of ethical language.

In *Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* Derrida writes that "There is still considerable gap separating the great and generous principles of the right to asylum inherited from the Enlightenment thinkers and from the French Revolution and...the historical reality or the effective implementation of these principles" (Derrida 11). Contrary to language which seeks to idealize, assimilate, and universalize, Deconstructive modes of analysis always strike towards the already-fragmented nature of language. *Liberte'*, *egalalite'*, *fraternite'*, in this sense, are already at loss because of the way that these terms were founded—because of the history of their naming.

The reason this matters to our understanding of AATN is that humanistic language—the written text—is the very first signifier of what an ethical relationship

should constitute. If the language metaphors of assimilation do not actually create the type universality they assume to create, criticism should call this type of humaminatarian universality into question. In a humanistic approach, trauma narratives suggest an already present relationship to the victims. The value of presence, if textual language may be said to emphasize presence, is most clear when humanistic language returns a victim's experience to an already understood, preestablished, set of beliefs in the mind of the reader. Such a reclamation of sameness suggested in metaphor does not structurally suggest a different demand of justice. The tendency to frame the other as a knowable metaphor may be the first barrier to overcome as readers attempt to apply deconstructive values of absence to their reading.

Outside of being metaphorized Western subjects, another way that AATN suggests a problematic relationship with presence is that there is assumed to be a textual "forgetting" and "using" of the Lost boys who did not survive. Deconstruction's work of mourning is to remain in a vigilant remembrance of others. To forget is unethical. Therefore, writing should be the greatest expression of such remembrance—even if the other resides in complete alterity. Forgetfulness of the dead may lead to instrumentalism of the dead. To use the other is to forget the alterity that exists. And so, the great ethical blight that Deconstructive thought would attack is to invoke the name and remembrance of the dead simply to reconfirm values about the self.

To quickly set this presence of the self in contrast to deconstructive values of absence, it is appropriate to recount Derrida's 1993 talk "By Force of Mourning." On the danger of expressive mourning reinstating one's own beliefs about the self, Derrida states:

What does one give oneself with this liberty, when one knows that the relation to oneself, that Narcissus himself, gazes at himself only from the gaze of the other, and then precedes himself, answering...only from the resonance of Echo" (164).

While it is tempting to fully expound the significance of Narcissus' "echo-quality" unethical, presence-based mourning, as far AATN is concerned it is sufficient to say that absence-based ethics must question the self-given liberty to use the plight of the other to reconfirm the identity of the self.

*They Poured Fire on Us From the Sky* offers examples of both of these approaches to expressing the reality for the lost boys. Bernstein quotes *Sixty Minutes* optimistic statement: "If ever there were tired, poor, huddled masses yearning to breathe free, it is these boys....So far a thousand of Sudan's best and brightest [are] coming to the U.S." (Bernstein xviii). A potential misreading of this narrative would emphasize the humanistic values of the U.S. over the reality: that is the civil war deaths and suffering in Sudan. Reading the traumatized other should not merely focus on reinstating beliefs about one's own self/country.

The literary reference to Emma Lazarus' "The New Colossus" is one that reconfirms the epitome of humanistic ideals, inscribed on a plaque at the Statue of Liberty. Symbolically and metaphorically, Lady Liberty is inscribed as the "Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand glows world-wide welcome..." ("The New Colossus"). In this case, the interpretation, the language of *Sixty Minutes*, focuses on how the other fits into the idealistic portrayal of our already present reality. There is no ethical absence in the language politic and Derrida's "considerable gap" is forgotten.

A responsible reading of the text would focus on humanitarian notions of justice that are yet to come. This second approach to reading must recognize the failure of hospitality and safe asylum to the refugee—a mourning for justice—before the

affirmation of humanistic ideals. In the memoir *They Poured Fire on Us from the Sky*

Benjamin Ajak writes about the stark realities of a UN refugee camp in Kakuma:

You have to choose between education and food. / But reading was really difficult because when you read there was a certain cloud because of hunger. It's black when you look at the words in the book. The black covers the words and you can't see because of the color in your eyes from the hunger (276).

The “brightest and best” of Sudan first had to survive the “black cloud” of hunger that blocked words. In symmetry to this image, an underling cloud of doubt should encompass our understanding of humanistic ideals before we read triumph into narratives of Lost Boys. A reading value of absence would mourn the “black cloud” as a reminder that children still suffer under these conditions. An aporia at the center our response is the way to ethically value absence in reading.

This ethical theme is further supported when considering how other examples of AATN show a postwar perspective of refugee experience in America. Dave Egger's Novel *What is The What* is framed around Valentino Achak Deng's (A Lost Boy) experience of being robbed and physically beaten in his Atlanta apartment. Deng compares his experience of suffering in Africa to his present suffering:

In my life I have been struck in many different ways but never with the barrel of a gun. / I have watched a close friend die next to me in an overturned truck, his eyes open to me, his life leaking from a hole I could not see. And yet at this moment as I am strewn across the couch and my hand is wet with blood, I find myself missing all of Africa. I miss Sudan, I miss the howling grey desert of northwest Kenya. I miss the yellow nothing of Ethiopia (Eggers 7).

In this text, there is an ethical structure that suggests several types of absence.

The opening comparison of sufferings shows the reader that while horrible injustices

were taking place in Sudan, the author has suffered a unique indignity in America. There is an absence of justice in both places, and idealism is shattered when experience does not live up to the language of humanistic ideals. Two paragraphs down from this quote Deng states that "...I have cherished many aspects of it [America]...but I am tired of the promises" (Eggers 7). The way that Dave Eggers has structured Deng's story ethically calls into question the overwhelming pattern of AATN narratives wherein America offers peace and prosperity. Ajak's "black cloud of hunger" at the UN camp and Deng's comparative suffering give us rare glimpses of the ethical value of absence within the prose of these works. It is important to recognize these features so that my characterization of AATN is not reductive; in fact, the possibility of ethical reading exists when readers hone in on very specific themes of absence and mourning within the text.

The second point to emphasize in the offset quote is how the author links his experience of suffering to a remembrance of those he has lost. Textually there is first the loss of ideals, then there is the naming of the loss of life of others. When Deng states "I have watched a close friend die next to me....his life leaking from a hole I could not see," he is given a metaphorical statement of ethical mourning that is unintentionally Derridean. Deng (*vis-à-vis* Eggers) acknowledges the friend lost, but he does so by introducing doubt as a central part of that experience. Deng watched the friend, yet his gaze was not able to draw immediate meaning and closure from that particular loss. The viewer could not see it, and thus he was not able to semantically "wrap it up" into a humanitarian statement about life. This interpretation is consistent with a deconstructionist view of mourning.

Deconstructive mourning emphasizes the loss of sight and comprehensibility at the liminal edge of life. In *Memoires for Paul de Man*, Derrida writes that

Upon the death of the other we are given to memory, and thus to interiorization, since the other outside us, is now nothing. And with the dark light of this nothing, we learn that the other resists the closure of our interiorizing memory...death constitutes and makes manifest the limits of a me or an us....(34).

In this passage there is a clear resistance to presence-based readings. Derrida suggests how we must carry the other through our memories, and that it is only through us—our words, thoughts, and recollections—that the dead are carried on. However, even as we carry the memory of others who have passed away, they are not reducible to our attempts to draw collective and automatic meanings from their loss. Derrida suggests that this is especially true when the other is turned into an image, an idol, or an ideal (*Memoires for Paul De Man* 6). In humanistic language surrounding the literature of AATN, this type of unethical portrayal is found when those who have died in the Sudanese wars are idealized for the sake of political expediency, or for an immediate political goal.

Benjamin Ajak recognizes how refugee children applied the injustice committed to their parents to the desire to have revenge. In a college classroom interview, Benjamin recounted how many of his peers in Sudan felt:

Everybody's asking God can I grow up quickly, so I can go back to Sudan and fight. Go to 17 and then I will recruit. But everyone wanted to go. For me particularly, I need to go and revenge my parents. I'm here representing my people, fighting the government. We want him in court so we can ask him. Why are you killing these people. He is killing more people than Saddam Hussain....Too bad (Interview).

Although this quote's focus is outside of the scope of the memoir, it is quite within a normal human reaction. It is also possible that that a reader's identifications with violent

AATN may mimic this process of remembering the dead as a “we” justification for retribution. The mentality might follow this logic: I read about this particular injustice, now we need to fight. Even for the sake of a politics, death limits the ability of citing those in alterity for the sake of a “we.”

In other words, mourning often works in what we assume to be a dialectical process, even though mourning is, according to Derrida and Barthes, undialectical (*The Work* 50). The textual arguments made thus far regarding metaphor equivocation, and using the dead to form a political “we” suggests that misreading involves a type of false dialectic. This is what deconstructive mourning would ethically prohibit.

An absence-based reading would emphasize the responsibility to clarify and articulate the difficulty of speaking about the dead. In his *oeuvre* Derrida tries to faithfully negotiate the aporia and impossibility of mourning—speaking to the singularity—of colleagues who had passed away. In Chicago Press’ anthology of Derrida’s “mournings” readers are reminded not to give way to “political calculation, personal retaliation, narcissism, or attempts at achieving a good conscience” (*The Work* 7). The reason why this is important to AATN is that traumatic experiences call for a telling which must acknowledge what has transpired, and yet that act of telling, and any act of criticism has much careful negotiation to undergo. In this section I have argued how “presence” is manifest in creating language that may frame the other in order to universalize them. Second, I have suggested that this is problematic to ethical reading because it ignores the gap: politically, because justice is yet to be done; and ontologically, because of the fact that the dead are not reclaimable, except within our memory. Deconstruction may

reclaim an ethical reading of what is truly humanitarian by reminding us that ethical remembrance is not created through an instrumental dialectic.

To not create a false dialectics of reading, audiences should attempt to articulate and recognize the cultural and personal particularity of the mourning other. In this section it is important to establish how the stated memoir functions in more specific, cultural and historical mournings. That is, what is actually being mourned? And who is actually mourning in the story? Several culturally specific mournings are presented through the memoir.

The first mourning present is the mourning for the lack of peaceful childhood. The opening lines of the memoir seem to be simply sentimental: “Since my wandering began, there hasn’t been a day or night that I do not think back to my family, our people and lovely Dinkaland” (3). The idyllic past, within the boys (Benson, Alepho, Benjamin) childhood, is highlighted to emphasize that something is now absent. In this first quote, a reader might interpret that a former place and time are now yearned for.

In the chapters that follow, the tone of the memoir changes drastically: childhood becomes lost, homes have been raised to the ground, parents are no more. In the chapter “Gunmen in the Garden,” Benjamin expresses his experience of traumatic loss:

Before they reached my house they began shooting. People scattered everywhere. Roofs went up in flames. I left our goats and ran to join my parents, but I couldn’t get past the gunmen who stood in the middle of our yard. The village was destroyed. I hoped my parents had fled. I ran back into the bush to hide, afraid that the gunmen might come back and capture or kill me. I watched them kill our cattle, set the millet and sorghum on fire, destroy all the things that human life needs to survive. (63)

This passage shows us the opposite of an idyllic childhood. The explicitly stated childhood experiences of the village being burned and the community being attacked may dominate what seems to be most shocking and important about the text. Certainly, these actions are the most “present” in readers minds. But what is being mourned, what should be articulated through criticism, is that the expressed trauma and violence should point readers back to questions of mourning. As spectacular as the destruction of a village is, there is very little that can be said about this atrocity. It was terrible. And yet, it draws the reader into a relationship of valuing the spectacular..

The possibility for deeper ethical insight may come from an articulation of the unsaid mournings of Benjamin Ajak. What does it mean for one to mourn one’s lost childhood? How does mourning articulate a loss for a decimated community? These questions attempt to pull a reader back from the blasé presence of violence, to the articulate recognition of the unsaid absences in the text.

If *They poured Fire on us from the Sky* is to be read as a work of mourning, the timing of mourning also is a responsible concern. The initial question “What is being mourned?” questions the culturally and politically specific object of the Lost Boys’ mourning. The question “when can one mourn?” also has a culturally specific relation to Lost Boys. Following the village attack, Benjamin Ajak describes his whole community mourning as they attempted to continue on their journey:

Everyone walked day and night. I was so tired that I cried all the time. Nothing else was possible. I just staggered forward, walking with Lino and Emmanuel and friends we met. Everyone wept (64).

In this passage, the children of the community are left with nothing but their bodies. All that they can do is walk. They must mourn even as they are pushed forward by fear.

In this way, this Dinka village's mourning was supplanted by the demand for survival.

What may be overlooked, in western readers' accessibility to literary works of mourning is the reality that this privilege of *working through* (Freud's *trauerarbeit*), one so easily accepted by the spectator, is sometimes denied to the actual victim. In the memoir, following the raids, Benson is faced with the reality that he cannot mourn. Survival—fleeing the rebels—took precedent over working through the loss of his parents.

A rebel captain said to Benson:

That sickness will go away if you start walking and get stronger and do not think of your family. If you are thinking too much of your family, you will die before you reach a safer place. This will end soon. I know you are sick because of it but I will give to our uncle a medicine for you so that you will get well and can walk like the other boys (67).

Benson's reply suggests that he is so overcome with his own grief that he wants nothing to do with psychologically or geographically moving on: "I didn't want to listen to him. I wanted to stay there and stop walking farther away from my home and parents. I thought it would be better if I died" (67). The singularity and particularity of Benson's loss cannot be denied. Benson's initial ability to mourn was denied access; he was not offered the space to mourn.

Many of the "lost boys" of Sudan were in this position; there was a necessity to move on, and they carried the pain of loss with them. I cannot suggest what this loss means, but rather point out the structural difference between carrying an absence (lost homeland, lost parents) and the accessibility of presence for readers.

One aspect of responsible reading may be a regard for the victim's inability to mourn (due to psychological trauma, or geopolitical issues—not being able to return to homeland). It may be questioned: is it possible to remember the absence that belongs to another? Is this what it means to respect the otherness of victims? If so, what is to be mourned may be a vigilant recognition of another's loss—that “lack of” is the basis for remembering values of mourning through literature.

If the personal denial of mourning, and denial of loss, was a type of injustice against Benson Deng, Alephonsion Deng, and Benjamin Ajak, perhaps allowing literature to serve as their expression of grief is a type of justice. Kenneth Doka essay “Memorialization, Ritual, and Public Tragedy,” addresses how the public rituals allow loss to be remembered: “Public ritual offers reassurance and support, reaffirms community, shows solidarity, structures grief, and offers a narrative of what happened and how we should respond” (183). Traumatic narrative, I would suggest, may be viewed as a ritualistic expression of loss. It gives loss a certain permanence through narrative. The questions: “what is to be mourned?” and “When is mourning to take place?” are considered correctly when this type of literature is viewed in terms of mourning. A devaluation of mourning takes place when readers view the experience of victims simply in terms of their own experience of loss, affirming the comprehensible nature of the bloodshed. This is particularly the case when victims such as the Lost Boys cannot go through typical rituals of mourning (due to PTSD, an inability to return to their lost parents' graves, and a lack of information on what exactly happened). As a work of mourning, *They Poured Fire on us From the Sky* expresses overwhelming loss.

However, the recognition of that loss is better recognized and articulated when the loss of the other does not translate into an echo of myself. This is Deconstruction's great reminder in stating the ethical danger of the dialectic. Although mourning should turn to empathetic victimhood, or instrumentalism (both are dialectics), the demand of otherness does call forth the responsibility of our personhood.

### Not the Other I Expected

One of the basic tensions of studying traumatic literature is that reading should mimic actual human encounters, even as it must provide a basis for a type of criticism. Reading ethically involves the subjective person, but it also involves academic evaluation. Good ethical criticism is aware of our human sentiments, as well as the need to understand loss in a broader, more critical context. To personify the "problem of presence" as it complicates a reader's response to loss, I use an example from my perceptions of encountering Benjamin Ajak. Several months prior to meeting Mr. Ajak I had read through his memoir. It was troubling and my main reaction was feeling psychologically overwhelmed. This was one of the works that I selected for my thesis project. I later found out that Ajak was coming to MSU to speak. Kirk Branch, an MSU English professor and Tara Alley, a student interested in refugee work, helped me to meet Benjamin Ajak when he came to MSU.

In a classroom interview setting, during November of 2007, I sat and listened to Mr. Ajak relate some of his experiences to a college English class. Many of the

statements made comprehensible what was incomprehensible. To answer a question about how he was able to “move forwards” considering his past, he stated:

When you always go to bed you think about what you lost in the past. A simple example is using your credit card. If you lose a credit card at a store, you can't use it. And you thinking about it all night. We lost a lot of boys. We try to release our emotions out. We try to release it. Too bad.

This was a surprising statement because it reconceptualized mourning by giving a metaphorical example for how students could recognize his feeling. In making historical loss and mourning comprehensible to students, Benjamin's words equivocated mourning to something immediately and empathetically knowable. This traces the structure of my argument in that mourning becomes rendered as an object of consumer culture, instead of a historical loss that must be approached with indecidability.

Another statement of his emphasized his attitude about coming to America:

There are a lot of things. The first time I heard I was coming to America it was like a dream. But I didn't know what to expect. What kind of communities, what kind of traditions. Hey God take me to this famous state. Tell me one of those.

In listening to Benjamin Ajak speak, I was struck with a fundamental confusion. I had first imagined him as a static victim. In learning that Benjamin had a home in San Diego, in learning that he drove an SUV, in learning that he related his experience through losing a credit card, in hearing him talk about the American dream, and in eating pizza with him, I found him very easy to comprehend. It was not simply a matter of understanding his experiences through speech; it seemed that my initial reading experience of *They Poured Fire on us from the Sky* was now replaced by total comprehensibility.

Although his speech at MSU focused on many issues of political awareness in Sudan, I no longer related to the memoir in terms of mourning. There was very little shock in his video presentation. After eating pizza with him, I did not feel at all sad for the people that I had read about in his memoir. After seeing him face-to-face, and hearing about what needed to be done, there was a strange easiness with this knowing. I wondered that perhaps I was reacting the wrong way, and that I had locked him into the role of victim; once he lost that position, he lost gravity and uniqueness in my eyes. It may be that I had falsely inflated my ability to empathize, and when I found out that that was not the relationship he expected in our dinner conversation, I was left with an irrelevance. No longer, could I keep the victim in my head and mourn for him. He was in front of me and did not expect effusive sympathies. Instead, he spent most of dinner laughing and talking about his experience traveling around to different parts of America.

This encounter showed me several assumptions about my own approach to reading Trauma Narratives. Although the said genre may be working through loss and expressing grief, encountering the author in person does not always give one a better context through which to view another's loss. My encounter with Mr. Ajak may suggest that I had created a false-static identity. However, the aspect of misreading that bothers me the most is the misreading created by simply acquiescing to what is in front of my eyes. After meeting Benjamin in person, I did not have a sense that he was a victim of extreme trauma and unbelievable loss. Rather, my reference point was redirected to the easiest nexus for me: watching him in ordinariness sitting inside a pizza parlor and seeing him joke with other students in a classroom. He was visually, socially, and physically

present. That is what I know. The others lost in the Second Sudanese civil war (1983-2003), the enslaved, and those killed without a face, I did not consider.

The Force of Mourning: Engaging  
Deconstruction's Response to Criticism

It might be presumed that deconstructive modes of criticism are immediately at odds with the meaningful, honoring of a life. Introductory classes to literary criticism may leave students equivocating deconstructive thought with the destruction of meaning. If Deconstruction is in close affinity with practices of ethical mourning, this can never be true. Mourning must be an act of remembrance; deconstructive reading and criticism should have this same purpose. Part of Derrida's subtlety and complexity stems from his enormous self-scrutiny in the way that he ethically defines rhetoric. At the end of "Force of Law" this self-scrutiny leads Derrida to defend the polemic tension of Deconstruction as always including "a deconstructive affirmation" (Force 63). The work of mourning, as a recovery of values of absence in AATN, is such an affirmation.

In spite of neohumanist critic's arguments that Deconstruction cannot offer a tenable response to injustice, Derrida's and Levinas' writings form some of the most ethically strenuous discourses in the postmodern intellectual world. Deconstruction, as I argue in this section, expresses itself through a language of mourning. No other criticism's method of expressing value is so defined by *giving away*, acknowledging an aporia of what is knowable, and recognizing absence as a value for reading. Deconstructive criticism addresses the ethical issues brought up in the first two sections. Derrida and Levinas' criticism suggests how trauma narratives should be interpreted as

works of mourning and loss instead of literature that works that offers assurance through catharsis and resolution. Deconstructionist criticism may also be used to respond to the assumption that ethical criticism must always immediately address the question of political instrumentalism: “what must be done?”

To argue why this question is a more complicated question than assumed, we first need to review the standpoints of very discrete criticisms. Rationalism asserted the cogito as the seeing and knowing power. Consciousness works outwards from the mind’s eye. It collects. It gathers together. It works towards a knowing and a returning. Ethical discourse, in this mode of thought carries an instrumentalism based on the appearance of humanistic assurances (good-will, compassion, and common experience). Daniel Schwarz, in his essay “A Humanistic Ethics of Reading,” promotes his reading-model as a process of ethical inquiry. His five hermeneutical stages in the work of ethical reading include, “immersion in the process of reading,” “quest for understanding,” “Self-conscious reflection,” “Critical analysis,” and “Cognition in terms of what we know” (13-15). It would seem that this mode of ethical deliberation is not a necessarily exclusive means towards values and practices such as hospitality, compassion, mourning, and justice. Schwarz, however, offers no such grace to deconstruction’s contribution towards responsible, ethically concerned reading. He seems to pit humanists against deconstructionists, characterizing his own bias as:

Many of us were skeptical of deconstruction’s *nolo contendere*: For who really reads in terms of discovering where meaning goes astray? Is that kind of engagement something other than reading...where the reader stands outside the text’s imagined world as a carping cynic (3)?

Although Shwarz's frustration is felt by those seeking to approach ethics *in terms of what we know*, there is another way in which to view *nolo contendere*. As a judicial term, it is a plea for no contest and may be used in lieu of a plea for guilty or not guilty.

Syntactically, "no" and "contest" both suggest a rejection of the court-order dictum. This double negative, this "no" and this "I contest" form uneasiness within the subject's acquiescence to the pronouncement of the court. There is a structural undecidability, in one sense, to this total acceptance of the law. Refusing to justify oneself only allows a general application of punishment or reprieve to serve as *the truth*. The particular, the inwardness, the unexplainable dilemmas of the subject cannot fully be interpreted; truth remains in lack, in silence, and in secrecy. The plea *nolo contendere* may carry the same punishment as guilty, but in many cases does not require a verbal apology or allocution from the defendant. If truth is not spoken for, how can it ultimately be assured as the truth? How can the steps of immersion, understanding, reflection, analysis, and cognition ultimately return to the jurors with knowledge that justice has been accomplished?

This impasse of knowledge, this inability to speak for, in a constitutive, acquisitive, values-building manner, may be the starting place for Deconstruction's relation to ethics. However, what Shwarz refuses to acknowledge is that silence speaks. Derrida's negative theology recognizes the ability of cryptic ambiguity, discord, structural undecidability, blindness and otherness, to speak into the realm of justice. None of these qualities-of-lack necessarily allow a reader/critic to stand outside of the "text's imagined world," nor do they automatically confer an artistic "moral holiday" (Shwarz 6). Rather, Deconstructionist readings of literature seek to efface the epistemic

systems wherein formalist critics have passed on systematic and ethical modes of reading.

This is an ethics not to be measured by immediate outcome, an ethics not imbued with the platonic assumption knowledge equals action. If deconstruction can be said to have an inherent ethics, that is, an ethics clarified in its structural action, in its essential doing, I would suggest that it is tied to recognition of loss. Initially, this may be a loss of rationalistic/cultural assumptions. But as this lens moves circuitously around literatures of mourning it has a unique structural capability, and indeed a responsibility, to unseat and confound the spectators who have grown comfortable in their sympathies.

Deconstruction allows for a sort of haunting *absence* that always questions the *presence* of sure knowledge and clarifying vision. Thus, it is a lack and a loss that calls for a responsible action; it cannot speak the action itself, for that is the “response” of the responsible. Deconstruction is the mourning that calls for....

It seems appropriate that, in works of traumatic narrative, elegy, and victim testimony, deconstructionist readings not merely commemorate the real suffering of those who have lost...in terms of which memories can be compiled, how they can be categorized and understood, and what a singular loss means about loss in general. Deconstructionist readings of Trauma Narrative, if they are to remain responsive to the text, must parallel, intensify, and heighten the pathos of loss. A moral holiday may come if an absence of justice, a loss of life, and clear moral outcome has already been decided. This is why deconstruction is not only relevant, but most suited as a specter and a silhouette, remaining undeclared as *nolo contendere*—an “if you say so? Has justice been done?”

The most provocative literatures of mourning, in their acknowledgements of loss, have the same effect. The mirror scene in Wiesel's *Night*, Celan's "black milk," Coetzee's morally confounding landscapes, the gracious act of murder in Morrison's *Beloved*--all of these steal away our assurance that we, as critics and real-people, know how to deal with loss. In literature that focuses on the loss of loved ones' moral complexity does not simply broaden the grounds of interpretation, literature of loss takes away our own assurance that we know how to respond to the character's loss...the lost characters.

Levinas and Derrida enter this discourse on loss in significant ways; anterior presence and aporia both signify ethical implications that displace the assurance of presence. Certainly, the texture of their thought runs counter to Shwarz's model of comprehensibility and to my own easy identification with a victim of traumatic loss. Although the scope of this paper cannot systematically address the limits of normative, values-oriented ethics, I attempt to show how these are limited in their ability to address literatures of mourning. Each approach suggests a type of absence and an alterity as a basis for possible response. Their scholarship viewed together also may prove revealing to deconstruction's relation to *responsible mourning*.

Simon Critchley in *The Ethics of Deconstruction* analyzes the ethical conversation present in the work of Levinas and Derrida: "One of the major reasons why Derrida's work has not been read as an ethical demand by his major commentators is because of an avoidance or ignorance of the novel conception of ethics at work in Levinas' thinking" (3). If ethics is re-envisioned by these two critics as maintaining the irreducible

separation between the self and the other, then perhaps this ethics may allow for a new understanding of loss.

To rhetorically articulate this type of mourning, we must employ several distinctions: A) What is the relationship between the spectator and the secret? In another language: why does the physical fact that this person has experienced loss or died have anything to do with me? B) What would an ethical mourning look like? C) Lastly, can a discourse that embodies absence engender a responsibility towards mourning? Is it possible to read literature in a way that acquiesces vision and cognition to a value of absence? Can Deconstruction, as a mode of reading in absence, bridge a culture that has devalued mourning through presence?

Alessia Ricciardi gives a keen justification to my last question: “the abandonment of a hermeneutics of mourning both compromises our understanding of the past and sterilizes our vision of the future, as it deprives our culture...of the very notion of justice” (2). When mourning the other is simply present, it may forget the absences of the past, and not implicate itself in doubting justice for the sake of the future. This investigation into the possibility of Deconstruction as a hermeneutics of mourning is not an act of sparagmos; it is not an act of violence to those fallen. Instead, deconstruction readings should be recognized as a discourse that truly recognizes that there is always a loss taking place—an imminent loss that exists whenever the other is recognized and approached. In ethically approaching the other, the reader may imagine the polymorphous, hollow, haunting and troubling figure of the silhouette.

Levinas' pictures the relationship between the spectator and the secret as a sort of an ethics of being. This might be properly understood as a significant ontology, but not the only ontology possible within deconstruction. In his essay "Ethics as First Philosophy" Levinas questions how "being" comes to justify itself through knowledge. He questions typical modes of conscious approaching: self-contemplation in *Nichomachean Ethics*, Husserl's intentionality, and Heidegger's *Dasein*. However, Levinas' ontology as ethics takes a radical turn in his assertion that "one comes not into the world but into question. (Ethics 81). In other words, the ego does not begin to figure out how it must act ethically from its own departure point. Levinas suggests the effect of this initial nakedness of the conscious self:

It has no intentions, or aims, and cannot avail itself of the protective mask of a character contemplating in the mirror of the world a reassured and self-positing portrait. It has no name, no situation, no status. It has a presence afraid of presence, afraid of the insistence of the identical ego, stripped of all qualities (81).

Although not directly addressing Lacan, this quote refers to a self-ethics before the mirror stage. Levinas is questioning the self that assumes to reaffirm its own ego as it encounters the world. This is significant to his ethics because he suggests that before there is an act of vision as a reflection of the eyes, or an act of cognition to reaffirm the self, there exists an exposure.

This complete nakedness, before affirmation of its own *imago* in the mirror, is "open to question, but also to questioning, to have to respond" (Ethics 82). The spectator, in this reading of Levinas, must first realize that it is called into question. Just

as Victor Frankl's axiom suggests,<sup>1</sup> it is the individual who is implicated. For Levinas, this implication is anterior to intentionality. This common exposure to humans *being* always asserts an absence (before intentionality) and a lack before any politics or moral decisions are made. It is often assumed that mourning has to do with mere act, that is, something that one person does for another. Levinas may be said to be questioning a false empathy that forgets one's own vulnerability. He aptly notes, "Prior to any particular expressions...which cover over and protect with an immediately adopted face or countenance, there is a nakedness and destitution of the expression...vulnerability itself" (83). What is public mourning in the West? It seems that mortality is a covering over, a justification that gives and speaks from the superior position of the living. Above all, for fear of exposure to the ego, mourning is often practiced as a masque. Deconstruction questions first on the nature of ontology; it is significant that Levinas' ethics dwell on humans' responsibility to remembering mortality in language.

This may be why he critiques art as creating a doubled-discourse between truth and images; as artists of the mind, humans often secure identity through picture and metaphor (Reality 142). As such, exposure to another's death, through the lens of Levinasian ethics may acknowledge a human facing that unsettles before the other is ceremonially masqued--as if language could assure us that nothing has changed. To my understanding, this is Levinas' secret in approach of the silhouette: that we would forget the nature of our residence, the final stamp on our passport... and, again, the shadow-art of metaphor that consoles.

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<sup>1</sup> In *Man's Search for Meaning* Frankl gives the axiological imperative: "Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of his life is, but rather he must recognize that it is he who is asked" (131).

Derrida and Levinas share an almost a priori responsibility for the other. The existence of the other calls for a responsibility. Otherness is both a process of linguistic-identification, and a call for responsibility. Derrida's ontology, might define the relationship between the spectator and the secret as an alterity within every assumed-to-be-self-formed subject. There is no original ego that offers from its consciousness and no original gesture of language that works from simply from assurance, truthfully speaks in the place of, and enacts justice in the process of mourning.

This disenchantment may lead some critics of deconstruction to equate it with a type of nihilism, or as a language of impasse that cannot mourn. I will assert the opposite; it is the very language of mourning. Derrida's rhetorical break-down of "aporia" enacts a similar type of work as is found in Levinasian ontology. If Ricciardi's thesis is correct, that there are better and worse ways to mourn. Derrida's work in his address "Force of Law" might be thought of as doing justice to the other. Aporia, like ontology, is the... if you will, foundationless foundation, wherein a discourse of mourning might take place. For all of Derrida's cryptic profundity, aporia essentially is being used to ask: could it be that absence is the rhetorical opening that calls forth justice?

In "Force of Law" Derrida states that aporia is a necessary precondition for justice because only this "non-road" may challenge our desire for a justice to come. Aporia is broken into three categories: the rule, the ghost of the undecidable, the urgency that obstructs the horizon of knowledge. In regard to the aporia of "the rule," Derrida questions the notion of infinite justice. Since the structure of the law is iterable and self-

justifying through precedent, a doubt exists at the very heart of the law. Derrida appropriately notes that, “for a decision to be just and responsible, it must...be both regulated and without regulation: it must conserve the law and also destroy it or suspend it enough to have to reinvent it in each case...” (23). The performative nature of justice here might also suggest something about the nature of mourning—especially as it relates to political oppression and injustice. If the language of deconstruction that confronts injustice is a language of advent, a language of waiting, then it may be said to rhetorically discredit/abolish unjust laws while calling for the vision of possibility. In many trauma narratives, the language of mourning and the call for justice are inseparable.

The second aporia, the ghost of the undecidable is characterized by Derrida as the impossible demand between the desire for justice and a lack of assurance of that decision. He writes this doubt in as if were a specter of consciousness:

The undecidable remains caught, lodged, at least as a ghost—but an essential ghost—in every decision, in every event of decision. Its ghostliness deconstructs from within any assurance of presence, any certitude or any supposed criteriology that would assure us of the justice of a decision, in truth of the very event of a decision. (25)

Related to mourning, this question of doing justice to the other is very troubling. How is it possible to offer empathy and compassion to a victim, when one cannot speak to their singular experience? How is it possible to write on behalf of others who have died? If a fellow victim has shared their journey as a sufferer, can that person speak on behalf of all unaccounted for? Eulogizing often appears as an amalgamation of memories; an attempt to bring all of the diverse aspects of a person to light. This action may indeed be a responsible and appropriate act of remembering. And yet, in the act of memorializing is

it not the case that mourning covers over, metaphoricizes, and assures through vision? In mourning, the ghost of the undecidable is primarily those whom we can no longer see...those whom are now absent.

Here, I think it most appropriate to iterate and make new Levinas' use of the silhouette. And yet I cannot do this...it is already defined by the traces of philosophy and history. Many artifacts may be considered silhouettes: a crime-scene chalk outline of where a body was, nuclear shadows of Hiroshima, the words that someone penned on a cell-wall now washed of all clarity but for the smudge, a piece of art characterized by complete blackness outlining the center-figure. As spectators, it is to give an approximation of what has taken place, or that this marks and depicts a person. From a distance, this silhouette may appear to simply be a person ready to greet us. Yet, as we come to face this other, there is a blank hollowness at the core. A specter haunts the outlines of what we wanted to see, what we imagined, and what we gestured at with our voices as we came nearer. Dryness fills our mouth. We can no longer speak. Though we are summoned by a responsibility to the absolute other etched in chalk on the concrete. This is the specter that haunts the spectators through mourning.

In *Memoirs for the Blind* Derrida addresses the specious ocular-centrism of the West. On the quality of invisibility Derridas writes:

In order to be absolutely foreign to the visible and even to the potentially visible, to the possibility of the visible, this invisibility would still inhabit the visible, or rather, it would come to haunt it to the point of being confused with it.... (51)

The ghost of the undecidable is firstly, that attendant specter who whispers: “whose story is this?” and “For what or whom do you weep?” The mortal ego is fragile to answer.

Death is the great disposer of speech. The spectator's first act is a gesture of inhalation after seeing the frightening silhouette. Speculation, doubt, anger, trepidation and fear, are the negative-affirmations of this lack of sight. Levinas' distinction in "Substitution" interprets this silhouette:

Here, beyond visibility there is the very transcending characteristic of this beyond that is signification. /My responsibility for the other is for of the relationship, the very signifyingness of the signification. (Substitution 90)

Responsibility for maintaining and respecting the untranslatable, this is deconstruction's work of mourning. As *Memoirs for the Blind* suggests, tears are the first function of the eye, not sight.<sup>2</sup> Tears, are not just spectacle or another way of articulating; they blind and may be the most simple expression doubting ontology.

The last aporia to be addressed is "The urgency that obstructs the horizon of knowledge." I will employ this last aporia to address, not answer, the question: Can deconstruction, as a mode of reading in absence, bridge a culture that has devalued mourning through presence? This particular doubt is born of the real crisis before our eyes: what shall I do now? It addresses mourning in a particularly confounding way because mourning another's death is both an act of recollection and an admittance that one cannot see where the person signified by the silhouette has gone. Mourning constitutes both a gathering of knowledge and a complete rupture of that knowledge.

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<sup>2</sup> "Now if tears come to the eyes, if they well up in them, and if they can also veil sight, perhaps they reveal, in the very course of this experience...an essence of the eye, of man's eye, in any case, the eye understood in the anthropo-theological space of the sacred allegory. Deep down, deep down inside, the eye would be destined not to see but to weep. For at the very moment they veil sight, tears would unveil what is proper to the eye. / And what they cause to surge up out of forgetfulness, there where the gaze or look looks after it, keeps it in reserve, would be nothing less than...the truth of the eyes, whose ultimate destination they would thereby reveal: to have imploration rather than vision in sight, to address prayer, love, joy, or sadness rather than a look or gaze" (126).

Derrida defines the aporia of urgency as that which “must not wait” and “is yet, to come, *a`venir...*” (Force 27). The measure of doubt is intensified in the performative role of doubt in the possibility and anticipation of history. Justice, as Derrida notes, “as the experience of absolute alterity is unrepresentable” (27). In a discourse of mourning, what is unrepresentable is the re-iteration of many perhaps: What is the afterlife? Will this death result in an outcome that repositions loss as not in vain? Was this preventable? Am I guilty? Am I subject to this mortal sentence? Will I be remembered?

Certainly there is an uneasiness in mourning in the thought of deconstruction; there is a complete passivity and not knowing, and yet there is an expected translation. In African Trauma Narrative, there is a very real tension between allowing literature to do the work of mourning and speaking tours carrying a demand for political regime change. The demand for immediacy is high, but the responsibility to mourn is also real.

In a very different sense, in complete otherness to the Lost Boys, in complete otherness to me, Derrida had to perform this act of urgency and mourning for Emmanuel Levinas. In *Adieu*, Derrida demonstrates that a discourse of absence is not one that evades responsibility. Rather, he is scrupulously aware of his own implication by the event: a human being-towards-death and one bound to express another’s passing by the silhouettes of language and vision. Derrida gesture of mourning is expressed as an open door of hospitality. In a way, this metaphor holds our mortality and alterity (who knows who might come to the door?).

Deconstruction’s ability to address mourning has been addressed through I view Levinas’ positioning of absence to be an exposure to one’s own death and an otherness of

the Other that calls for a response. Although there is a saying, and a facing towards the silhouetted figure, he acknowledges the masqued subjectivity of the mourner. Derrida complicates this ontology of mourning by addressing assumptions of objectivity. There is a demand of justice to mourn the other, yet there is a doubt at the heart of the demand. This doubt comes from the spectral nature of another's death, the structural instability of the language used to express mourning, the performative nature of justice, and the tears (an immediacy of demand) that deny vision. I have focused this paper specifically and intentionally on the starting place, the birth, of mourning. If absence is the initial state of recognition, why does our culture and our ego immediately cover that absence with a spoken word, a face, and a presence that assures?

Other works of Derrida's criticism emphasize the Freudian appropriation of mourning—mourning as a working through. Alessia Ricciardi notes that Derrida's reading of Freud allows him to articulate “the concept of midmourning as a means of continually renegotiating or rephrasing the question of loss...” (38). A deconstructionist reading of mourning, or a mourning through reading should emphasize “midmourning” as a remembering, not a completing. Mourning is a continuous remembering of what is untranslatable. It is not an absence or silence that forgets. In contrast, Freudian “working through,” is a successful restoration of the image of wholeness.

Freud's great hermeneutic assumption of the soul is that conflict of being, the unsettlement of death and the aporia of facing others, may be cured through a translation of the subconscious. In suggesting anaporeatic approach, readers might question the

assuring presence of the silhouette. This comfort, as the work of our eyes, is such a difference from the uncertainty, the “hauntology,” remaining as a question.

A responsible reading of otherness continues to remember that reading ethically reading recognizes the double loss that has already taken place. An unaware reader may experience a loss or confusion of identity: in interpreting others a reader may identify them in terms of their complete comprehensibility. This translating of the other into a reader’s identity may take place as a false completion of the actual victim’s process of working through. The second loss is the loss of mourning as a secret. When atrocity becomes normal spectacle in the eyes of readers, the reality of a past loss is covered over by a cultural-reading emphasis on moving past mourning. *They poured fire on us from the Sky* is a narrative work of remembrance and mourning just as it is a work of political advocacy.

Anglophone African Trauma Narrative (AATN) may be read in a way that privilege empathy and self-articulation over absence. The reader, in being drawn towards a silhouette of the other, may forget that a prior loss has taken place—a loss that resists reclamation and understanding. As it relates to the misreading of presence, the silhouette in traumatic literature is the ultimate *trompe l’oeil* because the reader becomes more and more convinced of the fantasy that they participating in the journey of the victim, and eluding death. The traumatic loss of the victims of the Sudanese war and famine, eludes the reader. The danger of empathetically valuing the immediate relationship is that our own human sentiments become forgetful of the incredible loss that was suffered in the

Sudanese civil wars, the long walk, the shores of the Gilo river, refugee camps in Kenya, and continued oppression. It is a history that must be named and not forgotten.

Readers naturally accumulate trauma narratives as stories to consume and experience the extraordinary. Readers may be tricked to take a walk alongside, as a fellow victim. Yet the real trick of the eye, as deconstruction reminds us, is that the silhouette figure of the other, the one who we are tempted to experience, is in complete alterity from us, and yet this figure of the dying exists now within our memory calling forth our mourning and responsibility.

## CHAPTER 3

THE AESTHETIC TEST: VIRTUAL PRESENCE IN  
*BEASTS OF NO NATION*

*Because aesthetics is the branch of philosophy dedicated to investigating what pleases the senses, aesthetic questions generally involve pleasure; because history is the branch of the humanities that investigates social change, it often involves pain. The relationship between aesthetics and history...has generally been vexed.” --Brett Kaplan, *Unwanted Beauty**

As if it were shouted from within the ears of the reader, a panged voice echoes from the written script; the physicality of the action is sensed by the taste in a reader’s own mouth. This may be the reader’s experience as they are affected by the sensory-rich, experiential novel: *Beasts of No Nation*. The pulsating descriptions and the sublimely felt emotions of war have a psychosomatic effect on the reader. One scene of assault may demonstrate this probable, felt reaction:

I am with Strika and we are pulling the girl, pulling until her leg is cracking, but she is not letting go. She is screaming and I am seeing her breath come out of her mouth, just coming out and coming out (Iweala 51).

This scene conjures up an image beyond description: the close encounter of killing another human being. The values of the text emphasize the raw details of bone breaking, and an extremely moving description of the screams of the victim. A nominal reading of this passage might produce the observation that while the quote describes an unethical act, it does so in a way that creates the strongest, artistic picture in the mind of the reader.

Reading such passages may induce an uncomfortable reaction within readers, but the production of that discomfort is not just from the materiality of violence. The fact of

historical violence is one matter; the stylistic representations that make a reader feel the presence of trauma is another issue. This point of juncture is where literary ethics necessarily becomes intertwined with aesthetics.

While it is doubtful that historical violence may be depicted without an aesthetic framework and access, it is clear that authors utilize differing levels of aesthetic appeals to represent such acts. Vacillating levels of expressive hyperbole, and more factual, straight-forward narrative telling may be found both within a sub-genre of traumatic works, as well as within an author's singular work.

As it is a structural function of narrative, language of trauma cannot this evade this necessary "factual referring to" and "aesthetically going beyond" (even as both of these referents involve the telling of a trace, a memory). Certainly, critics might analyze the texts of AATN, classifying the textual appeals to historicity and aesthetics. However scrupulous this type of analysis is, I would argue that the telos would always result in a recognition of these ethically necessary tensions. Each is involved in the processes of "reproducing" trauma on a page, and each is inextricably linked to reader's ethical formations.

My argument recognizes the tension between these two appeals, but it also moves beyond it by making the following claims about interpreting AATN: The most significant way that AATN privileges presence over absence is through the aesthetic dominance of boy soldier accounts. Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* shows this dominance by expressing trauma as something that readers should experientially engage

in. The textual aesthetics of the sublime and abject allow for a reader's engagement to be framed by a close proximity to traumatic violence.

Using Dominick LaCapra's understanding of trauma as a self-test, my paper suggests that *Beasts of No Nation* engages readers in a type of aesthetic test where they are drawn to a relationship to the plot-action through sublimity and the abject (Writing History 23). The test, although it appears to be guised as a test of ethical relationship, is actually a test of a reader's ability to aesthetically "stand," or stomach the spectacle of trauma. To extend this metaphor of reading further, if a reader stands the test, they give in to aesthetically experiencing AATN as a spectator, and in doing so acquiesce their own ethical difference from the child soldier, Agu. In this test, readers are engaged in "less ethical judgements" because reader's ethical (the relation of one person to the other) abilities may be enveloped by, or collapsed into experiencing all of the senses and immediacy of the protagonist. If the aesthetics of the sublime and abject may be said to draw readers into experiencing aesthetic presence instead of ethical absence, there needs to be an ethical alternative to valuing absence and distance.

The last part of my argument suggests how the Holocaust trope of the privileged witness calls into question the assumed ethical positioning of the reader in *Beasts of No Nation*. This distinction of the relevance and positioning of the witness is, perhaps, the best way to positively articulate Theodore Adorno's dictum: "keep literature out of the fire zone." Adorno's prohibition of representing the Event, the supreme trauma, should be understood as an ethical judgment against the aestheticizing of traumatic suffering.

The body of this paper structurally aims to define a problem and suggest an ethical recovery. First it aims to define the aesthetics of AATN through Edmund Burke's concept of sublimity and Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject. The second rhetorical move is to argue how these aesthetic appeals draw readers of *Beasts of No Nation* into aesthetic tests for the self. Lastly, the rhetorical move towards absence is promoted through the Holocaust distinction of "the privileged witness."

### Aesthetics of Trauma

To understand how aesthetic entry strongly shapes the ethical reading, it is important to rest on previous criticisms of aesthetic criticisms which address aesthetic excess. Holocaust criticism sets a precedent for aesthetic criticism on the impossibility of historical representation after Auschwitz. But at the crux of the ethical debates surrounding modernist, postmodernist, and realist depictions there is a prior theoretical basis for aesthetic modes of description and how these descriptive modes can evoke literary feeling. In my argument, the sublime and the abject most apropos in how they describe reader's imaginative relationships with traumatically expressive texts.

In literary tradition, Edmund Burke's expressed the mercurial concept of the sublime as being the strongest part of man's imagination. In *On the Sublime and Beautiful*, Burke states that whatever excites ideas of pain, danger and terror, is a source of the sublime. Furthermore, Burke states that "pain is stronger in its operation than pleasure" (Sublime 1). The awe of the sublime has great efficacy in its ability to draw people into imaginative relationships. This is especially the case in Burke's definitional

characteristics of the sublime: infinite, solitude, emptiness, darkness and terror...”

(Cuddon 875). If these associations are also experiences in reading, the definition may be understood as either the initial step in a reader being drawn to literature, or a text’s expression of violent magnitude. The initial draw and the expression of the traumatized other both suggest aesthetic modes of representation.

Kant furthers our critical understanding of sublimity by suggesting the imagination’s limits to comprehend, even while the mind follows a duty and purpose to comprehend. Here we can understand the function of the aesthetic as a imaginative force, as well as the structure of the ethical—as a power of comprehension. In *Critique of Judgement* Kant says that the sublime is “an abyss in which the imagination is afraid to lose itself.” The potential of losing oneself in an abyss should be read as a loss of the mind’s ability to make discriminations because of the magnitude of the aesthetic. Though there is confusion over the semantics of sublimity, part of Kant’s view is that the sublime brings the viewer/experiencer pleasure through pain. How the emotional process of this works is notably complex, but the concern here is the affect on the reader.

The second ethical concern of sublimity relates to the text, but cannot be reduced to a solid object or form because of its very definition. What I want to emphasize, though, is the structural aesthetic of the sublime, where vastness and terror are utilized in descriptions of the landscape, character’s feelings, ineffable violence, and metaphysical appeal. These textual features help frame a reader’s aesthetic entry into a text. Readers are initially drawn to experience sublimity because the excess therein promises a greater, more secretive, darker reality than they are used to experiencing.

Like *Faust*, readers may give some ethical part of themselves up in order to experience a more sublime experience of what it means to live. This is the unspoken allure of AATN, shown within the textual features previously stated.

The second part of this process is how sublime descriptions become part of a normative mode of aesthetic description, and take precedent over ethical innertextual dialogue. The allure of the sublime may certainly draw a reader to trauma, but the abject is the force that breaks down reader's imaginative relationships.

Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject is an aesthetic feature useful in defining the death-related imagery within AATN. Tragedy may be able to draw readers through evoking fear and pity, but the abject may be said to both draw in the reader and then break down a reader's identity. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva suggests that the abject has to do with "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva 4). This definition is important because it states that we have natural psychological borders, and that the abject threatens those boundaries. The abject expresses a traumatic psychological relationship where there is a symbolic breakdown of the initial relation. In Kristeva's explanation of the abject, she states,

*L'abjection* is something that disgusts you, for example, you see something rotting and you want to vomit—it is an extremely strong feeling that is at once somatic and symbolic, which is above all a revolt against an external menace from which one wants to distance oneself, but of which one has the impression that it may menace us from the inside" (118 Julia Kristeva interviews).

Kristeva's quote shows that the abject has to do with images that are threatening both externally, from a protagonist's experience, and internally, as readers may try to repress the abject from within themselves. Kristeva's writing on the abject often refers to the

corpse as the quintessential image of the abject. The corpse is that fearful image that disrupts our sense of ontological order.

The abject image demands a reestablishing of the order once disrupted. Kristeva suggests that sublimity, is language attempting to fulfill and rescue us out of the abject. In summarizing Kristeva's paradigm, Dino Felluga suggests that "literature explores the way that language is structured over a lack, a want" (Felluga 1). Kristeva's paradigm is important because it shows us how readers and writers are forced to confront the abject through the language of sublimity. In this understanding, readers who confront the abject would characteristically either repress that image, or try to "override" this fear through relating to sublime language in the narrative. It is difficult to directly apply Kristeva's concept of the abject to a reading method, but it certainly contains this structure: First, there is a an evoking feeling of horror, through a textual image or relation to the abject. The threat of the abject is often expressed aesthetically before a response through language can be formulated, especially ethical language. Second, the abject must reckoned with through sublimity as literature attempts to come to terms with its own want of understanding.

What I have enumerated here is a reconceptualizing of the double demand of otherness. The fear of the abject may expresses our primary relationship to excess portrayals of others and to images of death. As readers attempt to approximate the traumatized other, they must attempt to reckon with the fearful image through appealing to the sublime within texts (something must be said). Literature, in varying extents, uses sublime appeals to express what cannot be said in realistic, concrete, knowable,

descriptive language. AATN shows this process in utilizing sublime appeals to the realities of child soldiers. Since the landscape of war is full of the abject, AATN attempts to relate and interpret the abject through a language that mimetically represents the experience of horror through language. Kristeva's concept of the abject is problematic for literary ethics, because it expresses both the fear of one's own death, and the angst for resolution. Both the problem and the "lacking," "wanting," solution are played out in *Beasts of No Nation*.

The sublime and the abject should be viewed in this way as they relate to literatures of trauma. Within this paradigm, an issue of aesthetics has, I would argue, necessarily lead to an issue of ethics. Although this argument does not recognize the lyrical and narrative formation of ethics qua ethics, the reiteration of this binary is a necessary one for the function and focus of argument. Another way of stating the abject and sublime mode of reading is the following: The initial draw to the scene of violent excess eventually soon produces an aporia when that image reminds a spectator or reader of their own death; the aporia rends meanings apart; and lastly, literature is a realm of experience where some type of new relationships to the ineffable must be formed. The reconstituting of identity relationships, however chimerical or idealistic that may be, is part of a search for ethics. At least, it is an attempt at an ethical language, an ethics within our language of relating to otherness.

Representations of war will always venture between excess allure and historical demands. Any overemphasis to one pole will call forth a response from the other side of the dialectic. In that basic tension, realist precedents of representation call into question

Beasts of No Nation for its utilization of the abject and the sublime. Though both of these aesthetic features draw a reader in towards a dark spectacle, each aesthetic feature has a different mode of ethical escape.

The abject disturbs our identity relationships to the ethical outcome of psychological repression. In the moment of horror, a reader would repress or reject their own responsibility a textual victim who is threatened by death. On the other hand, the sublime has the “escape mode” of drawing a reader away from the ethical event into the realm of metaphysical hyperbole. This is where readers lose a sense of who they are in the face of the violence that Agu experiences. These elemental experiences in reading are important because they constitute the initial psychological allure to read.

The allure of the aesthetic, while it may be used towards ethical ends, does not give readers a framework for ethics. Readers do not understand their relation to otherness—ontological or political through the sublime or abject. “Seeing through the eye and not with the eye”<sup>3</sup> requires that readers have a context for judgment during reading. I would submit that traumatic literatures that emphasize aesthetic appeals to reading should always be viewed through a “yes...and” approach, so that portrayals of sublime and the abject are given a language of understanding. If the aesthetics of Beasts of No Nation are simply affirmed and received, the reader has only been challenged to fulfill the aesthetic test of the self.

Scholars have negotiated the problem of aesthetic traumas in different ways. Dominick LaCapra addresses this problem of representation in terms of the tenuous placement of hyperbole, stating that though trauma “registers in hyperbole,” it should not

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<sup>3</sup> William Blake, “The Everlasting Gospel”

be the all-encompassing response to representing excess (xi). On the most basic level, LaCapra is indicating that the aesthetic should not have free-reign of expression within traumatic representation. Michael Rothberg's *Traumatic Realism* addresses the development of aesthetic portrayals of violence by noting Modernism's invasion through the traumatic. Rothberg traces traumatic hyperbole to an "after Auschwitz" turning point by suggesting how spatial and temporal axis are intertwined in representation (21). Although he admits the aesthetic shift, Rothberg still holds certain demands on aesthetics: "a demand for documentation, a demand for reflection on the formal limits of representation, and a demand for...risky public circulation of discourses on the events" (7). LaCapra and Rothberg's criticisms are important in analyzing *Beasts of No Nation* because of how aesthetic excess is being used represent an ethically significant situation.

These canonical works of ethical criticism are working towards a similar principle, understanding how aesthetics plays a fundamental role in, but does not undermine the historical and moral veracity of representing particular traumas. Although these critics promote their own unique reconciliations of the aesthetic to ethics, my own argument claims that sublime and abject portrayals of history are accentuated to such an extent in certain works of AATN, that they do not allow potential for such reconciliations. Since the aesthetics of the sublime and the abject have been defined in relationship to ethical criticism, it follows that these concepts be exemplified within *Beasts of No Nation*.

How Literary Aesthetics Implicates Ethics

*Beasts of No Nation* is a work of representative historical fiction about the lives of child-soldiers. This work appears to come from an ethical impetus since it speaks for those who do not have the ability to speak for themselves. That is, unless there is some type of advocacy or political rescue, it is difficult for child-soldiers to find an “authentic” voice in the West.

Uzodinma Iweala's first major literary work was mentored by Jamaica Kinkaid, born of personal experience with refugees in Nigeria, and written from material compiled for his senior thesis at Harvard. In all respects, the ethos of his fiction is furthered by his background. Indeed, we might say that he has the right, perhaps the imperative to speak for those who have suffered. In contrast, I am very aware that my own analysis is couched on a much larger question mark of legitimacy. The ventriloquist claim to speak for other should always be done with hesitation.

Despite the acclaim of this novel, I will argue that *Beasts of No Nation* is questionable in the type of aesthetic reading that its form strongly suggests.<sup>4</sup> The narrative mirrors the aesthetics of the abject in the portrayal of animalistic human nature, and sensory excess.

The animalistic nature of the child soldiers is apparent from the title of Iweala's work. The opening quotes emphasize the characteristics of the band of soldiers in the

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<sup>4</sup> Here I am making an argument that the most ethical type of literature contains a structure for moral repair within itself. This is not to say that AATN needs to portray a false happy ending, or way out. However, I am urging that it is not enough that a text makes an audience aware of a traumatic political situation or genocide through the portrayal of excess. AATN should have a self-interpretive mode where it explains and justifies an ethics through its own telling. It is not enough to give an audience a window to a situation of excess, and then simply close a vision of the traumatic.

novel: “I was able to expel from my mind, all human hope. On every form of joy, in order to strangle it, I pounced stealthily like a wild animal” (iii). If this is read as a code for unraveling what is to come, it would seem that we should expect a beast who has expelled its most human features. The reading expectation is framed in such a way that any prelingual responses to this quote would first encounter the abject. In Kristeva’s psychoanalytic view, the symbolic break down between human and animal suggests the loss of distinction between human and animal drives. The second quote listed, by Bela Kuti, gives us another animalistic frame through which to approach the novel: “This uprising will bring out the beast in us” (v). While the abject animal in this passage is the same as the in the previous passage, the ethical position of judgment has been altered from an “I” to a “us.” This quote explicitly places loss of humaneness at the forefront of reader’s minds.

Unlike psychoanalytic criticisms’ search for the substitutive object, the symbol that suggests another fearful repression, the audience is told what this fearful substitution will be before an “us” encounter of the imagined boy soldier. Substitution in these opening quotes allows for an entry into the text itself, and that vantage point, as the sequence suggests, is one that dialogically transfers identities from “I” to “us” and from “human” to “prepare for the jungle.” Whatever the author’s intent, these quotes have abject allure and they prepare readers to receive the narrative in a certain way. Iweala’s first valuation of *presence* is drawing readers away from their normative human-ethical expectations. By ethics, here, I am referring to one persons relationship and

responsibility to another person. If the initial access to this novel blurs the distinction between the reader and the protagonist, how does the whole novel show this feature?

An animalistic portrayal of violence permeates the events in the novel. One scene of slaughter portrays the protagonist and his fellow child soldiers in pursuit of more victims:

The other corner, is bed smelling like chicken and goat. I am wanting to kill. We are all wanting to kill. Under the bed there is woman and her daughter just hiding. She is looking at us...like somebody is cutting her face with knife. She is smelling like goat and we are wanting to kill her..."(47).

The gruesome nature of these statements underscores the consistent style and point of view of the novel. The level in which humans are portrayed in this passage suggests not just a total depravity, but an attacking of animal-like victims. The author makes an interesting ethical choice in not just portraying victims and perpetrators, but portraying human nature as animalistic, regardless of subject position.

This aesthetic choice carries with it the allure of sublime, and the breakdown of the abject. Pain and terror are easily evoked by the reading of this passage. The other-than-human subjects portrayed may be said to break down then normally perceived human sympathies between the reader and the victims in this scene. It is easier to forget that a person is being killed because our ethical discriminations have been changed by abject description. Iweala is utilizing the abject in a way that that changes reader's ethical perceptions of both the perpetrator and the victim. In the end of the novel, this feature allows the reader to forget the atrocities committed because of the nightmare-like

quality of the participants in the narrative. The offense is committed to the realm of the sublime and forgotten.

To examine the other side of this argument, Kristeva's *oeuvre* may suggest that this type of aesthetic is more universal than ethically questionable, or particularly offensive:

On close inspection, all literature is probably a version of the apocalypse that seems to me rooted, no matter what its sociohistorical conditions might be, on the fragile border (borderline cases) where identities (subject/object, etc.) do not exist or only barely so—double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject" (Powers 207).

Whether the particular aesthetic feature of the narrative is archetypal is less important than the fact of its affects. The fragile border that is broken through the woman being imagined as a goat for the slaughter demands more than sublime language as a reckoning force.

An ethical reading of this text would question what the outcome of such aesthetics and narrative choices have on the common reader. What empathy or judgment can be rendered to a non-human subject? The empathetic and judgmental abilities of a reader may be reduced in not being able to clearly differentiate subjects as victims and perpetrators.

The narrative draws more attention to experiencing the unaware perspective of a non-discriminant child soldier: "...my head is growing smaller and my body is growing bigger. I am wanting to kill; I don't know why. I am just wanting to kill" (Beasts 46-47). This statement presents an intimate self-description simultaneously with a complete lack of ethical awareness. This shows the problem of presence in that readers are drawn into close proximity with feeling, but not to human ethical discriminations. One might argue

that the animalistic human nature portrayed in the text has the effect of distancing the reader from the perpetrator, so absence not presence is valued. However, the animalistic excess of the narration also may be seen as aesthetically drawing the reader into a reading experience of voyeurism—where human-ethical relationship is not established.

Characteristically following Kristeva's paradigm for the abject, *Beasts of No Nation* exhibits sublimity as a way to escape and describe the abject. Throughout the self-narrated description of the child soldier killing the woman and her daughter, the protagonist continues to relate to sublime forces instead of his own act of will as the governing power: "I am not bad boy. Devil is not blessing me and I am not going to hell. But still I am thinking maybe Devil born in me and that is why I am doing all of this" (48). In this case, metaphysical forces are expressing the psychotic state of the child soldier.

Later in this same scene, the narrator goes into an extended description of the animistic gods and goddesses that model sacrificial killing. The ending line of this chapter describes the horrific end of this scene: "I am chopping and chopping...until I am looking up and it is dark. Another night. Time is passing. Time is not passing. Day is changing to night. Night is changing into day" (Beasts 51-52).

This passage expresses more than violence followed by confusion; it shows the text's aesthetic value of using sublimity to overcome the abject. What is essentially an ethical or not ethical act—taking another's life—becomes expressed into the realm of metaphysical darkness, infinite, and unknown. The unethical presence-based reading pattern initially draws a reader to experience animalistic violence as a test for the self;

second, it overcomes the problematic animalistic-style killing through giving way to sublime explanation. Ultimately, the ethical discriminations that *Beasts of No Nation* suggests, in the stated textual passage, must be a more-than-human or less-than-human ethical response. The blurred definitions between animal, human, and god suggest that the onus for interpretation relies greatly on the reader's outside, critical lenses.

Sensory excess is another aspect that defines the aesthetics of presence of *Beasts of No Nation*. It is one of the most obvious characteristics showing that readers are meant to experience war in a more intimate way. Sensory language such as, "Ping Ping," "Brightness," and "Kpawa," are used to make bullets and explosions closer to the mind of the reader (2). The author frequently relies on repetition, rhythmic intensity, contradiction, and staccato introjections to give readers a sense of frenzy. Stylistically, Iweala is using these modes of telling to achieve mimesis. Through these tropes the audience is meant to experience reality through the consciousness of a psychologically traumatized, potentially drugged, child-soldier.

Sensory binaries are exploded with Iweala's apocalyptic style of narration.

Sounds and sights are not interpreted as distinct senses, or moments within the narrative.

Rather, sensory excess runs through the topoi of the story.

It is too hot. It is too cold. It is raining. It is too much sunshine. It is too dry. It is too wet. But all the time we are fighting. All the time bullet is just eating everything, leaf, tree, ground, person—eating them—just making person to bleed everywhere and there is so much blood flooding all over the bush. The bleeding is making people to be screaming and shouting all the time, shouting to father and to mother, shouting to God or too Devil, shouting one language that nobody is really knowing at all (117).

The sensory excess in this passage is indicative of the sublime and the abject. In the first part of this passage, the loss in distinction of “natural” binaries, suggests that the order of the universe is disturbed. An explosion of binaries draws the reader into a world where senses do not make sense, and they become part of a relationship to the infinite, and the apocalyptic. The pattern follows the aesthetics of the abject. Images of blood are followed by sublime references to the metaphysical.

Again, the significance is found within the pattern of normal ethical discriminations being blurred, but in this passage there is an even stronger statement about the limits of language to express the traumatic suffering. This is both a statement of the ineffable suffering of war, and a statement showing how the author has aesthetically aligned himself with representing the unrepresentable. Iweala’s concluding line on the “language that nobody is really knowing” shows the postmodern value of the aesthetic within the text. There is not a significant language or approach that interprets the suffering within the narrative. In a more theoretical sense, the inexpressible language of suffering is the end development of sublimity. The most extreme development of aesthetic excess becomes a language of no ethical return.

The last aspect of the aesthetics’ relationship to the ethical I would like address in this paper is the texts positioning of the reader. This should be understood as the most culminating issue of my argument. The stylistic choices of portraying humans as animals, and sensory excess, are smaller issues of how readers aesthetically relate to and experience an AATN text. I have tried to clarify the how the aesthetic may suggest its own pattern of ethical discourse through the draw of the abject and the subsequent need

to address horror through sublimity. In other words, the text's pattern of aesthetics lends itself to an unethical mimesis for readers.

### Ethically Approaching the Other

*Beasts of No Nation* is an ethically demanding text because it demands that the viewers empathetically relate to an imagined boy soldier. The aesthetics of the abject and the sublime blurs readers' relationships to their normal ethical expectations. Outside of the aesthetic argument, though, is the primary question of relationship: How does an audience relate to a subject who is both victim, as a manipulated-by-war child, and a perpetrator, who kills in hyperspeed of textual events? Moreover, how does an audience relate to a narrator who is fictional yet assumes to give the audience truth claims about the experience of being a soldier? There is a double compromise in the narrative source: the teller is not actually experiencing war, and story narrator's portrayed perspective is meant to show the audience a limited perspective—of a child blinded by violence.

AATN is a subgenre in which accessing "authentic voice" is a premium value. Authenticity is valued on the aesthetic level and the implied ethical level. As Dominick LaCapra notes, this value is found within the desire for sublimity and tests of the self through reading. Gaining access to the authentic voice of the other, and the real-time experience of boy soldiers, gives an audience a presumption of presence—that they are close to the truth about the other—in and through their reading. The specious nature of presence and narrative access is best addressed on the level of historical precedent.

In the literary outpouring following the Holocaust, there was great concern about the objectivity and historical value of narrative. However, since so many narratives were unearthed, and because of the ethical demands of remembrance, the ethical clarity of narratives was viewed and continues to be viewed as having paramount importance. In particular, Primo Levi's oeuvre shows an intense amount of ethical effort to describe suffering in an objective way. His concern for dealing with moral ambiguity, the historical clarity of the witness, and ethical positioning of the reader are exemplary reminders of absence-based literary expression. Levi's ethical clarity within a genre prone to aesthetic excess, helps argue for a reclamation of an ethics of absence within *Beasts of No Nation*.

Primo Levi's ability to deal with moral ambiguity through objective prose is highlighted throughout narrative his memoir *The Drowned and the Saved*. It is semantically precise, yet it recognizes the limits of judging others. Levi understood moralistic narrative to be a type of fallacy because it attempted to try to make good and evil decipherable, emulating Christ's judgment (Drowned 38). His own experience in Auschwitz taught him that the enemy was on "innumerable frontiers" (Drowned 40). Drawing absolute distinctions of good and evil within the camps ignored the in-between characters that inhabited his own experience. In *The Drowned and The Saved* he recounts the limits of objectivity in viewing others actions. He wrote that because there was an inability to see others and our own potential in extreme situations, judgment should be suspended.

Levi also leaves prisoners' moral culpability as subject to be described in the light of historical conditions. It is an abnormal environment which calls for a different level of evaluation. Levi views much of the action in the Lager through the lens of the "gray zone." This might be considered his main concession into subjectivity and idealism (as defined earlier). Actions within the camp had a certain amoral status because those involved were forced to make a choice where no good option existed. Survival demanded a certain level of ambiguity, because victims started taking on the characteristics of their oppressors, becoming oppressors themselves (Kapos and spies). His turn towards conforming to idealism is poignantly stated: "one is never in another's place" (60). This in-between category seemed to be characteristic of his own conscience. In Levi's poem "The Survivor," he recounts his conflict with the dead of Auschwitz. Levi makes an interesting retrospective articulation here—showing his desire to be free from the realm of moral accusation. In her brilliant work on Primo Levi, *Tragedy of an Optimist*, Myriam Anissimov writes that he "orders the shadows of his companions to leave him in peace, he who had not usurped anyone's bread" (156). The guilt of Auschwitz implicated victims and perpetrators alike.

This is an important value related to interpreting *Beasts of No Nation*. The opening inclusion of moral ambiguity "This uprising will bring out the beast in us," is akin to Levi's "grey zone." Levi does not simply moralize the immoral situation, he reminds readers of trauma that moral ambiguity does not preclude the demand to address ethical complexity.

A concern for historicity and objectivity greatly influenced how Levi viewed the act of witnessing. In his own writing, Levi avoided the stylistic excess and aporia that characterizes many Holocaust representations. He refused to turn the *disaster notation* of the Holocaust into a metaphysical theodicy. On the subject of Levi's prose style, Myriam Anissimov writes that:

Levi...retained almost total recall of his captivity in Auschwitz, was selective in conveying what he had lived through. / Although he devoted his life to his mission as a witness, he avoided recounting his experiences too frequently, because, he said, the story tended to set into a crystallized form that displaced the raw memory. His originality lay in the way he wrote, a style he had acquired in the laboratory, where accuracy and concision were insisted upon, and lyricism and passion excluded. (5)

Levi's prose emphasized the necessity to articulate suffering in a personal way that focused on his original memories and attempts at moral perceptiveness—even when there seemed to be none to offer in the camps. This is an important precedent to value in AATN. Theodor Adorno's statement "no poetry after Auschwitz" suggests this basic realist demand of representation. Accuracy and clarity of narrative is important to trauma narratives because it attempts to avoid aesthetic language that obscures history. This demand for historically precise language *reads and suggests* against the postmodern narrative style of *Beasts of No Nation*. On this point, Levi's oeuvre does not discount the ethical work of Iweala's text, but it does remind the reader of an ignored ethical value that they must negotiate.

Aesthetic modes of narration, such as Agu's emotive statements, emphasize a reader's ability to feel what Agu is feeling as he is feeling it. Before he joins the soldiers, Agu describes his thirst: "I am floating away like leaf in water until KPWISHA! I am

feeling cold...my body is so heavy all around me” (Beasts 8). There is a level of emotional empathy created by poetic language in the text, but Levi’s writing, with few exceptions, reminds readers that realism may be an issue for ethics not just a matter of aesthetic taste.

While Levi’s prose to holds aesthetic limits, he also analyzed the historical and ethical clarity of other testimonials. Levi gives readers a framework for judging the testimonials of others by examining the “*impotentia judicandi*” that prohibited judgment for the Sonderkommando (Drowned 145). In this concept, Levi makes it clear that there was less value in the testimonials of morally compromised persons. The Sonderkommando who worked the gas chambers were well-fed and liquored-up for their duties, and that a rejection of their work brought about instant death. Their words and actions lost ethical clarity because of their animal-like reduction.<sup>5</sup> He notes that it was not uncommon for them to kill one another” (146). Levi notes that Jewry in the upper echelon of the camps lost their ethical privilege and relevance to bear witness. Only the witness who was not occupied with *walking the next two steps*, or who was not ethically compromised (i.e., Kapos, Sunderkommando) was able to give the clearest account. Although they were victims, ethical compromises led them to lose the clarity of and distinction of who real victims and perpetrators were in the Holocaust. According to Primo Levi, narratives of the Holocaust have different historical value.

Relating this principle to AATN, Levi’s ouvre reminds readers that proximity to violence does not often convey ethical and historical understanding of events. Literary

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<sup>5</sup>. Although Levi’s concept of “The Gray Zone” permeates his writing, Anissimov notes that “Levi was anxious to warn against bracketing killer and victim together” (127).

values of presence may ignore the “relevance to bear witness.” In application, *Beasts of No Nation* recounts a time when Luftenant is raping one of the village women. Agu, the child soldier, is listening to the sounds outside of the tent, and instead of the action upsetting his senses, he feels sexually aroused by the action (112). Again, in the text, proximity to bear witness does suggest an ability to ethically interpret. Whether this a self-evident intention of Iweala’s novel or not, Levi’s work reminds readers that mere record of violent events is less significant than the ethical interpretation of those events.

Lastly, Levi’s narrative writing in *The Drowned and the Saved* shows his value of positioning the reader. If readers come to ethical discriminations through a mimetic relationship with the narrator, Levi’s writing is exemplary. His prose positions readers to not be overwhelmed by emphasis on the abject and sublime. In *The Drowned and The Saved* Levi writes about why his own vantage point was historically privileged. Like Weisel, he notes that those who experienced Auschwitz to the fullest extent, those who were killed or were psychologically ruined, had no opportunity to bear witness. Christopher Bigsby writes that, “similar to a lab-technician’s concern for ideal testing conditions, Levi was aware of the uniqueness of his own position within Auschwitz” (289). Levi’s position as a chemist gave him value in the camps and allowed him to meet people who were neither prisoners nor guards. Since Levi saw the camps from multiple vantages, his narrative has both a unique perspective. His testimony has the “inside the gates” ethos to speak for victims, the clarity of mind to make ethical distinctions between perpetrator or victim, and the vantage point of absence in his not being a *Sunderkommando*, or an already compromised source.

The argument being made is that authors of trauma narrative have a particular responsibility to promote ethical perspectives within the structure of their text. Levi models this *par excellence*. It is much more difficult to read this value into Iweala's work because the imagined witness is on very edge of survival throughout the novel. The best possibility for this type of reader-positioning is not found in Agu's first person perspective; rather, it comes from a Western-identity confirming ending. Agu, the child soldier, is rescued by some Christian aid workers. Amy, a white woman from America, models the empathetic mother-figure for Agu, as well as for the reader. Here, the audience is given the desired ethical approach to the text. At one notable point Agu narrates that Amy "is always saying to me, tell me what you are feeling" (Beasts 140). Agu's later response is one of the most self-interpretive statements in the novel:

I am saying to her sometimes, I am not saying many thing because I am knowing too many terrible thing to be saying to you. I am seeing more terrible thing than twenty thousand men, and I am doing more terrible thing than twenty thousand men. So, if I am saying these thing, then it will be making me to sadding too much and you to sadding too much in this life (141).

In this statement, Agu gives the audience a retrospective examination of his own actions. Like the opening clauses to the novel, the use of pronouns is significant. In the first sentence, the Christian aid worker "her" becomes an ethically implicated "you" to the reading audience. Agu's voice follows this statement of ethical relationship by, arguably, gives an admission of remorse for telling us so many terrible things and making us sad. This passage positions readers to react empathetically to this beckoning "you," yet the position is one that emphasizes presence.

Readers have already experienced the excess violence which Agu tells Amy (the ethically positioned “us”). The option of not speaking, indicated by Agu’s “saying to you” statement, is an articulation of the impossibility of representation carries an implicit hint of irony because Iweala has already utilized stream of consciousness style narrative style to give us an inside experience of excess. Although we have an inside view of Agu’s experience, Iweala’s text positions the reader to empathetically relate to a subject who defines his experience through hyperbole: he sees more terrible things than twenty thousand men. The aesthetic of sublimity, beyond any comprehensibility, still overpowers the audiences ability to be an understanding and empathetic Amy. It might be argued that the lack of redemptive resolve through Amy’s positioning shows the absence of ethical outcomes, ending in a unresolved demand for justice yet to come. Such a reading is possible. However, the reader’s entry into Agu’s mind--the intensity of presence—cannot be immediately forgotten by an articulation of absence at the end of the text.

Primo Levi’s concerns for articulating moral ambiguity, the clarity of the witness, and the positioning of the reader, bring an unexpected theoretical connection to the ethics of absence. Deconstruction may draw values of absence from the structural instability of texts and the undecidable nature of doing justice to a victim, but Levi’s paradigm values absence by ethically positioning the reader, drawing them back from the aesthetic gaze of the abject.

The narratological placement of a reader is one of the most critical aspects of ethical reading. This claim is supported by more than just Holocaust concerns for

representation. Recent criticism suggests that narrative modes, by their lyrical, story-telling quality, escape our judgments.

In *Narrative as Ethics* Adam Newton claims that narrative textually functions as an ethics, “cutting athwart the mediatory role of reason,” and preceding consciousness (13). Authors choose how to position readers in relation to the characters in a particular text. These choices include: first and third person, level of access to a character’s consciousness, the moral options present for the protagonist, the humanity or lack of humanity exhibited in a particular context, and ethical vantage points that are presented through various characters.

Applying Newton’s basic premise to *Beasts of No Nation*, that the narrative functions as a aesthetic and sensory experience of the world. A significant part of this is due to the “authentic” portrayal of a child’s experience of war. From the eyes of this African child, captive to the extreme aporia of war, ethical and historical distinctions are not prominent in the novel. It is a child’s view.

Agu’s desire to mimic the soldier’s that he has seen in movies shows a textual example of narrative functioning as an ethics:

So we were playing all this game then and thinking that to be a soldier was to be the best thing in the world because gun is looking so powerful and the men in movie are looking so powerful and strong when they are killing people...(Beasts 31).

Here, Agu’s perception is showing us the process of movie narratives “cutting athwart” (LaCapra’s opening quote) his initial belief of what it meant to be a soldier. That aesthetic narratives of film functioned as a form of ethics for him. This passage highlights how the protagonist himself was drawn to view violence through the visual

appeal of power. Even though Agu questions this perception, Agu does not see himself as a “bad boy” because, as he states, “I am a soldier now” (31). That aesthetic identity picture is functioning as an ethical determiner for him. With few exceptions, Agu’s soldier’s narrative cuts across reason and ethical thought to favor aesthetically established identities. The pace of the storyline action, simply does not allow time or space for anything else.

It is significant that Agu’s perception of violence is characterized by a visual appeal of power, and an internal breakdown of the initial visual relationship. Once that relationship has proven false, Agu has adopted another identity to justify his actions to his own identity. Adopting a different schema (“soldier”) allows him to kill—and it allows him to survive. I would suggest that this pattern is in symmetry with a potential encounter with the text: the visual allure of the spectacular is broken down, and shattered by the terror of what is taking place in the text. This narrative process also positions the reader. Sublime and Abject modes of narration precede and overwhelm the reader’s ethical capacity as an Amy-figure at the end of the novel.

Both of these capacities are difficult for readers to achieve when the aesthetics of the sublime and abject are maximized in the narrative over attempts to humanize perpetrators. First identified as beasts Agu’s companions—Stricka, Luftenant, Rambo, and Commandant—have very little room for motivations and developed personas. Since readers are not privy to the internal motivations of the perpetrators it is difficult to receive them without stereotyping (Nussbaum’s criterion of impartiality), and even more difficult to make moral evaluations without character motivations (Nussbaum’s criterion of

judgment). In *Beasts of No Nation*, the audience is captive to a stream-of-consciousness spate of violence that does not zoom back into historical context, alternative mindsets, intertextual reference, or ethical perspectives on violence. These are the types of reading values that would suggest an absence or distance between the reader and the aesthetic.

Instead, the type of distancing absence the audience receives seems to be modeled by Agu as he is similarly overwhelmed by the incomprehensibility of the aesthetics of violence. If the reading audience follows the close proximity to the protagonist's consciousness, they may observe a type of self-distancing from the protagonist. During an act of brutality, the protagonist has a reflexive moment.

But I am standing outside myself and I am watching it all happening. I am standing outside of myself. I am grabbing the woman and her daughter. They are not my mother and my sister. I am telling them, it is enough. This is the end (Beasts 48).

This passage may portray the imagined "authentic voice" of a child soldier. It demonstrates the necessary fragmentation of consciousness of the threatened ego. The psychological separation of the protagonist happens as he remarks, "I am watching it all happen." A further step of separation happens when the narrator differentiates between his relationship his family and the victims in front of him. This type of metacognition does not indicate a stepping back into an ethical perspective.

This psychological self-narration may model the necessary disassociation for the perpetrator. However, the appropriate questions from reader response criticism may include: how is this affecting the reader? Does the psychological thought-process of the child soldier model a type of ethical impotence for readers?

The darker possibility, the misreading which is more ethically compromising, is that we as readers are brought along with the perpetrators as complicit watchers of the protagonist's acts of violence—watching the scenes unfold as we might watch an extremely violent film. The depiction is one that lends itself to sight, and not to comprehension. The fragmented scenes of a child's war is spliced together from various scenes of starvation, bombing, rape, initiation, drug-use, and more killing. Delineating this type of trauma literature is difficult because it puts readers in a position of Seeing as an act of complicity: we must follow the journey until the book is done. The ethical evaluation demanded must come almost entirely from outside of the text, even outside of the modeled empathy of Amy.

The first-person exposure to violence in *Beasts of No Nation* has the primary affect of drawing readers into an aesthetic reading of trauma. The narrative positioning models for readers, only how they are to “stand outside” of their own ethical sensibilities. *Beasts of No Nation* situates the reader so that they become visual and experimental participants the action. This makes ethical judgment, that is, the relation between the self and other, less of an experience while reading and more of a matter of self-extrication from the rhythmic intensity of sights and sounds of violence. Readers must extricate themselves from the abject vision of the narrator in order to redefine their own ethical relationship to the demands of otherness within the text.

Primo Levi writes about the necessity of ethical clarity in modes of witnessing after the Holocaust. Referring to the mutual wounds of memory, he states:

We do not wish to abet confusions, small-change Freudianism, morbidities, or indulgences. The oppressor remains what he is, and so does the victim.

The oppressor remains what he is, and so does the victim. They are not interchangeable. The former is to be punished and the execrated (but, if possible, understood), the latter is to be pitied and helped; but both, faced by the indecency of the irrevocable act, need refuge and protection.... / In general, the descriptions of the things seen and the acts committed are of little interest...and they are now part of history. Often they are regarded as well known. Much more important are the motivations and justifications: Why did you do this? Were you aware that you were committing a crime? (Drowned 25).

This passage gives three significant ethical values for representation. Levi rejects morbidities and indulgence into excess descriptions of violence, calling them “part of history.” Second, he denies the possibility of fluidity between victim and perpetrator identities. Lastly, Levi places the onus and value of witnessing on the question of “why?” not on the pure happenstance of telling. In several instances of killing Agu’s narrative denies these interpretive possibilities:

The man is screaming, AYEEEEIII, louder than the sound of a bullet whistling and then he is bringing his hand to his head, but it is not helping because his head is cracking and the blood is spilling out like milk from coconut. I am hearing laughing all around me even as I am watching him try to hold his head together. He is annoying me and I am bringing the machete up and down and up and down hearing KPWUDA KPWUDA every time and seeing just pink.... (Beasts 21)

Agu is both victim and perpetrator because he is forced into killing. The textual emphasis though, is not on the questions of why, but on the spectrality of the killing. The audience is a privileged witness to these events in the sense that we are experiencing them as close as we can be through reading a text. But the audience is not a privileged witness in the sense of Levi’s *impotentia judicandi*. How can we aesthetically value the witness of a voice so morally compromised? The potential for this voice to

simultaneously enact violence, suggest empathetic response, and relay truths about war become very complicated in the light of readers aesthetic entry into the text.

Levi's concept of the privileged witness calls overly-aesthetics depictions of trauma into question. Iweala's text encroaches these ethical values by giving us an "indulgent" aesthetic experience of following a subject who cannot be fully perpetrator or victim, and whose motivations are not yet realized. This abject image of the man Agu killed is interpreted for us through Commandant's statement "it is like falling in love" (*Beasts* 22). Unfortunately, in the aesthetic representations of this text, "all becomes fair" in seeing through the war-torn eyes of an imagined boy soldier. While commandant's statement may be a warning to "not fall in love" with the aesthetic, it is a dubious "aha" if the corpus of the story delves so deeply into the abject, only to tell us "watch out for this" at the end of the novel.

The multifaceted face of this paper has held high intention of not "rewriting" the traumatic narrative of Agu, or suggesting that it must change x, and y, aesthetic feature to fit realist demands. Rather, it has taken a deliberately subtle position: that the aesthetics of the abject and the sublime frame the ways that readers relate to victims and perpetrators in *Beasts of No Nation*. Second, as a mode of reading recovery, Primo Levi describes a traumatically violent landscape with ethical clarity through placing readers "narratologically away" from the scene of violence (again, this is not to directly transfer imagined Africa to Auschwitz). The problem of presence in *Beasts of No Nation* is not a likely candidate to receive criticism from within a culture that commodifies trauma, or champions it for an entry into the extraordinary. Perhaps, only Levi's ethical gravity of

subject has the ethos to question aesthetic depictions of violence, by saying that the violence itself is nothing extraordinary, but the question of “why,” distances readers enough to be aware of their own ethical formations.

*Beasts of No Nation* confirms the argument of my thesis in demonstrating the literary value of presence in AATN, while suggesting an ethical recovery founded in rhetorics of absence. The opening argument for my thesis confirms that readers are not as able to make ethical discriminations when their access to narrative is overwhelmed by proximity. In this chapter, this argument implicates the author as well as the readers who must evaluate the ethics of their own aesthetic entry into preframed fictional, dialogically-performative worlds. The recovery of ethical absence in this chapter demonstrates the ethical value of proximity by demanding a moral and historical distance from the event that one is to ethically judge.

In *Writing History, Writing Trauma* Dominick LaCapra writes that “there has been an important tendency in modern culture and thought to convert trauma into the occasion for sublimity, to transvalue it into a test of the self...and an entry into the extraordinary” (23). At best, I would suggest that the rhythmic intensity, hyperbole, and violence in the text offers the most marketable type of story. In the worst case, my polemic argues that authors have used historical tragedy to justify an imagined traumatic perspective for an aesthetic “entry into the extraordinary.”

## CHAPTER 4

## CONCLUSION

Testimonial Presence in AATN

*What is most striking here is the movement which troubles the subject and the text from its place within the confessional subject to a location external to the traumatized subject. In this sense, testimony represents the 'turning inside out' of the confessional self. -Susannah Radstone*

It has been argued that Holocaust and Deconstructive literary approaches address the double demand of otherness (I cannot relate, and I must relate) in a way that foresees, and addresses the problematic and spectacular presence of the other within AATN. Deconstruction calls this presence into question through the articulation of mourning. This mode of thinking reminds readers of the chasm of alterity them and the victims, perpetrators, and the unnamed, killed victims alluded to in AATN. Holocaust approaches to traumatic expression call the aestheticizing of trauma into question through historical, moral, and evaluative “interruptions.” Both deconstructive and Holocaust modes of ethical representation suggest values of absence in place of presence..

One final demonstration of this double demand will be analyzed to form closure to my argument. The last “I must relate” is an attempt to briefly review the major works of the subgenre: Anglophone African Trauma Narrative. It is my hope that this type of conclusion both honors the collective narratives of AATN, and questions the narrative modes of presence within this subgenre.

Before a reader can appreciate the cultural and moral significance of this body of narratives, they must reckon with the question of historical accuracy. This is not just an issue of remembered dates and experiences, or whether every expression is “authentic” to the reality of trauma experienced. The valuation of AATN’s historical accuracy is an issue reliant on the reader’s beliefs about whether historicity is a prerequisite for ethical force. If readers are to respond to actual events portrayed through narrative, how do their beliefs about responsibility and ethics change when those events may be in question?

One of the results of the incomprehensibility of AATN has been to question the historicity of events surrounding child soldier’s actual experiences. Shortly after the printing of Ishmael Beah’s *A Long Way Gone* several publications called his memoir into question. In January of 2008 *The Australian* began a series of articles (News Limited) suggesting discrepancies in Beah’s timeline of events, even going as far as suggesting some of the events did not take place at all. Graham Rayman’s article in *The Village Voice* recounts how this is more problematic in light of the fact of Beah’s claim of telling horrific details with a “photographic memory that allows him to ‘indelibly’ recall the events in his life.” (Graham 1). *The Village Voice* acknowledges that while major publications in America had an overwhelmingly promotional view of Beah’s work, the narrative may seem in jeopardy.

Other works of AATN have negotiated the question of historical legitimacy by situating their claims within understandings of genre. Valentino Achak Deng’s story, *What is the What* is titled “a novel” on the cover page. *Beasts of No Nation* is admittedly a work of representative fiction also titled “a novel.” Other works AATN anticipate and

respond to historical criticism before it ever occurs. Emmanuel Jal's *War Child* makes the admission: "Most of the everyday violence of war never makes it into books, and this one is not meant to be a history of a country to be read by scholars. It is the story of one boy, his memories, and what he witnessed" (*War Child*, i). Still, Judy Bernstein emphasizes the lyrical weaving together of one story from three *Lost Boys*: "Their telling comes to me randomly, but from the threads and pieces, an amazing story emerges" (xxi). It seems clear that authors of AATN—survivors, and ghost-writers—place greatest importance on the telling itself. Blurriness of *Childhood* details, and editorial misrepresentation is not the main concern of the teller.

The historical truth and accuracy of AATN precedes the rhetorical basis of my argument about presence and absence. I must assume child soldiers' basic claims of experience. Even so, it must be said that truth-claims are significant to the responsiveness and ethical formation of readers. Hyperbole-driven expressions of trauma may question historicity as the supreme ethical value of telling. Dominick LaCapra addresses this issue of ethical representation in questioning how literature "in its very excess can somehow get at trauma in a manner unavailable to theory [historiographical, or psychoanalytic]" (*Writing History* 183). This is an important counter-claim for AATN's legitimacy amidst historical critiques. Journalistic critiques of AATN and author's sensitivities to genre, forecast a continued tension between the demands of historical representation and traumatic expression.

Readers are able to move towards the ethically strenuous challenge of reading AATN after they have addressed doubts of authorship. Great literature is the sort that questions the listener through the stylistically, culturally, and morally complex material.

Just as Sethe's moral compromise in Morrison's *Beloved* draws readers into the most complex ethical discussions, AATN summons a complex and multi-leveled responsiveness to its own ethical demands of presence. The subgenre may be linked to other types of trauma narrative, yet AATN is best represented by the following books suggested here.

*Beasts of No Nation* is a novel written by Uzodinma Iweala, and published in 2005. The novel begins *in media res* with a series of camera-flash-like sensory experiences being told. The child-soldier victim, Agu, has already been kidnapped by a military group. Most of the plot action is told as if it were told in an action film. The first way that *Beasts of No Nation* demonstrates a value of presence is through its non-stop, stylistically excess narration. The intensity and rhythmic input of visual and sensory detail is extremely effective making a reader feel like they are the narrator, Agu. The experience of relating to Agu's actions have been argued to aesthetically suggest sublime and the abject effects through reading relationships. The reason that this presence is ethically significant is that the reader's aesthetic entry into *Beasts of No Nation* may overwhelm other ethical capabilities.

A second way that presence dominates the reading experience of Iweala's text is the lack of polyphonic quality, ethically modeled oppositions within the text. The lack of oppositional ethical structures and modeled heteroglossia within the text does not

challenge readers to psychologically extricate themselves from the sheer experience of following one child-soldier through his narrow perspectives on war.

There are some moments where Agu mentally extricates himself from the live-action in order to show readers his internal dialogue, these glimpses are disheartening in their lack of judgment. It is a child's view of war, and questions of whether he is a victim or perpetrator simply have no room to be formed and asked through the voice of the protagonist. Agu feels like a bad; he feels good; he feels like he is "wanting to be happy in this life because of everything" (141). Outside of Iweala, his fellow soldiers only model more adult versions of Agu's own perspective. Everybody is acting with the deliberateness of total war.

To Iweala's credit, he does offer Amy—a caring aid worker—as a sort of ethically ideal model for the reader. However, this mimetic insertion at the end of the novel does not fully recover the sense that readers have been wandering through an apocalyptic "grey-zone" for the past 100-pages. Readers do not find out what Amy actually thinks; she offers Agu her tears and always says to him, "tell me what you are feeling" (140). Unfortunately for the audience, this is one of the few perspectives we do know from intertextual. Ethical values of absence would emphasize the reader's role in identifying, contrasting, and evaluating multiple ethical paradigms within the text. Iweala's novel is brilliantly stylistic and moving at times, but the value of presence in this work is more aesthetically compelling than ethically formative.

*They Poured Fire on Us From the Sky* is a joint memoir, compiled by Judy Bernstein, and published in 2005. The novel begins with "An Introduction to the Lost

Boys.” Bernstein uses intertextual references and metaphors to render the characters into known, Westernized subjects. This metaphorization and reduction of the alterity of Benson, Alephonsion, and Benjamin into imagined “Lewis and Clark” figures, and *Lord of the Flies* savage boys, is argued to bring about an understanding of the other based on presence.

To clarify this process, the prohibition against equivocation, or the “I cannot relate,” is lessened by the metaphorization of the other. The result of this is that the presence of the other seems easy to understand, and more pliable to fit into our own understandings of how the world should work. Equivocation always functions as alterity’s return to the self and a reconfirmation of one’s values.

*They Poured Fire on Us From the Sky* also values presence by focusing on America as a refuge instead of the traumatic experience of loss. Instead of recounting those who were victims of starvation, or genocide, the memoir concludes with the Benson, Alephonsion, and Benjamin’s emigration to America. The hopeful ending pictures America as the a country of “such wonders,” a “land of gorgeous goods,” and a place of “destiny” (307). This might suggest a closure, and restoration of the boys traumatic experience instead of the lack of justice and continual mourning that actually may haunt the Lost Boy survivors’ minds. Alepho’s chapter “In Process” shows the value of only looking forward, not looking back: “Forget what happened in Sudan. America is the best place and I’m going to be there the rest of my life” (283). The promotion of presence in this case, as well as in my third chapter, is argued to be evident

through promoting an assurance of present justice instead of mourning for the justice yet to come.

While deconstructive ethics does not prohibit hopefulness, psychological healing and closure, it does remind us of a rhetoric of absence that relies on the force of doubt. Mourning the dead expresses the complete denial of presence; it expresses a meaningful relation to the past, and this practice of mourning has been argued to be ethically responsible.

*What is the What* was written by Dave Eggers about the life of Valentino Achack Deng. Published in 2007 by Vintage Books, this novel has received a National Book Critics Finalist award for fiction. Although I include this work in the genre of AATN, this narrative does not suggest the values of presence that are more prominent in other trauma narratives of this genre. Instead, this novel portrays a great amount of ethical clarity through its values of absence.

*What is the What* challenges the instrumentalism that would suggest America offers a complete rescue from political injustice. The text begins by addressing that assumption in narrative form. At the beginning of the novel Valentino recounts an experience of being robbed in his own apartment. The assailant tricks Valentino, and then brutally assaults him before stealing his personal items. There is a shocking exchange of contrasting ethical perspectives within the first several pages. First, there is the doubt of not knowing which situation is worse: being a Lost Boy in Africa, or being assaulted in the land of promise. The conflict continues and Valentino tries to compare this indignity with other sufferings: "...my memory is searching for the time when I last

felt...in the presence of evil so careless” (5). Later in the robbery, the assailant kicks Valentino in the ribs and says “No wonder you mother\*\*\*\*\* are in the Stone Age” (9). While these actions might suggest the elicit the readers emotions in empathetic relationship to the victim, they show clear values of absence.

Readers might assume that they are to encounter a victim in Sudan that needs to be rescued to America. Instead, Valentino’s experience being robbed in an Atlanta apartment suggests that reader’s assumptions about America’s hospitality and advancement (beyond the Stone Age) are called into question. Eggers uses this opening story to introduce an aporia on the nature of justice. It is not just found present or absent in one particular place; the possibility of injustice abounds in every place. When readers are called into question by means of aporia, it has the effect of bringing about contrasting ethical paradigms. Such complexity draws readers out of the mire of just experiencing the sensations and presence of narrative.

A second way that *What is the What* ethically values absence is by recognizing the chasm of otherness within trauma narrative form. Instead of relying on excessive as a reader allure, Eggers gives Valentino a voice that is aware of readers involvement in the textual action. One of the more intense scenes of violence portrays Ethiopians, Eritreans, and Anyuak attacking fleeing Sudanese civilians. Although Valentino sees and experiences this action, he describes the violence by articulating the limits of how it may be told: “ we could see everything, could see far too much” (339). Here, excess is defined by saying that it was “too much.” The physical descriptions of violence that follow do not emphasize the aesthetic presentness of the reader as part of the action.

Valentino describes the scene as a removed subject: “Thousands of boys and men and women and babies were crossing the river, and soldiers were killing them randomly and sometimes with great care” (339). The material possibility of using this scene to exhibit presentness is fully there. Eggers, though, does not give the reading audience an experience of presence.

Eggers ethical awareness of alterity and difference suggests that he is aware of how readers will respond to the power of texts. The last lines of the novel suggest Eggers’ perceptiveness to the double-demand of otherness within the reader:

I will tell stories to people who will listen and to people who don’t want to listen, to people who seek me out and to those who run. All the while I will know that you are there. How can I pretend that you do not exist? It would be almost as impossible as you pretending that I do not exist” (535).

Eggers portrays the double demand of otherness that I have argued to be the essential experience of reading AATN. The “I must relate” is shown by the teller’s awareness that they do, in fact, have an ethically impressionable audience. The “I cannot relate” is suggested by the admission that some listeners and readers will not want to hear the story. *What is the What* is a deeply ethical trauma narrative. Absence is valued throughout the novel by questioning the reader’s relationship to the victim.

*A Long Way Gone* is Ishmeal Beah’s memoir about his experience as a boy soldier. Published in 2007, the memoir has had wide public appeal in gaining Beah interviews with John Stewart and an endorsement by Starbucks. The memoir opens by drawing the reader into a dialogue exchange between a high school student and Beah. The student opens by asking,

“You mean you saw people running around with guns and shooting each other?”

“Yes, all the time.” [replies Beah].

“Cool” [unnamed student] (4 ).

If this opening dialogue is meant to ethically introduce us to the trauma narrative to come, it forecasts an spectators view of war, where Western audiences appreciate trauma because it offers a special type of excitement. The visual nature of war is emphasized in the descriptions of victims. Beah recalls a scene of war midway through the first chapter:

Blood was running down her dress and dripping behind her, making a trail. Her child had been shot dead and she ran for her life. / When she stopped at where we stood, she sat on the ground and removed her child. It was a girl, and her eyes were still open, with an interrupted innocent smile on her face (13).

A bare, descriptive prose characterizes Beah’s telling of this event. While stylistically, the writing does not overwhelm the reader with sensory material. The writing forefronts the presence of violence, and the inability for response. It is not an unfair question to ask why Beah chose to describe this scene with a pairing of intimate detail and violent reality. It may be a reality of war, but the placement of promising excess, and delivering a product (description) of excess, should make us feel slightly uncomfortable as readers. The marketability of trauma as an experience of novelty should be questioned in its values of representing, and framing events of war. Ethical values of absence would emphasize the questioning of, not the allure to, the reader.

The danger of this type of traumatic representation is that readers, like the boy-soldier victims, may experience a numbness in encountering the closest proximity descriptions of violence. Many passages in *A Long Way Gone* express the nausea and numbness felt by Beah. After describing a brutal march and a recent scene of a man with

a smashed-in skull, Beah writes: “I felt nauseated. Everything around me began to spin.” His commanding officer replied, “You will get used to it, everybody does eventually” (100). A second danger in portraying the presence of violence is that readers are inscribed with new limits of what they are “used to.” Psychological numbness denies the ethical capacities of boy-soldiers and readers alike. Textual values of presence draw readers into close proximity with violence; the numbness that results from such encounters may contribute to a readers ability to reject or accept the values of violent actions.

If it is accepted that presence is a dominant feature in AATN, and that this feature inhibits reader’s abilities to read ethically, it must be concluded that this subgenre is in particular need of an “outside” ethical input. It has been argued that Deconstructive criticism and Holocaust literary tropes value the absence and detachment of the reader from the feelings and actions of the protagonist. The reader’s utilization and recognition of values of absence help contribute to the necessary tensions of ethical reading. This tension is initially expressed as the double demand to otherness. The prohibition of this demand, “I cannot relate,” is the ethical focus of promoting absence as a practice of aware readership and authorship.

In the coming century, the ethics of readership will continue to be challenged by new literatures of trauma. This is especially true in cases where culturally specific, oral narrative are being transformed through emigration to Western countries. In that process, the self-assumptions of “civilized” identities will be challenged by traumatic otherness. At the limits of representation, the most ethical questions should not be directed towards

the trauma experienced by the other, but, instead, at the reader's inward formations towards the other. This precedes the immediacy of politics and yet it defines how such politics are framed.

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