

## Making it Work

### Aesthetics and Affect in Dave Eggers's *What is the What*

Anke Geertsma

is a ph.d student in comparative literature at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York and a lecturer at the City College of New York.

This article explores the role of aesthetics and affect in the broader human rights claim that Dave Eggers's *What is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng, a Novel* (2006) wants to make. The book describes the life of this Sudanese "Lost Boy" who has to flee his nation's second civil war, spending decades in refugee camps in Ethiopia and Kenya before being brought to the U.S. in 2001 through a UNHCR resettlement program.<sup>1</sup> Raising awareness and resources for the Valentino Achak Deng (VAD) Foundation, which was founded after (and thanks to) the publication of the book and seeks to give aid in South Sudan, emerges as the book's main objective.<sup>2</sup> I consider *What is the What* as a cultural translation of a spe-

1 This name was given to the approximately 20,000 boys who walked across the border with Ethiopia and on to Kenyan refugee camps during the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983-2005). Many of them resettled in the U.S. with the help of the UNCHR and local Lost Boys Foundations. Numerous (American) publications describe the experiences of these war victims in the form of novels, memoirs, documentaries and historical accounts.

2 In the book's preface, Deng writes that he and Eggers agreed that "the author's proceeds from the book would be mine and would be used to improve the lives of Sudanese in Sudan and elsewhere." In the short biographies at the end of the book and on the back cover, it is again explained that "all of the author's proceeds from the book will go to the Valentino Achak Deng Foundation, which distributes funds to Sudanese refugees in America; to rebuilding southern Sudan, beginning with Marial Bai; to organizations working for peace and humanitarian relief in Darfur; and to the college education of Valentino Achak

cific, local human rights violation into the dominant, Western discourse of human rights, and include the collaboration between an established American author and a Sudanese refugee, fictionalization and the categorization of the book as a novel (rather than a memoir or autobiography), and the de-contextualization of a specific experience as relevant issues in this discussion.<sup>3</sup>

I argue that Eggers makes aesthetics and affect work to increase the effect of the book's human rights claim. He consciously operates within the conventions of human rights, and strategically uses genre categorization to avoid controversy over notions of truthfulness and authorship. Aesthetics here pertains to all formal categories of a text, including style, structure, and genre, and specifically refers to the idea that a work of art is "pleasurable" to experience because of an appreciation of these "packaging materials." Affect concerns affective, emotional reader response and involvement in a narrative. Pertinent issues such as power relations, cultural platform, facticity, authority, and the way in which the story and its subject, Valentino Achak Deng, cross the cultural bridge between the Sudan and the U.S. are thus compromised for the story's effect. What counts most for Eggers and Deng is the potential to elicit (a call to) action within the dominant human rights discourse.

It is not new to argue for the relevance of storytelling or to claim that our understanding of and empathy toward others can increase with the reading of novels, even, or especially, within a human rights context (Rorty 1993; Nussbaum 1997; Scarry 1999). In her book on the history of human rights, Hunt likewise (2007, 39) stresses the importance of novel reading for the development of a human

---

Deng." Interestingly, Eggers's bio does not list his work as an author but only his publishing and humanitarian initiatives, one of which is the Voice of Witness series, "a series of books that use oral history to illuminate human rights crises around the world."

- 3 To analyze the transfer of stories from one culture to the other I draw on the theoretical concept of cultural translation, which has been elaborated on by Homi K. Bhabha and later Judith Butler, who sees in it the negotiation of and struggle between local and universal, or dominant and subordinated meanings and cultural languages and differences. The risk of this process lies in the existent power structures, through which the process of cultural translation can become "the instrument through which dominant values are transposed into the language of the subordinated, and the subordinated run the risk of coming to know and understand them as token of their 'liberation.'" See Butler in Stanton (2012, 75). As this article makes clear, this "risk" is curiously under-acknowledged in Deng and Eggers's discussion of their collaboration.

rights “sensibility,” arguing that “reading novels created a sense of equality and empathy through passionate involvement in the narrative.” Rather than explicit moralizing, this form of empathy is achieved through the employment of novelistic devices such as plot, structure, and style. Because of the reciprocal relationship between fiction and reality in the broader project of *What is the What*, encompassing the production and publication of the book as well as the human rights work of the VAD foundation—which built the first secondary school in the Marial Bai region, “attracting praise from across the country” (Morrison 2010), the whole project of *What is the What* provides a curious case study of human rights as discourse and practice. That Deng has recently been approached by the new South Sudanese government to take on “a more national role” (Morrison 2010), further elevates the relevance of the study.

To analyze *What is the What* within the context of human rights, I first discuss how Eggers fictionalizes and aestheticizes the story and at the same time preempts criticism on issues of truthfulness and authorship. His main strategies are an explicit openness about the collaboration between himself and the book’s subject, and the categorization of the book as a novel. I then analyze the translation of the story into the dominant culture of human rights, the representational function Deng comes to fulfill, and the consequences of this for the foundation’s human rights work in South Sudan. Finally, I look at the reception of the book, and briefly touch upon its relationship to a certain cultural hunger for stories of suffering overcome and to a form of “privileged guilt” on the part of the author.

### Open Collaboration and “Strategic” Novelization

*What is the What* is a collaboration between a popular, youthful, white American author with a wide societal reach and a poorer ethnic immigrant with less power and no cultural platform. In various interviews and articles the book’s author and its protagonist stress that it was Deng who started the testimonial process. Having been an organizer in the Kenyan Kakuma refugee camp and later a spokesperson for the Lost Boys Foundation in Atlanta, he wanted to have his story heard by a broader audience. The rest seems simple and straightforward: the founder of the Lost Boy Foundation, Mary Williams, “didn’t know Dave Eggers, but she’d happened to pick up his memoir (*A Heartbreaking Work of Stagger-*

ing *Genius*, 2000) once when she needed airport reading," Thompson explains (2006). Eggers was approached and flown into Atlanta to talk to Deng, where, as the latter declares, "they became friends that first weekend" (NPR 2006).

In most interviews and other publications about the book and the writing process Eggers gives the floor, and the credits for the work, to Deng. He further declares that he "airbrushed" himself out of the book in order to approximate Deng's voice as much as possible (*One Book One Marin*, 2009). The book's author makes a conscious decision to place Deng in the spotlight, while minimizing his own involvement in the production. In fact, he says he was merely "hired" by Deng, who needed a writer because he was still "taking classes in basic writing at Georgia Perimeter College" (NPR 2006). Of course, it is unlikely that Deng would have written the book himself had he finished his classes, yet the power/knowledge structures involved in the production and publication of the book are never touched upon. Rather, certain issues and obstacles in the writing-process (such as genre, truthfulness, and the translation of the story into American conceptual frameworks) were responded to in a pragmatic way, always keeping in mind the desired effect of the book. In fact, Eggers says both he and Deng define self-worth and success by measuring their ability to place action over debate. Responding to the success of the school in Marial Bai, Eggers says: "I think it comes down to the fact that both of us are more bricks-and-mortar people than theory people" (Morrison 2010).

Still, in content, structure, and style, the story of this Sudanese refugee has been altered, supplemented, and "flavored" by Eggers. In terms of content, Eggers broadened Deng's story with information from Human Rights Reports, historical documents, and testimonies from other refugees. He transformed these bits of information into events occurring in the book, complete with characters, description, and emotion:

I made up many scenes that were necessary to describe the whole sweep of those 20 years or so that the book covers. Sometimes I'd read a human rights report about a certain incident during the civil war, and would ask Val [Deng] if he knew someone who had experienced that incident, or something like it. Sometimes he did know

someone, and we could go from there, but other times I had to imagine it on my own (NPR 2006).

Eggers thus supplements factual information with fictional strategies. In an interview (*One Book One Marin*, 2009), he explains his struggle with the form of the book: “I wondered if I could just call it a novel and be able to have these little bridges here and there, make it come alive, or create a scene with dialogue ... or describe a man’s face that Valentino can’t remember right now.” In addition to these fictional constructions, Eggers also enriched the style of the original testimony. Considering a few passages from the book shows the result of these stylistic alterations:

I moved only in shadows, for I knew if I were caught all would be lost, and I would lose all my benefits, such as they were, as a refugee. I darted from bush to bush, ditch to ditch, crawling and scraping and breathing too loudly, as I had when I first ran from my home. Each exhalation was a falling tree and my mind went mad with the noise of it all, but I deserved the turmoil. I deserved nothing better, I wanted to be alone with my stupidity, which I cursed in three languages and with all my spleen (407-8).

The first three lines read like a poem, and the self-pity of the latter half can deepen readers’ respect of this upright and unselfish human. Criticism of this form of “prettifying” has come from just one reviewer, Lee Siegel (2007), who argues that the book reads like a type of “fairy tale.” According to him, these poetic passages and grammatically-correct subjunctives (such as the one in the first line here) only make the violence more remote. But unlike Siegel, who believes that all of this makes readers “come away from this wrenching book without any urgent sense of human misery in Sudan at all,” Eggers clearly believes his aesthetic enhancements will “[t]ranscend the Human Rights Reports that were already out there” (Eggers in Cooke 2010).

Increasing the book’s capacity to elicit affective audience responses is a love story between Deng and Tabitha, which runs through the book like a true romance of longing and loss. Here, Deng’s poetic reflections on love do well to intoxicate readers: “If ever I love again,

I will not wait to love as best as I can. We thought we were young and that there would be time to love well sometime in the future. This is a terrible way to think. It is no way to live, to wait to love" (353). Using motifs like this and poetic phrases such as "the collapsible space between us" (535), Eggers transforms the incomplete testimony of Deng into a captivating, aesthetically appealing *literary* story about the second civil war in Sudan.

All of this finds its origins in the desire to make the book have a particular effect: the foundational story is novelized and broadened to make it compelling, comprehensible, and accessible to a wide audience. Curiously, this is explained (away) as being part of Eggers's job: "I wanted this to have a deeper, wider scope, and I really wanted it to bring the country, and the town, and Valentino and his family, to life ... He [Deng] is not a writer, I was. If he wanted a film, he'd hire a filmmaker" (*One Book One Marin*). Since giving the story aesthetic appeal is considered part of Eggers's job, it seems to demand no further discussion, and it is indeed never further complicated by either one of them. There is openness about the collaboration between Eggers and Deng, but it never touches on sensitive issues. Rather, it serves to forestall criticism of truthfulness and authority. As Brouillette (2003) argues, Eggers has employed this strategy throughout his literary and publishing career. He shows himself to be so open and aware about the production processes because "disclosure (...) serves very explicit purposes, in that it allows Eggers to pretend to a kind of *honesty* about the writing process through which he pre-empts critique" (emphasis mine). Thus, despite simplifying the collaborative process, the openness of the collaboration shuns criticism on factual inaccuracies while it allows for a "believing" reader response of the book as a whole.

For the sake of effect, Eggers then adds a narrative framework that brings the African story closer to its American audience, both geographically as well as mentally. This framework also illuminates the harshness and difficulties of the immigrant experience. The book opens in Atlanta, where robbers tie up Deng in his apartment and keep him there for hours. Lying on the floor, he starts to silently tell his story, explaining that "you would not add to my suffering if you knew what I have seen" (29). In addition to reducing the conceptual barrier between the book's audience and the distant and past events of Deng's youth, this framework undermines the possi-



bility of redemption and denies to end the process of suffering for this Sudanese civil war victim. Peek (2012) argues that this illustrates how *What is the What* deconstructs the “dominant developmental narrative of progress” that still characterizes much of the human rights project, and which has been associated with the sovereign citizen of the European enlightenment and the racism and paternalism of nineteenth century European imperialism, as well as with the persistent binary between the U.S. (as developed, independent, enlightened) and Africa (as undeveloped/primitive, dependent, dark, and in need of saving). The Atlanta framework, and the several scenes addressing UN relief work in African refugee camps, shed a critical light on the story of American progress and the promise of human rights, as they “foreground limitations of humanitarian narrative and activism by implicating humanitarian aid and U.S. hospitality in racial and colonizing histories” (122). Nevertheless, as Peek then adds, and Nance (2006, 106) further explains, this continuation of suffering and abuse into the present can also have a motivating effect on the reader, as “the forms of discourse that enable the achievement of closure...will often for that very reason minimize productive tension in the reader...readers will not feel called upon to expend precious energy on a project that is already finished.” If Eggers wants to add a critical note to the project of human rights, he at the same time appeals to its promises and ideals. Much in the same vein as Deng’s preface, the book ends with a plea to a common humanity and a belief in the importance of storytelling for a relief of suffering worldwide.

*What is the What*’s lack of a redemptive ending and its categorization as a novel set it apart from popular mass-marketed memoirs of childhood experience in war-torn African countries, a prominent example of which is Ismael Beah’s 2007 memoir *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*—which Oprah promoted like President Obama supported *What is the What*, placing it on the White House aids’ reading list. Genre categorization is also how *What is the What* differs from the main characteristic of the Latin American *testimonio*, popularized in the U.S. after the publication of *I, Rigoberta Menchù: An Indian Woman in Guatamala* (1984). These testimonios, and Beah’s memoir, are presented as non-fictional stories told by the victims themselves. In her book on the genre of the *testimonio*, Nance (2006, 7) defines it as:

The body of works in which the speaking subjects who present themselves as somehow 'ordinary' represent a personal experience of injustice, whether directly to the reader or through the offices of a collaborating writer, with the goal of inducing readers to participate in a project of social justice.

*What is the What* shares most of these defining characteristics, yet reverses the structure: now it is the "collaborating" author whose name appears on the book, and the victim who writes a nonfictional preface to it. *I, Rigoberta Menchù*, opens with a preface written by Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, the writer of the book. She stresses the agency of Menchù and her own effort to "airbrush" herself out of the story: "I allowed her to speak and then became her instrument, her double, by allowing her to make the transition from the spoken to the written word" (1984, xxii). Everything seems to be the same in these testimonial projects, yet, strikingly, Menchù's book sparked great controversy over issues of truthfulness and the under-acknowledged role of Burgos-Debray, which is something the publication and reception of *What is the What* has not seen at all. To explain this difference in reception, Phillipe Lejeune (in Peek 2012) argues that the categorization of a book works as a kind of contract. This contract, he says, governs the expectations and attitude of the reader: with fiction, "the reader will attempt to establish resemblances in spite of the author," whereas with autobiography, "the reader will want to look for differences (errors, deformations, etc...)."

Instead of a factual account, readers of *What is the What* expect a compelling story that gives insight into the feelings and thoughts of its characters, informing and enriching a narrative that they still accept to be true, or "truthful." While the truth-based origin of the story "elicit[s] a more believing reader response," as Peek (2012) points out, a re-negotiation of the constraints of autobiography, "allow Eggers and Deng to turn potentially skeptical readers into advocates and donors." Those critical of factual accounts might thus fall for this hybrid novel/autobiography. All in all, despite Deng writing that the book is "the soulful account of my life, I told Dave what I knew and what I could remember, and from that material he created this work of art," thus stressing that the book is no longer his life story but a *work of art* (xiii-xiv), the book's main objective is no



different from that of *I, Rigoberta Menchù*, or from that of any other testimonio. Brian Yost (2011, 149) here notes that, “although marketed as a novel and titled an autobiography, [*What is the What*] more closely resembles a testimony narrative.” That Eggers’s name features so prominently on the cover and in the copyright section (copyright © Dave Eggers), can be better explained from a marketing perspective: as Jones (2007) rightly points out, “Eggers’s name sells books, and selling more books raises awareness of and more funds for the causes that matter most to Achak.” This strategic marketing underlines Hamilton’s conclusion (2010, 10) that Eggers “has demonstrated the possibility that celebrity and sincerity need not be perceived as mutually exclusive.” Here, platform and cultural reach appear dominant factors in considerations on the form of the book.

### **Cultural Translation and Critical Reception**

The fictionalization and broadening of Deng’s incomplete memory of his childhood years has profoundly influenced his identity and role in the broader human rights project. Even though Deng claims that his collaboration with Eggers was so intense that the latter could almost read his mind—“It was very strange how he envisioned events through my eyes. Because we had spent so much time together by that time, it is not surprising that he could guess my thoughts” (NPR)—it cannot be stressed enough that Eggers did not just document a life but construct a story. A part of this story, Deng’s fictional persona becomes the vehicle or representational character for the many Lost Boys and other victims of the Sudanese civil war. In *What is the What* (21), he tells readers that Lost Boys are willing to confirm to their audiences’ expectations:

[T]he tales of the Lost Boys have become remarkably similar over the years...But we did not all see the same things...But now, sponsors and newspaper reporters and the like expect the stories to have certain elements, and the Lost Boys have been consistent in their willingness to oblige. Survivors tell the stories the sympathetic want, and that means making them as shocking as possible. My own story includes enough small embellishments that I cannot criticize the accounts of others.

This proves that the reception of a human rights narrative such as *What is the What* is conditioned by the (enabling and constraining) conventions of the genre.<sup>4</sup> Pointing out these “embellishments,” Eggers implicitly acknowledges that he wants to speak within the established conceptual frameworks, despite his awareness of their limitations, but ultimately focusing on reaching and appealing to his Western-based audience. As Peek (2012, 122) observes, this strategic appeal to a targeted audience “erases individuated human experience and vulnerability for the sake of a more compelling story—a story that reveals more about readerly expectations than it does about the actual experience of the vast majority of Sudanese.” Tying into these expectations, Deng comes to represent, for most readers of the book, all the Lost Boys of Sudan, and maybe even the entire suffering part of the country’s population.

Interestingly, it is in this representational function that Deng starts to carry out the human rights work for the VAD foundation. In his hometown of Marial Bai, where the foundation built a secondary school, he was initially approached with skepticism by the local community, as if he were an outsider. Other outsiders had not kept their promises, so the community’s first response was to “wait and see” (*One Book One Marin*, 2009). This outsider’s position is somewhat affirmed when, during fundraisers, Deng speaks from within Western frameworks of reference, explaining that “they [the farmers in Marial Bai] still use traditional methods of farming” (*One Book One Marin*, 2009). He talks about his native community in the third person, and contrasts their farming methods with the “modern” methods of the Western world.

4 Here, I categorize *What is the What* as a human rights narrative to align it with other publications, fiction and non-fiction, that seek to address an absence or violation of human rights, and, through their narrative, want to create awareness and actively call for action, intervention, or retribution. Many but not all of these texts adopt the legal language of human rights. The conventions of this genre of writing and human rights activism are enabling, in that they create awareness and potential change for un- or underrepresented injustices and marginalities, and constraining, in that they are tied to the underlying premises and dominant language of the international human rights regime, which has been subject to criticism characterizing its whole “universal” enterprise as cloaking Western neo-imperialism, maintaining structural imbalances, and offering an exclusionary model of individual progress which runs along the lines of the Enlightenment *Bildungsroman*. For a discussion of the similarities between the *Bildungsroman* and human rights law, see Slaughter (2007).

Deng has come to occupy a discursive and cultural space in-between Sudan and the U.S. His fictional representation minimizes the bridge to Sudan for Western readers, and his constructed public persona forms the link between his local community in South Sudan and the VAD foundation, which finds its origin and resources in the Western world. Clearly, his perspective and cultural vocabulary changed when he moved to the U.S. As Smith and Schaffer (2004, 19) point out, “displaced, migrant, and diasporic people arrive at destinations where different discursive fields and different histories of activism offer new terms and storytelling modes...through which they might remember, interpret, understand, reconstruct and come to terms with a complex past.” It is with the expectations of the audience and the goals of his human rights project in mind, and through a geographical and cultural replacement—which affects both memory of past events and perceptions of what is “good” for the local community—that Deng operates within the broader human rights project of *What is the What*, and as such his identity is formed (by himself and by cultural expectations) and performed (at fundraisers, lectures, and in his work for the VAD foundation).

A striking example of an appeal to and speaking from within the dominant cultural lexicon of human rights is the book’s frequent reference to the human and to a “common humanity.” As Cheah (2006, 3) argues, our human rights discourse draws in many ways on the idea of a global humanity. Against forces that instrumentalize and objectify the human, human rights discourse seeks to conceive of “the global as the human.” That *What is the What* functions within these conceptual categories can be seen in the book’s preface, where Deng describes his earlier self as a “helpless human,” and on its final page (535), where his fictional character says that to stop telling these stories (of suffering), “would be something less than human.” Peek (2012, 116) argues that “such nods to the human can...be read as instances of an enduring belief in and longing for the concept of a universal humanity that connects us across geopolitical and cultural divides.” Criticism on the colonial and patronizing history of this notion of a global humanity aside, the human still forms the premise of current human rights discourse and consciousness, and *What is the What* consciously employs this motif. When critics subsequently point out that “[h]umanitarianism becomes *human* in Deng’s prescient voice, and narrative begets character in Eggers’s deft hands”

(Maker 2007, emphasis mine), one can understand Eggers's eagerness to "transcend" human rights reports, as something that is *human* seems to resonate with his audiences in a deeper and more meaningful way than something that is merely *humanitarian*.

The book also adopts conventional human rights strategies in its creation of feelings of guilt and shame for the readers, thereby working like the method of naming and shaming, used by NGOs, news media, and international organizations alike. As Eaglestone (2008) argues, the book functions alongside the common trope of "allegories of failed understanding."<sup>5</sup> The Atlanta robbery framework, for example, points out to readers that they have previously been mis- or uninformed about the "real" state of the world. Feelings of guilt and shame are triggered when Deng tells his robbers, and by extension his readers, that they would act differently if they would know his whole story. The historical and meta-textual information (a map of Sudan) that the book contains also make clear that the (urgent) goal is to inform readers about an unknown or unfamiliar situation.

Analyzing the reception of the book one strikingly notes that few reviewers discuss cultural translation, or grapple with the categorization of the book as a novel. Some words are spent on the subject, but no relevance is attributed to it. As Prose put it in the *New York Times* (2006): "novel, autobiography, whatever." With a slightly patronizing tone, she applauds the didactic effect of the book: "Eggers's large and youthful fan base...will be able to visualize the geographical positions of Sudan, Ethiopia and Kenya with a clarity surpassing the possibly hazy recall of anything they might have memorized for a World Civilization class." In *USA Today* (2006), Donahue writes that "[a]s weird as this hybrid novel/autobiography sounds, it works ... It is not some James Frey-esque truthiness scam." Recalling the scandal and media frenzy over Frey's memoir *A Million Little Pieces* (2003), Donahue now has no problems with issues of veracity. What matters is that it "works." Several critics even speak of *What is the What* as a "lightly fictionalized version" of Deng's life story (Amsden, 2006; Graff,

---

5 Eaglestone argues that a common trope in Holocaust literature can also be found in many African trauma narratives. In these allegories of failed understanding, "figures not involved in the traumatic events are shown in their misreading or incomprehension of the events involved." See Eaglestone (2008).

2006; Grossman, 2006; Henriksen, 2006), thus undermining, or ignoring, Eggers's considerable creative contribution.

It was Lee Siegel (2007) who wrote one of the few very critical reviews of *What is the What*, going so far as to argue that the book's "innocent expropriation of another man's identity is a post-colonial arrogance—the most socially acceptable instance of Orientalism you are likely to encounter." He scorns Eggers's decision to fictionalize and aestheticize Deng's story, saying that "the eerie, slightly sickening quality about *What is the What* is that Deng's personhood has been displaced by someone else's style and sensibility—by someone else's story." Siegel believes that Eggers completely eliminated Deng's identity by taking his story and making it his own. Moreover, he laments that when such a book "works," when "a writer can find a way to represent evil," then "his motivation is about as relevant to his achievement as his blood type." This implicit critique of the book's (critical) reception nevertheless reveals Siegel's own idealism. According to him, when Eggers would have told the "unadorned story, the true story humbly recorded and presented," it would have had enough force. For Siegel it is only on the basis of this true story, the authenticity of the testimony, the presence of the survivors, and on their memory and a general belief in the "sanctity of truth" that justice can be achieved. Yet, Eggers's book can be seen as undermining this admirable concept of a system of human rights and retribution in which aesthetics and fictionalization hold no currency. The broader cultural discourse of human rights, as Eggers's book demonstrates, is a curious "juggling act" of fact and fiction, testimony and storytelling. The platform and wide reach of this work, along with the concrete results it has on the ground in Sudan (through the work done by the VAD Foundation) illustrate how fiction operates in the broader field of human rights.

Ideally no one should harbor illusions concerning objectivity, decades after the linguistic turn, yet the reception of *What is the What* makes clear that it is still desirable that a "truthiness scam" be avoided. Whereas genre boundaries may seem like medieval concepts to a postmodern author like Eggers, his decision to label the book as a novel minimizes the risk of it stirring up controversy. Bringing up the cliché that, sometimes, "fiction takes you closer to the truth" (Eggers in Freeman [2007]), it becomes clear that truth has to do more with *effect* than with truthfulness. Donahue's claim

that *What is the What* “works” means just that. When Prose talks about the clarity with which readers will be able to visualize the situation she is also talking about the book’s effect, which is boosted by the book’s aesthetics. Still, whereas it succeeds to avoid the pitfalls of the memoir or autobiography through acknowledged fictionalization, the book’s desired effect is by no means different from that of a memoir, autobiography, or testimonio that aims to call its readers to action.

### **Conclusion: Stories of Suffering**

Stories of suffering such as *What is the What* perform an important role in our Western culture. Our age, which Slaughter (2007, 2) calls the “Age of Human Rights,” has also seen a surge of memoirs and other forms of life writing. Part of this is a “sudden burst of distressing and traumatic narratives from Africa” (Eaglestone, 2008). In most of these narratives, the dominant theme is (personal) struggle and suffering (overcome). As Smith and Schaffer (2004, 25) argue, there seems to be an insatiable desire for stories of “individualist triumph over adversity, of the ‘little person’ achieving fame, of people struggling to survive illness, catastrophe, or violence.” It is no surprise that Deng’s strength, resilience, unwavering faith and admirable character are admired most by readers and critics, in both his fictional character and his public persona.

This hunger for such stories of suffering can be aligned with Eggers’s own apparent feelings of guilt. As Sarah Brouillette (2003) argues in an analysis of Eggers’s second novel, *You Shall Know Our Velocity* (2002)—which she reads as thematizing a fear of “selling out” in a corporate literary marketplace—there exists a form of “privileged” guilt on the part of Eggers, as the novel “expresses an anxiety about the proper social acquisition and distribution of general wealth.” In this novel, two young Americans become wealthy in an instant. Feeling “guilty just by the fact of cultural privilege,” they desperately attempt to get rid of the money, traveling to foreign countries to give it to the less fortunate. Brouillette points out that, through this novel, “Eggers’ usual aversion to admitting to financial motivation is given a rationale that extends beyond the literary field and into his guilty feelings about his privileged status as a white American...” For her, this indicates that Eggers’s “play” with form and his unease with his wealth and privilege demonstrate a “sincere



form of social responsibility motivated by general cultural guilt and humanitarian sympathies.” In *You Shall Know Our Velocity*, the protagonists feel extremely uncomfortable in the face of real poverty and suffering, which results in many desperate and clumsy attempts to donate their money, always shunning meeting the “victims” face-to-face and finding safe, mediated forms to reach them. Likewise, *What is the What* offers readers a relatively simple and practical way to (feel that they) contribute to human progress and fulfill the promise of human rights.

Whether or not Eggers or his readers are (consciously) motivated by a form of guilt, or driven by an awareness of broader structural inequalities, remains elusive. Yet, it cannot be denied that Eggers and Deng know well that they are writing (and speaking) within the dominant discourse of human rights. In fact, they effectively *use* its conventions as strategies to appeal to a “human-rights educated audience” (Moynagh 2011, 46). Despite the book’s renegotiation of a linear process of redemption through intervention from international aid organizations, it should not be forgotten that stories like this risk “confer[ring] humanity not on the passive people in distress but on the spectators pitying them, who assert themselves as enlightened individuals by having big feelings” (Solomon 2006, 1591). The book may resonate stronger with and touch a broader audience through its careful fictionalization and stylistic strength, yet the decontextualization of the story’s subject also cause the real story to suffer in its cultural translation and appropriation across the Atlantic Ocean. By understanding how exactly this cultural translation takes place and by grasping the functioning of genre categorization, fictionalization, and the openness of collaboration in this case study of a human rights narrative, it becomes even clearer that “human rights work is, at its heart, a matter of storytelling” (Dawes 2009, 394.) Also, as Smith and Schaffer argue (2004, 1), it once more affirms that one should always “understand ‘the political’ as inclusive of the moral, aesthetic, and ethical aspects of culture.” Knowing this, Eggers cleverly uses all his skill as a writer, the codes of storytelling and the conventions of Western human rights culture to reach his and Deng’s humanitarian objectives.

## References

- Amsden, D. 2006. "Truly Heartbreaking." *New York Magazine*, accessed May 12, 2012, <http://nymag.com/arts/books/reviews/23147/>.
- Beah, I. 2007. *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*. New York: Sarah Crichton.
- Cooke, R. 2010. "Dave Eggers: From 'Staggering Genius' to America's Conscience." *Guardian*, accessed May 12, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/mar/07/dave-eggers-zeitoun-hurricane-katrina>.
- Brouillette, S. 2003. "Paratextuality and Economic Disavowal in Dave Eggers' *You Shall Know Our Velocity*." *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture* 3 (2), accessed September 24, 2012, <http://reconstruction.eserver.org/032/brouillette.htm>.
- Cheah, P. 2006. *Inhuman Conditions: On Cosmopolitanism and Human Rights*. Cambridge, Harvard UP.
- Dawes, J. 2009. "Human Rights in Literary Studies." *Human Rights Quarterly* 31 (2): 394-409.
- Donahue, D. 2006. "Fact or Fiction: Eggers' *What Lends Humanity, Inside to African Conflict*." *USA Today*, accessed May 12, 2012, [http://www.usatoday.com/life/books/reviews/2006-12-06-what-is-the-what\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/life/books/reviews/2006-12-06-what-is-the-what_x.htm).
- Eaglestone, R. 2008. "'You Would Not Add to My Suffering if You Knew What I Have Seen': Holocaust Testimony and Contemporary African Trauma Literature." *Studies in the Novel* 40 (1-2): 72-85.
- Eggers, D. 2006. *What is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng*. London and New York: Penguin.
- Eggers, D. 2002. *You Shall Know Our Velocity!* San Francisco: McSweeney's.
- Freeman, J. 2007. "We Never Feel Any Sort of Ownership. Interview with Dave Eggers." *Guardian*, accessed May 14, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/sep/14/culture.features>.
- Frey, J. 2003. *A Million Little Pieces*. New York: Nan A. Talese.
- Graff, K. 2006. Review of *What is the What*. *Booklist*, accessed May 12, 2012, <http://www.booklistonline.com/What-Is-the-What-The-Autobiography-of-Valentino-Achak-Deng-Dave-Eggers/pid=1794210>.

- Grossman, L. 2006. "‘I See Him in Me’: A World-Famous Writer and a Refugee from Sudan Collaborate on One of the Year Most Moving Novels." *Time*, accessed May 10, 2012, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1552529,00.html>.
- Hamilton, C. 2010. *One Man Zeitgeist: Dave Eggers, Publishing, and Publicity*. New York and London: Continuum.
- Henriksen, E. 2006. Review of *What is the What*. *Portland Mercury*, accessed May 10, 2012, <http://www.portlandmercury.com/portland/what-is-the-what-by-dave-eggers/Content?oid=78999>.
- Hunt, L. 2007. *Inventing Human Rights: A History*. New York and London: Norton.
- Jones, T. 2007. This is Not That Place. *London Review of Books*, accessed September 24, 2012, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v29/n12/thomas-jones/this-is-not-that-place>.
- Makar, A. 2007. Africa for Generation X. *American Book Review* 28 (4).
- Menchù, R. 1984. *I, Rigoberta Menchù: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*. Translated by Ann Wright. London: Verso.
- Morrison, S. 2010. "Dave Eggers helps Sudan's 'Lost Boys' get a Fresh Start at School." *Guardian*, accessed September 24, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2010/aug/03/dave-eggers-sudan-secondary-school>.
- Moynagh, M. 2011. "Human Rights, Child-Soldier Narratives, and the Problem of Form." *Research in African Literatures* 42 (4): 39-59.
- Nance, K.A. 2006. *Can Literature Promote Justice? Trauma Narrative and Social Action in Latin American Testimonio*. Nashville: Vanderbilt UP.
- NPR. 2006. All Things Considered: Interview with Dave Eggers and Valentino Achak Deng, radio broadcast, November 1.
- Nussbaum, M.C. 1997. *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*. Cambridge: Harvard UP.
- One Book One Marin*. 2009. "Interview with Dave Eggers and Valentino Achak Deng," accessed May 10, 2012, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DgbfBQc\\_ExM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DgbfBQc_ExM).
- Peek, M. 2012. "Humanitarian Narratives and Posthumanist Critique: Dave Eggers's *What is the What*." *Biography* 35 (1): 115-36.
- Prose, F. 2006. "The Lost Boy." *New York Times*, accessed May 12, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/24/books/review/prose.html>.

- Rorty, R. 1993. "Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality," In *On Human Rights: The Oxford Amnesty Lectures*, edited by S. Shute and S. Hurley, 111-34. New York: Basic Books.
- Scarry, E. 1999. *On Beauty and Being Just*. Princeton: Princeton UP.
- Siegel, L. 2007. The Niceness Racket. *The New Republic*, accessed September 22, 2012, <http://www.tnr.com/article/the-niceness-racket>.
- Slaughter, J. 2007. *Human Rights Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law*. New York: Fordham.
- Smith, S. and K. Schaffer. 2004. *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Solomon, A. 2006. "Who Gets to be Human on the Evening News." *PMLA* 121 (5), 1585-92.
- Stanton, D. 2012. "Top-Down, Bottom-Up, Horizontally: Resignifying the Universal in Human Rights Discourse," in *Theoretical Perspectives on Human Rights and Literature*, edited by E.S. Goldberg and A. Schulthuis, 65-86. New York: Routledge.
- Thompson, B. 2006. A Heartbreaking Work of Fiction. *Washington Post*, accessed May 10, 2012, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/11/27/AR2006112701573.html>.
- Yost, B. 2011. "The Voices of Others: Dave Eggers and New Directions for Testimony Narrative and Cosmopolitan Literary Collaboration." *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 42 (1): 149-70.