Petit paw lave yon Bo, Kite yon bo

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the first paragraph of the paper.

As I sit in front of my computer screen with a blank page awaiting my thoughts and input, I can't even fathom a starting point. How is it possible to summarize an evil manifestation, which has been around the world since the dawn of mankind, in a paragraph? How can I start this, when just under a week ago, I had false pretensions that slavery doesn't exist anymore, that it had been abolished with the dissipation of the Civil War in 1865? But the truth is much more frightful: slavery still haunts us in today's world, more so than ever before.
As I sit in front of my computer screen with a blank page awaiting my thoughts and input, I can’t even fathom a starting point. How is it possible to summarize an evil manifestation, which has been around the world since the dawn of mankind, in a paragraph? How can I start this, when just under a week ago, I had false pretensions that slavery doesn’t exist anymore, that it had been abolished with the dissipation of the Civil War in 1865? But the truth is much more frightful: slavery still haunts us in today’s world, more so than ever before.

I suppose the best place to start is the beginning.

As I open A Crime So Monstrous: Face-To-Face with Modern-Day Slavery by E. Benjamin Skinner, I already have a predetermined thought on the book. I assumed I was in for the typical humanistic viewpoint of how forced labor was frowned upon, but with today’s laws and regulations, the laborers would still have certain rights that made sure they would never become a slave. I was dead wrong.

The book begins with Skinner telling us about his trip to Haiti. First, simply enough, he finds a taxi to escort him for the hour drive to the JFK International Airport. It takes another hour to get through security, then a three hour trip to Port-au-Prince, Haiti. As he gets off the plane, he finds an English translator that will spend the day with him and pays him $20. They find a tap-tap, a flatbed pickup with benches, that will only cost twenty-five cents for each travel. As Skinner travels through Port-au-Prince, he comments on how overpopulated the Haitian capital is, regardless of how colorful it is. Port-au-Prince was built to accommodate around 150,000 people, but hasn’t received any upgrades since 1804; the population is closer to three million now.

Skinner arrives at Delmas and notices that slaves are everywhere. Having been investigating slavery for years now, Skinner notices how the slaves are always the smaller ones, “even if they’re older” (5). Just by witnessing how they walk, slump, and have their heads bowed, Skinner is able to recognize them. Skinner reports that “the average fifteen-year old child slave is 1.5 inches shorter and 40 pounds lighter than the average free fifteen-year-old” (20). After driving for a half an hour, Skinner gets to his destination, pays the cab driver, and walks down a well-kept alley. As he approaches a group of five men, one steps out and asks, “Are you looking to get a person?” (Skinner 6).

This man’s name is Benavil Lebhom, and he will be the one negotiating the sale of a human being. But, of course, he doesn’t consider himself a child seller; he says that he’s simply relocating Haitians. And although he does, in fact, sell humans, he also holds a real estate license. It’s just that two thirds of his sales are slaves. In Benavil’s height of business, he would sell twenty to thirty kids in a week and make around $200 a month. The average income for a Haitian household was $30 a month.

Haiti specializes in child slavery. Any child, aged from seven to about fifteen, can be negotiated for sale with Benavil. The average child being sold is 12 years old. In Haiti, they’re not called slaves; they’re called restaveks or the “stay-withs” as they’re known in Creole (Skinner 6). It comes from the French words “rester avec.” As Skinner reports, “these are the children who won’t look you in the eyes” (Skinner 6).

After a brief introduction, Skinner and Benavil start negotiating. Benavil claims that he can get a slave as quickly as three days. But he’ll only bring in a kid from the countryside, for it’s much easier to have a country kid as a slave. City kids are too street smart and will try and find an escape. The country kids, as Benavil says, are too timid to escape and will ultimately be easier to break. They have weak wills.

In fact, it’s easier to negotiate with the parents from the country into handing their child into slavery rather than from the city. Benavil’s colleague in La Vallée goes from village to
village and house to house trying to convince families to give up their children. He promises that the child will be fed and educated. That’s usually all it takes to convince a family. The villages have very poor living standards. Out of every 1,000 urban kids, 112 die before age five, whereas in the countryside it’s 149. Education is a luxury because of how difficult it is to attend; most children never attend school. 80% of schools are private, “and urban high schools cost $385 per year; this sum is beyond the annual income of the typical Haitian” (Skinner 8). However, when the restaveks are introduced to their new families and lifestyles, the promise of an education is usually quickly demolished, as only 20% of restaveks go to school. When the parents give up their child, the family rarely gets paid. They’re satisfied with the promise that their child is getting a better life with an education. Little do they know, they’re handing over their child to be physically, mentally, and sexually abused.

The negotiation between the two continues. Benavil says that the travel expense to get the child will be roughly $100 US. After a brief rundown on prices, Skinner agrees. He then asks the most important question: “And what would your fee be?” Benavil eyes down Skinner, determining how much he can squeeze out of the foreign American (Skinner 10). “A hundred. American” (Skinner 10). Skinner yells at Benavil, claiming to being ripped off for the inflated price. After some negotiation, Benavil offers a final price. “Fifty U.S.” Benavil smirks, knowing that the sales of the restaveks are much less expensive for the local Haitians (Skinner 10). They agree to the deal. In just over six hours, Skinner proves that it’s possible for any American to negotiate and purchase a human being for only $50.

Let’s take a look at this. A person could work minimum wage at $7.25 for about 7 hours, which is less than a day, and get enough money to purchase a human. That’s less than a full tank of gas for Hummer by the standards in 2008. The average American household spends $500 for Christmas alone. Their Christmas spending could purchase 10 restaveks. Many dogs cost between $500 and $1000, up to twenty times the price of a human. Yankee tickets go for between $120 and $3,549. How is it possible for the price of a mortal soul to be less expensive than all of these items?

What I found even more nauseating is that humans have sold for even less than $50 U.S, even though the average price is $90 U.S. In Southern Sudan, Dinka children cost 40 Sudanese pounds, which is less than the cost of an international postage stamp. In Asia, a Chinese restaurant traded a woman for 100 kilograms of wheat. Slaves in the Civil War used to be worth the equivalent of $400,000 with today’s inflation. When Skinner searched for slaves in Europe, he was able to negotiate trading a human girl with a used car. That moment in the book was one of the least humane moments I’ve ever read. It makes me fear the evil and ugliness in Man.

Before Skinner and Benavil departed ways, Benavil leaned in and asked him a question. “Is this someone you want as just a worker? Or also someone who will be a ‘partner’?” (Skinner 11). In Haiti, there are slaves known as “la-pou-sa-a,” slaves who perform sexual favors as well as housework (Skinner 20). Benavil quickly states that he can get Skinner a girl between the age of nine and twelve. Skinner says it’s a large investment, so he’d like to take some time and think it over.

Haiti has the most slaves in the Western hemisphere. The nation alone has 400,000 slaves with a population of 8,300,000 people. 20% of the population is slaves. There is an estimated total of 27 million slaves today. In this point in history, there are more slaves in the world than ever before. It’s just difficult to notice because there’s also a larger population in the world, and the slaves represent a smaller percentage.

A large portion of slaves throughout the world are held captive as sex slaves. In Haiti, most clients want a young girl because they want their house to be clean and food to be cooked. These female restaveks have consistently been raped when under captivity. There is a case where a young female Haitian was bought by an older couple. At night, the father would rape her and in the day, the mother would beat her for seducing her husband. Haiti isn’t the only place to have sex slaves, though.
In the Netherlands, a single sex slave earned her pimp an estimate of $250,000 per year but didn’t see a single dollar of it. However, the sex slaves from the Netherlands are more of prostitutes without any freedom, compared to the slaves of Haiti who would be raped by their masters.

There’s a Haitian proverb that goes “petit paw lave yon Bo, Kite yon bo.” This translates to “Your child is not my child, and I don’t have to do anything for him because he’s not mine” (Skinner 21). There are two things that trouble me about this proverb. Firstly, it’s assumed that many Haitians are so consumed with their own lives that they’re nearly reckless with other children’s lives. It’s as if Haiti’s warm weather needs to be compensated by cold personalities. Secondly, it’s stunning to find that this is a proverb. It’s popular enough to be said frequently and often that it is oftentimes passed as a truth. This summarizes Haiti’s slavery issue more so than any other phrase that I’ve stumbled across.

Slavery isn’t only apparent in Haiti, either. As Skinner reveals that a multitude of nations have similar troubles with slavery. If any slave was to try and escape from his or her captors, the consequences would be dire. Four Romanian girls were shot dead when they refused to have sex with a horse. A Romanian slave was forced into a tub of freezing water if she hadn’t come up with enough money. One particular woman, Tatania, had suffered the “loverboy phenomenon” (Skinner 135). She had started dating this young man named Luben. Eventually, her family was losing money because of economic chaos from the fall of communism. Luben, now her boyfriend for six months, convinced her to travel with him to Amsterdam for a job he prepared for her. Once they got off the train, they met with a big and burly man named Anton. He asked Tatania to use her phone; his was dead. When Anton came back, she noticed that all of her contacts were deleted. “You have to pay. That’s the rules. The only way you can give me back my money is by working on the street. I own you. I’m the boss now” (Skinner 136). Anton had paid for Luben’s trip to swoon a lady and bring her back to Amsterdam. This cost Anton $3,000, all of which Tatania had to pay back through prostitution.

Bill Nathan has had a rough life in Haiti. His father died of malaria and left his mother, Teanna, with him and his sister, Shayla. She worked as a maid for a wealthy neighbor. They never lived well, but they had enough for food and eventually school. Teanna didn’t trust her brother, so she asked the neighboring families that employed her to look after them had anything happened to her. In 1991, unexpectedly, Teanna died mysteriously. Bill and Shayla were split between the two families whom employed Teanna. Bill moved in with the Gilts at the age of 8. They owned a restaurant and had two boys and two girls. For the first two months, they provided Bill with the necessities every kid deserves: a comfortable bed, some clothes, and the privilege of attending school. Slowly, they made him do labor work, but nothing too drastic because they still had a servant of their own. The father, Wilton, was imprisoned and tortured for supporting the Avalanche political party until he escaped to America. With the sole protector gone and the economy in shambles, the restaurant sank and the mother, Sealon, had to fire the servant. In her place, she forced Bill to do manual labor. She made Bill wake up at five every morning, mop floors, sweep the yard, and boil the water. He wasn’t allowed to bathe or sit at the tables with the others to eat. He was only fed leftovers, and his bed compiled of a pile of rags on the floor. She would publicly yell at him and beat him.

“Mon Dieu bon,” he told her. “God is good, and one day I won’t be a restavek anymore” (Skinner 21). She would laugh at him and continuously punish her. One day, she gave Bill 20 Haitian dollars and told him to purchase food supplies from the market. She spit on the floor and said, “By the time that spit dries, you’d better be back here” (Skinner 21). Bill rushed out of the room as fast as he could. When he got to the market, he saw a huckster running a game. Pick the wooden shell with the concealed picture and win $8. Bill, distracted by the game, put $4 HA (about $.50 US) down and lost. He was in shame and scared for his life. He took his time coming home, but when he did, word had
travelled back that he had lost the money. Sealon was furious. She kicked him to his knees and handed him two rocks to hold in each hand. If he were to drop the rocks, she would kill him. “After twenty minutes, Bill’s blood lay in pools on the cement floor. The rocks were still in his hands” (Skinner 23).

On his tenth birthday, two men abducted Bill. They were sent by Sister Caroline, a nun who knew his mother. She heard about the beatings and saved Bill. They had put Bill in an orphanage and soon found out he was a tremendous drummer. He became a famous drummer who performed in front of a crowd of five thousand, including Pope John Paul II.

Sealon did what many slave owners do – try and break the slave. Usually this means the age old theory that if you treat a man like a dog, soon enough he’ll become one. The slave owners would try to wipe out their past lives by beating out all of their culture and identity. By treating Bill so poorly and by beating him to make him frightened, Bill became less human and more animal.

Haiti’s history of slavery practically defined the country itself. In 1685, the King of France set up a system of child slavery that continued for 330 years. A century later, King Louis XIV declared black children to be property of their mother’s master. In 1791, Haiti staged the modern world’s first and only successful slave revolt. A new constitution abolishing slavery was drafted by revolt leader Toussaint L’Ouverture. He also noticed that schools were needed in the countryside because rural families sent their children to the city for schooling. Unfortunately, his vision didn’t come true, and only a handful of schools were built for the elite. Only parents who “rendered high services to the country” were allowed to have their kids sent to school (Skinner 20).

Haitians also helped Americans fight for their freedom against Britain. However, Americans were scared of the Haitians because they were created from a slave revolt; something Americans wanted to avoid at the time. Along with their Vodou religion, the United States embargoed Haiti for sixty years to “confine the pest to the island,” as President Thomas Jefferson is quoted to say (Skinner 20).

Ironically enough, Americans brought upon that scared slave revolt themselves with the Civil War. With the Civil War, the United States had no reason to hold the embargo and lifted it from Haiti.

In 1957, Francois “Papa Doc” Duvalier and his son “Baby Doc” became dictators for Haiti. Baby Doc would sell tens of thousands of slaves. He explained, “It is the destiny of the people of Haiti to suffer” (Skinner 16). After Baby Doc was overthrown, a populist named Jean-Bertrand Aristide rose to power. He was a Roman Catholic priest who ran an orphanage – a shoe-in to help restaveks. Unfortunately, a coup was formed and scared Aristide out of power and back to the United States. When he returned to lead Haiti, he was too timid to do much, and any plans of preventing and stopping slavery were not seen through fully, if not abandoned. During the Bush administration, John Miller had persisted on changing Haiti’s restavék problem throughout Haiti. For a while, it actually helped the cause. The Bush administration spent more money on preventing slavery than any other President. Unfortunately, it just wasn’t enough. John Miller was only given a budget of $10 million to combat the slave trade, which made over $32 billion annually. To put this into perspective, the Bush administration spent as much money in two days to free Iraqis as it did in six years to free slaves.

To decide which countries had a problem with slavery, the American government set up the Tier System. Countries were judged on a scale from one to three. If a country is Tier One, they’re working hard toward abolition and are succeeding. If they’re Tier Two, they’re working hard at abolition, but failing. If the country is Tier Three, they’re making no effort at all. Tier Three countries were given 90 days to upgrade to Tier Two before the United States initiated nontrade sanctions. Haiti was listed at Tier Two until 2006 when they were considered to have such a poor government, it was hardly considered a governed state and was removed from the list altogether. Just prior to that, John Miller was pushing to get Haiti demoted to Tier Three. But this system has many flaws. If the President or one of his colleagues are associates and don’t want to criticize a country they’re
doing business with, they'll find ways around demoting them. This includes passing a law abolishing slavery but not necessarily forcing it.

The combination of poor living conditions, poor income, and poor education, among other things, made it desirable for some Haitians to immigrate to America. It was always a place for the free and for a Cinderella story. As some Haitians found out, slavery still persisted in America. Williathe Narcisse, age 8, was bought by an American woman to be her slave in America. Fake passports were created for Williathe, and she had no trouble arriving on American soil. She was kept as a slave in a gated community for a wealthy family. She would do typical housework and was even allowed into a public school.

However, one night a few weeks after she arrived, the family’s oldest son Willy Junior “slipped into her bed” and raped her (Skinner 269). When Williathe tried telling this to the mother, she accused her of lying. When Willy Junior, the father, found out, he threatened to kill her if she said so again. For years, Williathe was yelled at, punished, and forced to do the labor of the entire household even though she was only roughly ten years old. She slept in a bed in the garage, put her into a closet when she resisted to work, couldn’t eat with the family, and wasn’t allowed to talk or even look at other children.

The raping would also continue for years until Williathe told her teacher of her being raped, even though she had a tough time grasping the concept at such a young age. After a couple hiccups, the family was caught and put on trial. Just before the trial, the father and the son escaped to Haiti, while the mother was left to plead for herself. The judge sentenced her to six months in jail because he believed her claim that she didn’t know about the sexual abuse. Williathe wound up in an orphanage and bounced from family to family until she turned 18 and was able to live on her own. She was able to attend college at a local community college and was able to successfully escape bondage.

As I finished the book, I was both mentally and physically strained. My body felt like I had gone through a lot of pain and trouble just by reading the text. I flipped the book to the front and looked at the cover of the book. The cover has a hazed view, either by a fog or because the camera isn’t in focus. An recognizable piece of land rests in the background, far out of reach from our current perspective because of a body of water between us and the land. In the foreground are two parallel chains, running horizontally across and dividing us from whatever lays on the other side. Much like a modern day slaves, they focus clearly on the obstructive chains in the foreground but intently searching for the free land in the background. They wish for a different life, a different landmass; the clarity of the chains makes it nearly impossible to set their eyes on a plausible freedom.

This novel reminded me of the painting, “Led Demoiselles d’Avignon” by Pablo Picasso (The Museum). It shows five prostitutes that stylized different characteristics. Two of the women offer an open invitation of seduction and curiosity. However, two of the other prostitutes are casted with a shadow as they pulled back the curtains; a shadow that symbolizes the darkness. The last is the most frightening. It shows a woman with her back to the audience, but her head is spun around 180 degrees to face the spectators. She’s wearing a mortified African mask, foreign and tortured. The slave market is much like “Led Demoiselles d’Avignon” in the sense that it has many different faces. American abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison wrote “This is an act so unnatural, a crime so monstrous, a sin so God-defying that it throws into the shade all other distinctions known among mankind” (Skinner 229). These distinctions that Garrison wrote about are hidden by the shadow much like the two prostitutes’ faces. Whether mankind will ever regain these distinctions are still undecided. If this trend continues, there’s no chance to regain our humanity.

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