HUMANITARIAN LITERATURE: THE UNIQUE CONDITION OF *WHAT IS THE WHAT*

by

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(Under the Direction of Reginald McKnight)

ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the unique condition of Dave Eggers' and Valentino Achak Deng's collaboration on the book *What is the What*. When Eggers, an established American novelist, was introduced to Deng, a Sudanese refugee living in the United States who wanted to share his life story, they embarked on a journey that would take them both through years of friendship, story-telling, frustration, research, and collaboration.

The following chapters examine a brief history of Sudan, the text as testimonio, the role of women characters, and the humanitarian impact of the book. Each section is bound together by the two men behind the creation of the text. Eggers and Deng share a dream that social impact of the book will bring awareness about one of the worst wars in history and will also prevent the same kind of atrocity from ever happening again in any part of the world.

INDEX WORDS: Sudan, *What is the What*, Valentino Achak Deng, Dave Eggers, testimonio, women, humanitarian

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to Aghigh, who helped me survive graduate school.

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I would like to thank Reg McKnight, Dr. Linda Brooks, and Dr. Emma Hunt for all their support and encouragement during this year.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

"You need to help your African sisters," he said.

I have relatives in Africa?

How many starving African children had I seen on late-night infomercials and ignored? I couldn't name more than two countries in Africa. I was content living on my side of the ocean. My American-grown indifference, however, was not immune to Dave Eggers' novel *What is the What* or to meeting its protagonist, Valentino Achak Deng, face to face.

Meeting Deng redefined my reality. Disenchanted with academia, failing to find an avenue within the study of English literature which ignited my soul, I turned to my "pleasure reading," and discovered my passion.

In February 2007, the *McSweeney's Internet Tendency* electronic newsletter advertised Deng's book tour, encouraging readers to respond to the email and let *McSweeney's* know "where to send him." I responded: "Send Valentino to Athens, Georgia!"

It was in the car driving from Atlanta to Athens when Deng entreated me to help my "African sisters." The subsequent afternoon was a blur, penetrated by Deng's distinct voice and message, which strangely lacked bitterness and resentment. When I arrived at Deng's hotel in Atlanta that morning, he got into my jalopy, I gave him control of the radio, he reclined the passenger seat, and we settled in for an hour and a half drive that I will never forget. Our conversation ranged from Brittney Spears, Angelina Jolie, and Bob Marley to President Bush, Darfur, women's rights, and his future plans for his homeland.

It was the discussion of Brittney Spears that first made me realize that I was not the real humanitarian in the car. Deng asked me what I thought of the slew of rumors surrounding Spears' marriage, children, and substance abuse. I do not remember my response, but I cannot forget Deng's. He felt sorry for her and said that he thought Spears was "unhappy." He viewed the laughing stock of American pop culture with sympathetic eyes full of acceptance and understanding, the same way, I would discover, he looked at everyone.

Valentino, simply and directly, described the situation in Sudan: war, poverty, education, and female genital mutilation. I felt helpless listening to his stories, but when I asked him what I could do, he acted as if my miniscule effort would actually make a difference. He encouraged me to make others at my school aware of the atrocities in Sudan. He said we could raise money to help build one room for a school, but that before long that one room turns into two rooms, and eventually there would be an entire school for Sudanese children.

Deng had practice with my feelings of inadequacy. *What is the What* was created out of a similar sense of helplessness. In fact, Eggers own feelings of hopelessness almost caused him to give up on the writing project. I realized the style of the book tour resembled the process by which Deng and Eggers were going to attack the problems of Sudan. It was not about the glamour and glitz of Hollywood. It was not about attention or popularity. It was not about making a profit. It was not about broad, sweeping strokes which unrealistically claim to save the world in one fell swoop. It was about a single person, lots of single people actually. It was Valentino saying he wanted to share his story. It was Dave Eggers helping him to do that. It was hundreds of *individuals*, like me, giving Valentino a ride in their jalopies to their churches or schools or bookstores to speak. What ties all aspects of the book together are the two men who made the text possible: Valentino Achack Deng and Dave Eggers. Their combined efforts and

dedication brought the book to life, and their past experiences not only show through the text, they bind the two together.

Writing another person's life story is not a small undertaking, nor is it easy to leave one's own story out of the writing. Eggers life, as portrayed in his memoir *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, is not completely unlike Deng's. Both men spent their formative years within a male fraternity: Eggers with his younger brother whom he raised after the deaths of their parents, and Deng with the thousands of Lost Boys with whom he walked across a country. The loss of loved ones and loss of youth plague both men. Eggers dropped out of college to become a full time dad to his eight year old brother while Deng was separated from his family at age six and would not see them again for nearly 20 years.

Though Eggers wanted to disappear within the text so that Deng's story would be unadulterated, their shared stories could not help but subtly emerge. Their similar pasts appear to be a factor in the bond that caused them both to sacrifice years of their lives to make the book possible.

My personal experience meeting Deng along with the social impact of this book makes it worthy of further examination. Though the humanitarian impact of the book and the history behind it were what first drew me to the text, in this paper I will also examine the structure of the book itself, the writing process, and the depiction of women.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORY

It seems hopeless. Poverty and warfare have marred Africa for generations. Unstable governing systems, mismanaged economies, and foreign influence are mostly to blame for the continent's rocky history. The countries of sub-Saharan Africa have the most turbulent history on the continent. Even when dictatorships and apartheids end, the new governing systems are poorly managed and appear democratic only in name.

The European countries that colonized Africa officially took possession of African land, after unofficially invading and exploiting it, at the Berlin Conference of 1884, where no Africans were present. To gain power on their own continent, European countries often needed to acquire territories elsewhere. Thus, the Berlin Conference became a battle for land and trade areas as the European countries attempted to gain footholds on the African continent (July 295).

The topic of the conference was Africa, yet it was held in Europe, and attended by Europeans. Every European nation was represented, except Switzerland, and the United States was present as well (July 295). Unfortunately, the modern view of Africa tends to hold with the same policies. The conclusion of the conference marked the birth of colonial Africa. Some tribal chiefs signed treaties with Europeans, not knowing they were giving up their freedom, while other chiefs tried to use alliances with European powers to their advantage (July 310). Either way, the partitioning of Africa was unstoppable, and once the land was claimed, the Europeans used whatever means necessary to maintain maximum control of their claimed land with minimum expense to their own governments (July 375).

The division of Africa into countries ultimately combined "fifty-six ethnic groups split into more than 570 tribes that speak at least one hundred languages" to create Africa's largest country: Sudan (Bixler 6). However, these differences did not prevent the Anglo-Egyptian condominium from grouping together radically different groups of people into a nation state from 1899-1955. During that time, the British decided to treat northern and southern Sudan as completely separate entities within one country, leaving Sudan divided: the Arab Muslim North and the African South (Bixler 47).

Sudan began trading with the Middle East thousands of years before the birth of Christ. Consequently, Arab traders settled in northern Sudan, and after the Arab Muslim Empire invasion of Sudan in the seventh and ninth centuries, the Arabs gained controls throughout the country and opened communication between the Sudanese and Arab worlds. The wealth and elevated status of the Arabs was attractive to native Sudanese, resulting in a number of intermarriages. Since Islam requires that a Muslim marry within the faith, many northern Sudanese converted to Islam (Deng 9-10). On the other half of the country, missionaries introduced Christianity, which spread under British rule (Deng 11)

The cultural and religious differences of the two sections are further heightened by physical barriers between the North and the South. The Sudd, an immense swamp, marks the boundary between the two regions. The swamp serves as such a daunting and treacherous divide, that the first outsiders to penetrate the South came in 1840 when the Arab Muslims of Egypt came in search of black slaves. Furthermore, the climate in the South is harsher than the North, making a more barren and rugged terrain and adding to the distinct differences in the two territories (Bixler 39-40).

The two regions seem to define themselves in reference to each other. The political, cultural, and religious beliefs of both the North and the South are emphasized by the presence of the opposite in the other half of the nation. The very division of the country spawned from "the Arabization and Islamization of the North and in the resistance to those factors in the South" (Deng 9). The division within the country has been a continuous battle. The most recent civil war, beginning in 1983, began when Jaafar Muhammad Nimeiri, who had taken power of Sudan when he overthrew the government in 1969, decided to divide the South into three sections in hopes of weakening the region. To top it off, Nimeiri also decided to impose Islamic law throughout all of Sudan, a stipulation the Christian majority of the South greatly opposed (Bixler 52-53).

The establishment of an Islamic state brought about the creation of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), accompanied by its military force, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA). The goal of the rebel group was "the creation of a new, secular, democratic, and pluralistic Sudan" (Deng 13). The SPLA disagreed with the ruling politics of the North and aimed to protect "the unity of the country by creating a 'new Sudan' liberated from any discrimination based on race, ethnicity, religion, culture or gender" (Deng 19-20).

To subdue the SPLA in southern Sudan, the Sudanese government employed militias, known as the murahaleen, to destroy the lower part of the country. The murahaleen had a indiscriminate method of attack. Consequently, the Sudanese people living in southern villages were the innocent victims of the war between the SPLA and the Sudanese government ("It Was Just"). For example, in 1987, the Sudanese government ordered that all males in the South be killed, regardless of age (*God Grew*). Dave Eggers called it "the 'to catch a fish, drain the pond' method of warfare" ("It Was Just").

To make matters worse, there was division within the rebel ranks beginning in 1991. John Garang, the leader of the SPLA, fought "for a united, secular Sudan that protected the rights of Southerners;" however, three of his commanders wanted an independent southern Sudan, causing a fissure in the rebel movement, and "a war within a war" (Bixler 66-67). The group that broke away from the SPLA was originally called the Nasir group but was later renamed SPLM-SPLA-United. SPLM-SPLA-United actually joined forces with the rebel's opposition, the Sudanese government in Khartoum, against John Garang and the mainstream SPLA movement. Ironically, the Sudanese government strongly opposed a divided Sudan; however, their opposition to John Garang was enough to drive them into an alliance with SPLM-SPLA-United (Deng 20-21).

The lines continued to blur as seemingly opposing forces created alliances and internal differences caused fissures, which made it extremely difficult for civilians caught in the middle of the conflict to determine who was friend or foe. As civilians fled their homes, groups of young boys banned together. Ultimately, these boys became known as the Lost Boys of Sudan, as they trekked together for 1,000 miles to Ethiopia. The Lost Boys often found themselves victims of attacks, and at times it was hard to determine who their assailants were.

Not only did they face bombs, bullets, and machetes while they walked hundreds of miles, the Lost Boys also endured grueling conditions with little or no food and water, attacks from wild animals, and diseases. During the journey from Sudan to Ethiopia, it is estimated that nearly eight thousand boys died (Bixler 57). More died in the Ethiopian refugee camps and while fleeing Ethiopia amongst the gunfire of Ethiopian soldiers. John Bul Dau survived the attacks in Sudan and Ethiopia. In his book, he says, "I wonder still, what does war do to people to make them shoot children?" (102).

Jimmy Carter has called the war in Sudan "the most long-lasting and devastating war in the world" (Bixler xv). However, the bitter division between the North and South has at times been overlooked. In 1820-1821, Sudan was invaded by Egypt and Turkey, causing the North and South to unite against a common enemy. Together, they eventually led a successful revolt (Deng 10-11). Though for 22 years of civil war the concept of a united Sudan appeared unattainable, unification in the past had been possible.

At President Bush's inauguration, he told Jimmy Carter to let him know if there was anything he could do for the former president. Carter replied, "There's only one thing I want you to do for me and that is to initiate peace talks in Sudan in a balanced way" (Bixler 216). President Bush listened. With the help of the African Union, the United States, and other members of the international community, the SPLA and the Sudanese government negotiated a ceasefire. After two million deaths and 22 years, peace began in 2005 with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, which gave "the south far greater autonomy, half the country's oil profits and, most importantly, the ability to secede, should the people vote to do so, in 2011" ("It Was Just"). The ceasefire continues to this day.

Sadly, just as the Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed, killing began in another region of Sudan: Darfur. Other rebel groups in Sudan saw the success of the SPLA and decided they too should fight the Sudanese government. The Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) rose out of Darfur. In response, the Sudanese government used the same tactics they used two decades earlier in southern Sudan, only this time, the government-employed militia is called the Janjaweed, instead of the murahaleen. Like with the previous war, the international community has not responded and pushed for peace ("It Was Just"). Consequently, *What is the What* does not only illuminate the atrocities of the 22 year civil war in Sudan, it also helps bring awareness

to the current situation in Darfur. In fact, Deng and Eggers began a book tour immediately after the publication of the book in 2006, "feeling that its release coincided with a new and powerful wave of awareness and action directed towards Darfur" ("It Was Just").

The story of *What is the What* could not escape the history of Sudan. Eggers incorporates multiple miniature history lessons into the text to help the reader better navigate the complex history of the region. Understanding the events leading up to and during Deng's life, help illuminate a deeper story and are crucial to Deng and Eggers' goals for the impact of the book and the future of southern Sudan. Due to the standing peace agreement, the towns in southern Sudan have been able to start rebuilding, but progress is slow because so much of the population that fled during the war has not yet returned. In addition, most towns were burned by the murahaleen, livestock are scarce, and schools, school supplies, and teachers are difficult to find (*VAD*).

Africa is a continent whose land Europeans savagely divided at the Berlin Conference, whose people and soil foreigners rape, whose countries wars and genocide consume, and whose economies aid and unstable governments continually destroy. Deng and Eggers hope that the book will bring not only the history of war in Sudan but also the current situations in southern Sudan and Darfur into the public eye. Their dream is that telling the world about the atrocities committed in Sudan will prevent them from ever happening again in any part of the world.

CHAPTER 3

NOVEL OR TESTIMONIO?

While the contents of *What is the What* has undeniable social significance, the text suffers from its indefinable nature. The title includes both "autobiography" and "novel," leaving the reader questioning the accuracy of the text. Though Michiko Kakutani of the New York Times called *What is the What* "a startling act of literary ventriloquism," he also noted that "the book is flawed by an odd decision on Mr. Eggers's part to fictionalize Mr. Deng's story." Other book reviews were less critical. Francine Prose, also of the New York Times, categorizes the book as "novel, autobiography, whatever." Though Prose appears unconcerned with labeling the book, its current classification limits the way readers view the text and weakens the impact of its historically factual contents.

Eggers is not the first American to write a book about African tragedy. New York journalist, Philip Gourevitch, traveled to Rwanda a year after the genocide and wrote *We Wish To Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families: Stories From Rwanda* based on his experiences. Much of the book consists of direct quotes from survivors of the genocide, which Gourevitch recorded. Atlanta journalist, Mark Bixler, wrote *The Lost Boys of Sudan: An American Story of the Refugee Experience*, about three Lost Boys of Sudan fleeing their war-torn country, whom he followed from the second they stepped off the plane in America. Bixler also includes a large number of quotes from the Lost Boys. However, both of these books are also direct products of the authors; the authors are the narrators who guide the readers along as additional outside viewers of a tragedy.

The library subject headings for *We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with are families* are as follows: "Genocide—Rwanda, Rwanda—Politics and Government, Rwanda—Ethnic relations." The subject headings for *The Lost Boys of Sudan* are "Refugees—Sudan, Refugees—Georgia—Atlanta, Orphans—Sudan, War." In neither subject heading list is the word "fiction" present. However, in the subject headings for *What is the What*, "fiction" comes at the end of each line: "Refugees—Sudan—Fiction, Refugees—United States—Fiction, Sudanese—United States—Fiction." Additionally, the genre/form category for *What is the What* is "biographical fiction."

Eggers could have written a strictly non-fiction account of his time with Valentino and his experience traveling to southern Sudan. Instead, he chose to use his literary talents to help bring Deng's story to life while he disappeared within the text, allowing Deng's voice to shine through. In the place of a journalistic text from an outsider's perspective, Eggers offers an intimate look into the experience of one of Sudan's Lost Boys. To do so, however, Eggers drew on his own research and experiences in Sudan to fill in gaps in Deng's childhood memory. The additions forced Eggers to label the book "fiction."

What is the What's categorization as fiction is not only misleading but undermines the integrity and importance of the work. "Novel" in itself is not a negative term, but in the case of Egger's and Deng's text, it gives the impression that all of the information contained within the pages of the book is fictional. *What is the What* should stand beside other works like *We Wish To Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families* and *The Lost Boys of Sudan* as an additional informative and accurate text about the turbulent history of Africa's war-torn nations.

The categorization of *What is the What* is striking: an autobiography and a novel. It appears to be a literary joke: Eggers's breaking the rules in his now well-known style. Yet, neither label does justice to what comes after the title page. In fact, calling *What is the What* an autobiography or a novel undercuts not only the work put into the text, but the message the book leaves with its readers.

The collaboration between Eggers and Deng began at a birthday party. After Mary Williams, founder of the Lost Boys Foundation in Atlanta, contacted Eggers and asked him to help Deng tell his life story, Eggers flew to Atlanta and met Deng at a birthday party for nearly 200 Lost Boys. That very weekend, Eggers and Deng began recording the history of Deng's life ("It Was Just"). At first, they worked through the basic story, using 12 hours of tape. Then they had to make a decision about how to proceed. In a recent interview posted on The Valentino Achak Deng Foundation website, Deng said, "I thought I might want to write my own book, but I learned that I was not ready to do this. I was still taking classes in basic writing at Georgia Perimeter College." In the same interview, Eggers' said, "I didn't really know exactly what form it would finally take—whether it would be first person or third, whether it would be fiction or nonfiction. After about eighteen months of struggle with it, we settled on a fictionalized autobiography, in Valentino's voice" (*VAD*).

Those eighteen months were grueling for both Eggers and Deng. The two would meet at Eggers' home in San Francisco and at Deng's home in Atlanta. They sent thousands of emails back and forth and spent hundreds of hours talking on the phone. Deng says that usually he would spend approximately twenty minutes describing an event, and then months later, he would receive the account in written form from Eggers (*VAD*). Though the two got along well and enjoyed working together, the process of writing the text was intense and complicated. In the

essay, “It Was Just Boys Walking,” Eggers states, “We were dealing with material that was very difficult for him to dredge up, and difficult for me to hear. On top of this was a central struggle for me—I had yet to figure out just how to write the book” (1). Eggers originally had very different plans for the book than what the final product turned out to be. He says, “I assumed I would simply interview Valentino, straighten the narrative out a bit, ask some follow-up questions, and then assemble the book from his words. I even imaged for a while—much of our first year together—that I would simply be the editor of the book, not its author” (“It Was Just”). However, that scenario soon proved impossible.

The decision for Eggers to be the author was not an easy one. Eggers even went as far as to seriously consider calling off the entire project. As he gave up, he recalls, “I couldn’t make an interesting non-fiction account of his life—I do believe another writer could, but I personally couldn’t—and a simple oral history wouldn’t add anything significant to the material out there. I didn’t know how I would tell Valentino that the thousands of hours he’d given to the process were for nothing” (“It Was Just”). In the end, Eggers did not give up. Instead, he decided to create a novel because, as he says, “Only in a novel could I imagine the look on the face of the man who rescued Valentino when he became entangled in barbed wire one black night in the middle of his journey to Ethiopia. Only in a novel could I apply what I had seen in the various regions of southern Sudan to describe the land, the light, the people” (“It Was Just”). Deng approved of the decision, saying that Eggers was the writer and must do what was best in order to reach the most people (“It Was Just”).

Deng appears satisfied with the classification of the book, and explains, “It is very close to the truth, but many things in the book are somewhat different than what happened in life. Some characters have been combined. Some time is compressed. They are minor things, but

they were necessary" (*VAD*). The reason for the minor fictionalization stems from Deng's inability to clearly remember his childhood. He elaborates: "For one thing, I was very young when the book begins, so I could not remember conversations and small details from my early childhood in Marial Bai. It was necessary to reconstruct the chronology, and that is what Dave did. He took the basic facts and then created a story from there" (*VAD*).

Eggers stands by the classification emphatically, claiming in an interview that "[a]ll of the events in the book have historical basis. But it really is a novel" (*VAD*). Eggers admits that, as a journalist, he has a very strict definition of nonfiction, and his contribution to Deng's story kept him from being able to classify it as anything but fiction ("It Was Just"). Eggers added events to Deng's life in the name of spreading awareness about human rights violations in Southern Sudan. Eggers says, "Sometimes I'd read a human rights report about a certain incident during the civil war, and would ask Val if he knew someone who had experienced that incident…Sometimes he did know someone, and we could go from there, but other times I had to imagine it on my own" (*VAD*).

Labeling the narrative as a novel authored by Eggers is in some ways advantageous. It attracts Eggers' usual, and large, fan base. Eggers's name draws in his youthful audience instead of turning them off with the idea of an autobiography about someone from a country of which they know very little. Ashley Makar of the American Book Review speculates that "[p]erhaps the autobiographical "I" of What is the What could jolt Generation X and Y readers, among whom Eggers is wildly popular, out of navel-gazing. If they look up, they will apprehend another world in the life story of Valentino Deng" (30). Similarly, Prose, in her book review, predicts that Eggers's young fans will learn a great deal using the maps in the book to follow the travels of the Lost Boys, and by the end of the book, "they will be able to visualize the

geographical positions of Sudan, Ethiopia and Kenya with a clarity surpassing their possibly hazy recall of anything they might have memorized for a World Civilization class." The importance of Eggers connection to the text then becomes crucial in the overall goal of the book: to spread awareness about the situation in Sudan.

The simplest way to describe the work is: "Eggers's fictionalized retelling of Deng's true-life journey" (Mengestu 61). However, with a text this factual, historically accurate, and informative, "fiction" or "novel" seem unfit labels. "Autobiography" is also insufficient, as it ignores Eggers' significant contribution to the work. Eggers himself notes that "once you say a book is fiction, you have a harder time convincing a reader that certain things are possible" (*VAD*).

What is the What, I'd like to submit, is better classified as testimonio. Testimonio is Spanish for "testimony," and describes a genre in which a witness relates his or her story to an editor or compiler. Testimonio is relatively unknown in the United States, though its popularity is widespread in Latin America. In this form of literature, the intentions of the narrator are the main focus. John Beverly states, "The situation of narration in testimonio has to involve an urgency to communicate, a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, struggle for survival, and so on, implicated in the act of narration itself…Unlike the novel, testimonio promises by definition to be primarily concerned with sincerity rather than literariness" (Gugelberger 26). In *What is the What*, Deng urgently wants to communicate the truth about the civil war in Sudan, especially since the mass human rights violations in Darfur began shortly before the book was published. Though it employs some novelistic elements, like the framing technique where a robbery in Atlanta frames the story of Deng's childhood, *What is the What* includes many non-novelistic aspects, such as the lengthy background information on the history

and politics of Sudan and the call to action at the end of the text where Deng implores the readers to not only listen to his story but to react.

Each testimonio critic has his or her own definition of the genre, and as Elzbieta Sklodowska notes, "*testimonio* remains undefined," (Gugelberger 84). Accordingly, testimonio has struggled as a genre to gain recognition and credibility. It often finds itself under scrutiny about the authenticity of the testimony, as fabrications on the part of the witnesses and editors are uncovered. Yet, Linda Brooks argues "that *testimonio* is literature, that it is aesthetically determined, and that despite fashionable rejections of aesthetics as politically irrelevant, *testimonio's* performance strategies have always defined it as a genre" (182). The unique format of testimonio writing, the process by which it is created, and the roles of the witness and editor earn it the title of genre. As a valid and growing literary genre, testimonio is a fitting categorization for Eggers' and Deng's text because it allows for more recognition of the contributors to the text and the factual information within the book. Brooks goes on to assert that "*testimonio* is a performance-based, collaborative form of writing, grounded not in journalism or legal testimony but in anthropology" (182). Therefore, the words of the editor and witness "cannot be taken at face value nor can the speaker be held responsible for them as fact-based or 'serious' statements. Rather than verifiable truth claims, the witness's and editor's words are *enactments* of broader truths—performances of the dialogical process by which truths originate" (Brooks 183). While parts of *What is the What* were fictionalized, the truth of the message of the story has never come into question. Deng's story serves as an enactment of the tragic repercussions of Sudan's civil war. Even the parts which Eggers added are truths about the turmoil in Sudan, whether or not Deng experienced them directly. The goal of the book was not for Eggers to transcribe Deng's story word for word onto the page. Deng would have been

capable of doing that himself. The goal was to create a work of art that would bring an often overlooked tragedy in recent world history into mainstream culture, connecting readers to the person they found inside the text while educating them.

Within the testimonio form, the editor and witness inevitably influence each other through their interactions, as they are placed on a stage where they must perform (Brooks 191). As performers, Eggers and Deng must cater to their audience. In order to make Deng's story attractive to mainstream culture, and Eggers' youthful fan-base, Eggers fictionalized parts of Deng's story using his creative literary license; however, his contribution to Deng's story makes the truth of *What is the What* no less real or relevant to society.

The process Eggers and Deng underwent to create the text follows the guidelines of testimonio writing. Since often the narrator in testimonio literature is illiterate or not at a professional writing level, "the production of a testimonio generally involves tape-recording and then transcription and editing of an oral account by an interlocutor who is an intellectual, often a journalist or a writer" (Gugelberger 26-27). However, in an interview, Deng appears to oppose the goals of testimonio writing, saying, "I want to tell you that this is my story and not the story of a thousand Lost Boys…This is a story of my life, not everyone's life. We are all different people" (*VAD*). Nevertheless, Deng's story is irrevocably tied to the story of others: the stories Eggers read about other people in the civil war and the stories of the people Deng encounters during his journey. In testimonio writing, according to Beverly, "Each individual testimonio evokes an absent polyphony of other voices, other possible lives and experiences. Thus, one common formal variation on the classic first-person singular testimonio is the polyphonic testimonio made up of accounts by different participants in the same event" (Gugelberger 28). Deng cannot escape the story of others who witnessed Sudan's civil war. George Yudice defines

testimonio as "authentic narrative, told by a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of a situation (e.g., war, oppression, revolution, etc.). Emphasizing popular, oral discourse, the witness portrays his or her own experience as an agent (rather than a representative) of a collective memory and identity" (Gugelberger 44). While testimonio writing does express a personal experience, that personal experience is part of a group struggle (Gugelberger 54). Though Deng wants to claim the story as his own, he is speaking to the world about a very large issue which affected thousands, and therefore engages in a testimonio.

Testimonio writing brings the literature of those who were previously excluded from literary expression into the spotlight through the representations of professional writers (Gugelberger 29). As a result, labeling *What is the What* as testimonio would better acknowledge Deng's contribution to the work. Brooks claims that testimonio works have two authors: witness and editor (183). To give Deng credit as an "author" of the work, would not only lessen the suspicion that the work is completely fictional, but would also recognize Deng's efforts without diminishing Eggers' contribution or decreasing the attention his name brings.

Barbara Harlow notes that the narrator and complier's antiauthoritarian relationship is critical to testimonio writing (Gugelberger 72). In *What is the What*, the pairing was perfect. Though Eggers attempted to disappear in the text, there are few differences between his style of storytelling and Deng's, blurring the lines between the stories of the two men. Eggers' first book, a memoir titled *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, received positive reviews; however, some noted Eggers tendency towards dense long-windedness, which caused the book to drag at times. Similarly, Makar points out in her book review that "readers will likely get tired of Deng's exhaustive testimonials—paced at times as steadfastly as the Lost Boys walking—to impassive audience." In hearing Deng speak in person and in a recording of the Clinton Global

Initiative, it is obvious that the two share a love of lengthy accounts with excessive attention to detail. Their similar styles could bring the authenticity of the text into question, as Yudice notes, "Literary critics…have been quick to discard the testimonialista's claim to authenticity, based on the age-old literary premise that narrative voice is always a persona that does not coincide with the individual narrating" (Gugelberger 46). However, Eggers' and Deng's similar styles enhance the telling of the story and do not compromise the truth of Deng's journey. Deng notes that "[b]ecause we had spent so much time together…it is not surprising that he [Eggers] could guess my thoughts" (*VAD*). The bond between the two helped Eggers bring Deng to life on the page, but it inevitably forced Eggers himself into the text as well.

Eggers published an article about his experience traveling to southern Sudan with Deng; however, he realized that using his voice distracted from Deng's story. Therefore, in the book, Eggers knew he had to become invisible ("It Was Just"). Though Eggers attempted to disappear within the text, he was also at the same time adding his own touch, and consequently, his own experiences, to the book. Though Eggers did his own research in order to fictionalize and add events to Deng's story, it was not the only way he contributed to the text. In *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, Eggers tell the story of his parents' deaths within six weeks of each other, and how he, at age twenty-one, took on the parental duties of raising his eight year old brother, Toph. As Eggers watches the other parents during Toph's baseball practice, he realizes, "I am not them. They are the old model and we are the new" (*A Heartbreaking* 57). At open house night at Toph's school, the other students greet Toph and his "parent." Eggers says of the other students, "They are scared. They are jealous. We are pathetic. We are stars" (*A Heartbreaking* 96). This new model family consists of the bond between two young men who are alone and scared, but who are surviving with each other's help. Eggers attempts to take on

the role of "father," but both Toph and Eggers are now orphaned and need each other to survive, changing the dynamic of the situation. It is not Eggers raising Toph, but the two raising each other, and according to Eggers, no one can stop them: "Try to stop us, you pussy! You can't stop us from singing, and you can't stop us from making fart sounds, from putting our hands out the window to test the aerodynamics of different hand formations, from wiping the contents of our noses under the front of our seats" (*A Heartbreaking* 49). Eggers and Toph form a bond that is them against the world, in much the same way the Lost Boys banned together to make a thousand mile journey through a war-torn country.

Along with the male camaraderie, comes the idea of being owed something by the world which has caused so much pain and damage. Just as Deng feels that no one would wrong him if they knew what he had suffered in the past, Eggers feels that he and Toph, after their parents' deaths, deserve to be spared future pain. As they leave town together, Eggers says, "Every day we are collecting on what's coming to us, each day we're being paid back for what is owed, what we deserve, with interest, with some extra motherfucking consideration—we are *owed*, goddammit—and so we are expecting everything, everything" (*A Heartbreaking* 47). Eggers, like Deng, appeals to the audience for validation. Through both texts, Eggers and Deng bring their stories to the world, so at last someone will hear their cry. Ultimately, Eggers presence in the book enhances the story and should be praised instead of criticized. He not only adds his style and his research, he adds his personal experience, which makes him better able to connect with Deng, and this bond in turn allows Eggers to better portray Deng's story to the reader. Eggers capitalizes on every resource he has to help bring Deng's story to life for the reader in order that the text may spread awareness about a socially and politically important event, which is the goal of all testimonio writing.

An important aspect of the book is lost when it is given the label "novel." It is a text which breaks rules and pushes limits, attempting to bring about awareness and social change through literature. The broad-reaching scope of testimonio seems more fitting since "testimonial writing is taught in literature a well as anthropology, sociology, and political science courses, thus requiring new methodologies of interpretation and analysis that fall outside the purview of prevailing disciplinary classifications" (Gugelberger 47). *What is the What* spans all of these disciplines and does not fit neatly into a mainstream genre classification, like novel. Eggers' and Deng's book breaks the mold, fitting nicely with the untraditional style of testimonio literature.

The current political situation of the world makes Eggers' and Deng's timing perfect. New approaches are used to bring about change. Politicians, leaders, and even young people around the globe are recognizing serious human rights violations that have previously been ignored. The postmodern view of literature also allows for changes and new developments, like testimonio, where in the past "[t]he modern institution of literature traditionally has functioned as a gatekeeper, permitting certain classes of individuals to establish standards of taste within the public sphere and excluding others" (Gugelberger 47). Now the philosophy of postmodernity, like testimonio, places more importance on marginal ideas while rejecting the prevailing ideas of world interpretation (Gugelberger 49). This view creates a ripe environment for anyone attempting to do what Eggers and Deng did. They brought a story of critical importance to a public that was finally willing to listen.

As Eggers and Deng crossed cultural and racial boundaries, they were participating in the tradition of testimonio. In testimonio writing, "the narrator is someone who requires an interlocutor with a different ethnic and/or class background in order first to elicit the oral account, and then to give it textual form as a testimonio, and finally to see its publication and

distribution" (Gugelberger 30). Eggers, a famous, white, American male, used his established fame, talent, and connections to give life to the story of a black, Sudanese refugee, barely living above the poverty line. Above all, *What is the What* is more than an autobiography or novel because of the message of the book. Beverly states, "Testimonio represents an affirmation of the individual subject, even of individual growth and transformation, by its connection with a group or class situation marked by marginalization, oppression, and struggle. If it loses this connection, it ceases to be testimonio and becomes autobiography" (Gugelberger 35-36). The representation in the book of all southern Sudanese as a whole is undeniably connected to Deng's plea in the final pages of the text. A novel "is a closed and private form in the sense that both the story and the subject end with the end of the text" (Gugelberger 37). Deng's story is far from over, and the reader is not led to believe the story ends when the book is closed. Ultimately, testimonio is a performance of who we are as humans, not just a means for spreading political information (Brooks 203).

While the current classification does not do justice to the work itself, it is indeed attracting readers under the guise of "novel" and making Deng's story known. In the end, the established popularity Eggers brings to the table overrides what the label of "novel" or "autobiography" may do to diminish Deng's role in the text, as the goal of both author and protagonist is to bring awareness to as many people as possible. Ultimately, no matter the classification, as "[a]n eloquent testimony to the power of storytelling, "What is the What" is an extraordinary work of witness, and of art," which transcends labels and takes literature to its ultimate form: a vehicle for encouraging social awareness and political change (Prose).

CHAPTER 4

REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN

During our drive from Atlanta to Athens, Deng expressed deep concern for the women in his home country. He spoke of the atrocities of female genital mutilation (FGM) and his friends who have undergone the horrific procedure. In Africa, it is estimated that "between 100 and 132 million girls and women have been subjected to FGM" (Satti 303). Sudan is one of the African countries in which the practice is the most widespread. Hygiene, tradition, culture, increased male sexual pleasure, religious beliefs, enhanced fertility, family honor, and social acceptance are all justifications for FGM (Satti 303). Deng expressed a deep desire to stop this traditional practice in Sudan and to educate others about the realities of FGM. One of the primary focuses of The Valentino Achak Deng (VAD) Foundation, which was created from the proceeds of the book and was co-founded by Deng and Eggers, is women's rights in southern Sudan. The VAD Foundation is building a community center in Deng's hometown, Marial Bai, and "[w]omen will play a leading role in managing the community center" (*VAD*). The Foundation helped start the Marial Bai Women's Action group which plans to create a co-operative restaurant using a grant from the Foundation (*VAD*). Though Deng's advocacy for women's rights is apparent, the representation of women in *What is the What* is often perplexing.

To begin, few women grace the pages of the text. This is a book narrated by a man and written by another man; however, the women who are mentioned do serve important roles. It is Deng's mother who is present in all of Deng's most cherished child-hood memories. It is a young girl who pesters Deng and ultimately pulls him to his feet when he has given up hope on

the long journey to the refugee camp. It is three girls who open Deng's eyes to sexual pleasures. It is one woman who steals Deng's heart, though she consistently toys with his emotions. It is a woman who heads the Lost Boys foundation in Atlanta and is surrounded by controversy over use of funds, and it is a female thief who enters Deng's home and steals his most-cherished belongings.

Within the text, women are seen as nurturing mothers, nagging companions, fickle lovers, suspect businesswomen, and heartless criminals—all strong Western female stereotypes. First, I will focus upon the three young girls who play the roles of inexperienced temptresses, as I believe their impact on Deng's life affects his views of women throughout the rest of the text.

Deng first meets the four sisters at Pinyudo refugee camp in Ethiopia when he is approximately eight years old. They are the nieces of Deng's teacher, and Deng meets them in class. The 51 boys in the class are so enthralled with the introduction of the feminine into their midst, that little work is accomplished in the classroom during the first several weeks of the girls' attendance. Deng is no exception. In the narrative, he says, "I studied their necks and their hair, as if the secrets of the world and history were discernible in the twists of their braids" (270). At first, Deng places the nieces on a pedestal, viewing them as more mature than he and completely "unattainable in every way" (*What* 270). Deng's admiration of the "Royal Nieces" leads him to believe he has found the reason for his previous hardships. He thinks to himself:

> God had had a plan. God had separated me from my home and family and had sent me to this wretched place, but now there seemed to be a reason for it all. There was suffering, I thought, and then there was light. There was suffering and then there was grace. I was placed in Pinyudo, it was clear now, to meet these magnificent girls, and the fact that

there were four of them meant that God intended to make up for all the misfortune in my life. God was good and God was just (*What* 271).

It first appears that these are the naïve rationalizations of a young man who has been through great tragedy only to find joy in the small pleasures in life. What is troubling, however, is the implication that a girl is a reward and that multiple girls mean a greater reward.

After seeing the sisters, Deng begins focusing more intently on his academic studies. His goal is to answer every question the teacher asks correctly so the girls will notice him. He gets to school early and stays late, offering to help the teacher in any way possible. His diligence is rewarded with an invitation to lunch at the girls' home. When the sisters argue over which one of Deng's shirts they like best, Deng thinks, "Already they were fighting over me! It was bliss." (*What* 276).

After lunch, the eldest three girls drag Deng into their bedroom. There, the girls give Deng instructions on how to play hide and seek. The sisters tell Deng he will have to search for something hidden under their shirts. Deng says, "Agar pointed to her chest. I took in a quick breath. Even thinking of it now, I cannot believe it happened, that I was chosen for these experiments. But this happened, exactly as I say it did, and next she said the words that I still hear today, when I close my eyes and lay my head to rest. --You have to look for it. With your hand" (*What* 278). Agar, the oldest niece, then proceeds to take Deng's hand and place it inside her shirt. Deng claims he can still feel the "heat of her skin" to this day (*What* 278). The children continue to play hide and seek, and the girls look for hidden treasure in Deng's pants while he looks under their skirts.

When he returns to his hut with the other unaccompanied boys, he decides not to tell them the intimate details of his visit with the Royal Nieces, as "[t]hey might be considered of

easy virtue, and it is no exaggeration to say that out of the tends of thousands of people in that camp, there surely would be one man, perhaps more, willing to risk his life to despoil one of these girls" (*What* 280). However, Deng does not think that his actions were in any way a negative treatment of the sisters.

To his amazement, Deng is invited back many times to have lunch and play hide and seek with the sisters. Deng claims to be able to remember every detail of the girls' room, even twenty years later. Eggers ends the chapter with Deng's final thoughts of his first sexual experimentation: "so many times I returned to play hide and seek, at which, thankfully, our abilities never improved. I was very bad at looking for things, so I had to look and look!...It was not the worst of my years" (*What* 281).

It is understandable that Deng would have this experience and enjoy it, as childhood sexual exploration is common, and "children explore and compare both their own and other children's bodies (e.g., playing doctor) and at the same time gender-specific roles develop" (Sandnabba). The sexual behavior of children is also influenced by culture (Sandnabba). Deng and his playmates were acting out the gender roles and cultural traditions of the adults in their own families and incorporating an imitation of polygamy into their games. Deng's father practiced polygamy, and Deng's mother was his first wife. At age six, Deng converted to Christianity under the encouragement of his uncle, though his parents did not attend his baptism. Deng's father rejected Christianity because the local priest forbade the practice of polygamy. Polygamy goes against Deng's Christian beliefs, yet it was what Deng grew up with in his immediate family, making it a familiar practice.

Polygamy practices are closely tied to economics. In Kenya, for example, before the practice was illegalized in 1990, "the ability of a man to take a second wife depended on his

accumulation of enough resources to provide a second payment of bride-wealth" (Hetherington 162). Deng's friends in America often had trouble paying a bride price for a Sudanese wife while they were making minimum wage. Bride prices in Sudan are in cattle, not monetary, form. One of Deng's friends, Gabriel, was expected to pay a bride price of 240 cattle, which equals approximately $20,000 (*What* 224). Even the Sudanese men working in America had a difficult time saving enough money for the bride price of just one bride, much less two or more. Deng's father was a wealthy man and owned a general store in Deng's hometown (*What* 17). He was able to afford six wives, meaning the economic status connected with multiple wives was familiar to Deng. He would have associated the attention of the three nieces with being powerful and wealthy enough to have three wives. In the film *God Grew Tired of Us*, many of the Sudanese refugees in America expressed concerned that in their new country they would only be able to have one wife (*God Grew*). Deng does not protest polygamy in the text, but he does convert to Christianity, a religion which opposes the practice, and he does maintain a monogamous relationship while in America.

The sexual exploration of Deng and the sisters is to be expected considering their age and the traditions of their tribes. Research shows that "40-75% of children participate in some form of sexual exploration before the age of 13" (Sandnabba). The exploratory tendencies are highest from the ages of three to about seven. Afterward, children are more aware of social standards and sexual taboos (Sandnabba). The children acted out their curiosity about the sexual and marital traditions of the adults in their families and communities. What is not so clear is why Deng, in his adult, monogamous, Christian, American life, continues to think of the episode with the sisters as one of the best times in his life. Deng seems very opposed to the traditional

treatment of Sudanese women, yet he glorifies the event, even in his adulthood, and this experience with women shapes Deng's later female interactions.

What is even more striking is Eggers inclusion of this story in the first place, though Deng was reluctant to share it. In hearing Eggers and Deng speak at the Margaret Mitchell House in Atlanta in March 2007, I learned that Eggers chanced upon the story of the nieces one day after he and Deng had visited one of Eggers' tutoring facilities. Eggers asked Deng about the interaction of young boys and girls in Sudan, and Deng's response involved the story of the nieces. Eggers shared the story with the audience in Atlanta and said how excited he had been to learn this information and how eager he was to include it in the text, even though Deng was less enthusiastic and did not see the story's relevance to his story as a whole. Writing about Deng's experience with the nieces seems an odd choice by Eggers. Eggers admits that Deng did not see the importance of this event in the text, so why the inclusion in the first place? Leaving it out would not have gone against the expressed wishes of the narrator.

Furthermore, Deng's insistence that this event is what he thinks about each night before he falls asleep to this day conflicts with an important aspect of Deng's adult life: his monogamous love for Tabitha. Deng and Tabitha begin a romance in the refugee camp, and later rekindle their love once they are both relocated to the United States. In the text, he says of Tabitha, "I loved Tabitha in a way that made me feel like an adult, like I had finally become a man. With her I felt I could escape my childhood" (*What* 31).

I believe that Deng's apparent attitude towards the sisters in the text is a combination of two things: feelings of power and Eggers' Western influence. As Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan note, "sexual identifies are similar to other kinds of identities in that they are imbued with power relations" (Kolmar 569). Deng continues to think about the sisters and his

experiences with them as one of the best times of his life because he was finally able to feel powerful after years of being ignored. The attention the sisters gave Deng is the first time Deng is treated as an object of desire. In fact, Deng receives very little recognition at all throughout the course of his childhood. He was one of many children born to six mothers in his immediate family. He was one of thousands of Lost Boys who was separated from his family during the civil war. In the refugee camp, he again finds himself as an indistinguishable unaccompanied minor.

Deng is brought into the household of girls whose social status is above him, whose beauty is known throughout the camp, and whose presence in school awes and mystifies all the other students. Though the nieces appear powerful in inviting Deng to play "hide and seek," their power only appears behind closed doors and is quickly turned into an offer of subservience. At school, the girls never speak. They quietly remain in the back of the classroom while the boys in the class answer the questions the teacher asks. Through the girls' desire to sexually experiment with Deng, he experiences a sense of dominance and power. His enjoyment of being physically intimate with multiple girls at once is a liberating experience of power for Deng. He is acting out the role of his father, and in doing so, imitates the power of a man of wealth who can afford multiple wives.

The nieces are victims of a male-dominated culture. While historically there have been a number of extremely powerful African women, African cultures have been conquered by Europeans and Arabs who have male-dominated cultures, leaving the African women powerless. As 'Zulu Sofola notes, "wherever the new alien powers dislodged African men from their previous positions of power, those African men would in turn grab whatever was left of power by dislodging their female counterparts from their own positions of power" (Nnaemeka 52).

Consequently, contemporary African women "are to a large extent disoriented, weakened, and rendered ineffective and irrelevant" (Nnaemeka 52). Deng's power was taken by the invaders from the Arab North. To regain a sense of power and identity for himself, Deng took power from the nieces, even though they were of a social status above Deng.

Judith Howard notes that "[s]exuality is an arena of social behavior in which power differences might reasonably be expected to be especially significant" (105). She discusses several studies on power and gender differences and their conclusions, which state that the differences in power between men and women in society are transferred into sexual relationship (105-106). Due to the power division between men and women in Sudanese society, the power division in sexual relations of Sudanese places the man in the dominant position. Therefore, it is natural that Deng's first experience of power came through sexual interaction with members of the opposite sex.

Though his sexual exploration with the nieces was initiated by the girls, they were acting in a subservient manner in offering themselves all to Deng. They first offered themselves for Deng to touch. Only afterwards did they look for "treasure" under Deng's clothing. Consequently, they solidified the idea of male power in Deng's mind. He sees the gender roles growing up where women were expected to be satisfied living as one of many wives, and men's wealth and status was judged by the number of wives they had. After his experience with the sisters, Deng realizes the truths of Sudanese gender roles first hand. As a result, in America, Deng is confused by powerful women.

After living in America for a few months, Deng attends a professional basketball game. He and the other Sudanese men with him are fascinated by the cheerleaders. He reflects, "We all stared at the gyrating young women, who put forth an image of great power and fierce sexuality.

It would have been impolite to turn away, but at the same time, the dancers made me uncomfortable" (*What* 153). Women presenting images of power are unfamiliar to Deng, and consequently, make him uncomfortable. The powerful, independent, sexuality of the cheerleaders, greatly contrasts Deng's experience with the three sisters in which he was the powerful party. Deng's association of power and dominance over women is an unhealthy view of the opposite sex, which could explain the way women are portrayed throughout the rest of the text. Two of the main female characters in Deng's adult life are Mary Williams and Tabitha. As described by Deng, both of them face unpleasant consequences because they are powerful women.

Mary Williams is one of the first American women with whom Deng interacts. They get along well, and she helps him settle into the United States, even finding him medical treatment for his persistent headaches. Deng is amazing that Williams would create The Lost Boys Foundation to help Sudanese refugees without receiving pay herself. However, Williams soon falls under scrutiny amongst the Lost Boys population who become angry any time they feel someone receives something they do not. For example, some of the Sudanese refugees were given the opportunity to go to Hawaii to be extras in a film. Deng says, "It was she [Williams], it was rumored, who engineered the selection of those who had gone to Hawaii, and who was she to wield such power?" (*What* 156). Deng claims that it was suspicions such as these which led to the demise of the Foundation. In this instance, Williams' "power" is seen as a negative aspect because it controls which Lost Boys receive which opportunities through the Foundation.

In addition, Deng is unsure of how to handle the powerful personality of his girlfriend, Tabitha. He even blames her strong personality for her death. Having grown up in a culture that views women as commodities to be bought with a bride price, Deng wants to believe that

Tabitha is his; however, he is often baffled by her behavior. Deng describes her as "flighty and moody…she would disappear for days. Her absence would go unexplained, and when she reappeared, I was forbidden to dwell on why or where she had gone" (*What* 263). Tabitha enjoys being pursued, and Deng does not believe that he was the only man in her life. Her attitudes and habits confuse him, though after his experience with the nieces, he considers himself a "success with ladies" (*What* 266).

Tabitha's independence and interactions with other men challenged Deng's previous success. Her "defiant" and "unafraid" attitudes were unsettling to Deng, just as the cheerleader's power made him uncomfortable (*What* 320). In the end, her defiance of an ex-lover who claims she aborted his child, results in her murder. Deng reflects that Tabitha's death is not the only murder of a woman in America at the hands of her Sudanese lover. In the narrative, Deng thinks, "Some say it is the fault of the women here, the clash of their new ideas and the old habits of men unwilling to adapt" (*What* 330). In the United States, there is "premarital sex, and there was an assertive young woman who decided to break off a relationship with an angry young Sudanese man"—two things that did not occur amongst couples in Sudan (*What* 330). Deng blames Tabitha for her assertiveness and her refusal to take her ex-lover's threats seriously, which he believes were contributing factors in her murder. However, Deng never directly blames Tabitha's ex-lover. He blames the conflicts between Sudanese and American society and he blames Tabitha, the sexually powerful and independent woman who dies at the hands of a man trying to regain dominance over her.

Not only does power play into the description of Deng's interaction with the nieces, so does Eggers' Western ideas of sex. Best-selling books rarely exist in today's market without including a sex scene. This focus is even more pronounced in books aimed at the sexually-

charged teenagers and young adults of America. As discussed in the previous chapter, Eggers has a well-established following in Generation X. Though none of his previous works are sexually explicit, he does not shy away from discussing it. Eggers' insistence on including the episode with the sisters in the text seems geared towards his young American audience.

Even within testimonio texts, the writer's presence is undeniable. The representation of women in Eggers' memoir, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius,* is not dissimilar from *What is the What*. Eggers' memoir focuses on the bond between Eggers and his younger brother, Toph, as Eggers takes on the parental duties after their parents' deaths. Eggers has two older siblings, Beth and Bill, though they are minor characters in the text. Other females, including girlfriends and coworkers, also play supporting roles, as the focus of the memoir is the male-oriented life of the author and his younger brother.

After the publication of the memoir, excerpts from emails written by Beth Eggers appeared on the internet. Beth claims, "I am the sister who supposedly 'helped out' while Dave 'raised his little brother alone'. Yeah right. I only picked him up from school every day, went to all the school events WITH Dave, although you'd never know it from reading all the reviews and the book" (FoE! Log #6). Beth also complained about the lack of payment for her contributions to the book: "Dave used my journal to refresh his recollection about many things—that's why he thanked me in the acknowledgements (sic) and probably also because he felt guilty for misrepresenting things. I still don't have the journal back yet—two volumes. No offer of royalties. But he did take me to Mexico with my brothers for Christmas, so I guess that's something" (FoE! Log #6). The comments found their way from the internet into Harper's Magazine. Afterward, Beth issued an apology on Eggers' website, *McSweeney's*, saying she "was having a really terrible LaToya Jackson moment" (FoE! Log #13). Though Beth tried to

take back her attack, her representation in Eggers' memoir seems similar to the descriptions of women in *What is the What*.

Eggers wanted to disappear in the text, but he cannot escape his own life story or his interpretation of Deng's story as he places the words on the page. Deng's reluctance to share the story about the nieces leaves the reader to question how much of this episode Eggers embellished. Either consciously on unconsciously, Eggers appears to incorporate the Western emphasis on sexuality and his own life experiences into the text.

Power struggles and Western ideas of sexuality contribute to the representation of female characters in the book. Instead of showing empowered women who help Deng along his journey, the text primarily describes women as minor, subservient, characters or obstacles to be overcome. Though I do not believe the Deng or Eggers wanted to negatively portray women in the text, the female characters in *What is the What* are often shown as negative stereotypes who are dominated by male characters.

CHAPTER 5

HUMANITARIAN IMPACT

In the face of sub-Saharan Africa's turbulent economic and political history, Eggers and Deng hope to do their part to make a difference and not follow in the steps of the countless unsuccessful African aid attempts. Part of the problem with African countries' economies is that aid is not always a solution; often it leads to more problems, as the nations acquire staggering debt and become dependent on outside support (Sogge 206-207). Not only does aid cause dependence, it also fails to produce improvements. Consequently, as Michael Dynes concludes,"[t]hree hundred billion dollars in Western taxpayers' money has been sunk into sub-Saharan Africa in so-called development assistance over the past 50 years and there is virtually nothing to show for it" (31).

The statistics are discouraging. The last 50 years in Africa have shown that economic development attempts have failed, proving that aid is not the solution to the problems of the continent (Dynes 31). The positive results are few, and now, half a century and billions of dollars later, international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are realizing that a new approach is needed to help African economies and governments. Though the ineffective measures have been identified, a solution that will be effective is not easily determined.

Part of the problem is that the majority of the world is oblivious to the dire situation in many African regions. Most Americans were ignorant of the genocide happening in Darfur until Nicholas Kristof dedicated his New York Times column to revealing the truth. Only after the fact would the international community define the massacre of nearly a million Tutsis in Rwanda

as “genocide.” Most Westerners had never thought to insist that the diamonds they purchase be “conflict free” until the release of the major motion picture, *Blood Diamond*. The most troubling fact is that all of these conflicts existed long before the world became aware of them. Furthermore, there are additional atrocities happening on the continent that remain off the population’s humanitarian radar. Most of the world still is unaware of the decades of apartheid and their aftermath in South Africa or the 21 year civil war in Uganda, which has left thousands in internally displaced.

In the face of African aid’s unsuccessful history, Eggers and Deng approached improving conditions in Sudan from an innovative angle, which is proving to be one of the only ways to make an impact in a country devastated by war and political turmoil. *What is the What* describes the horrors of war-torn Sudan and the difficulties refugees in the United States face even today. After the reader has had 476 pages to absorb the atrocities against humanity described, Deng, through Eggers, presents a stirring call to action. The last page states:

> I speak to you because I cannot help it. It gives me strength, almost unbelievable strength, to know that you are there. I covet your eyes, your ears, the collapsible space between us. How blessed are we to have each other? I am alive and you are alive so we must fill the air with our words. I will fill today, tomorrow, every day until I am taken back to God. 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” (475).

These final lines are the beginning of a movement, and present the solution to an ongoing problem in the book: invisibility.

Throughout his life story Deng struggles to be seen, to be heard, to be noticed. As a child, Deng desperately wants to be noticed by his sister's friend, Amath. He struggles daily to get her attention and win her affection. He finally settles for the attention earned only after he takes an embarrassing fall. Similarly, Deng battles his siblings for the attention of his beloved mother who must divide her time amongst all the members of the growing family. In the refugee camp, Deng fights for a chance to move to America, though he seems to be the last boy in the camp who is noticed and given the opportunity for a new life across the ocean. Once in America, Deng is shocked that the young boy, Michael, who accompanies the couple robbing Deng's apartment, is capable of using a blanket to make a tent over Deng and erase his existence. At the hospital, Deng becomes so frustrated with being ignored that he leaves without treatment after 14 hours of waiting in the emergency room. The book makes it impossible for the rest of the world to continue being unaware of Sudan's civil war, the plight of its refugees, or Valentino Achak Deng.

Though Deng's story is powerful on its own, Eggers deserves equal credit for the humanitarian impact the book attempts to make. He uses his reputation to gain attention for the book, but then steps into the background. On the first weekend Eggers and Deng spent together, Eggers says, "We both agreed that I would not be paid for the work, and that all proceeds from the book would be his to use or distribute however he saw fit. He knew immediately that he would send most of the funds home to his village of Marial Bai, to build a school, a library, a community centre, and any number of other facilities" ("It Was Just"). A foundation was created to help Deng use the funds to reach his goals and "provide better educational opportunities for the Sudanese both in southern Sudan and in the United States" (*VAD*). Deng feels that education is paramount in the rebuilding of his homeland. Improving southern Sudan's educational system

"is one of the best ways to build local capacity and encourage the creation of viable economic opportunities" (*VAD)*.

In the "Acknowledgments," the reader learns that all proceeds from the book go directly to The Valentino Achak Deng Foundation, which gives its 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 Deng." The reader is then directed to a website, www.valentinoachakdeng.org, which highlights the humanitarian impact of the foundation that was co-founded by Eggers and Deng.

The foundation has not only begun rebuilding Deng's hometown, it has helped bring Deng into the public eye where he is able to be a more effective advocate for peace in Sudan. Just last fall, in October 2007, Deng participated on a panel of the Clinton Global Initiative meeting. Nicholas Kristof moderated Deng's panel, titled "Promise of Education in Conflict and Post-Conflict Situations." Other panel members included Angelina Jolie, co-founder of the Jolie-Pitt Foundation, Muhammed Haneef Atmar, Minister of Education for the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, and Álvaro Uribe, President of the Republic of Colombia. Speaking about the importance of education in post-conflict countries, Deng gave the audience and the other panelist their own education. He spoke of his experiences in Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, and America. While in the refugee camps, Deng realized that "education was not only an important thing in anyone's life, but it was a necessity for anyone who wanted to lead a better life" (*Clinton*). His status as protagonist of Egger's book and co-founder of The VAD Foundation has given Deng opportunities unavailable to other Sudanese refugees. Deng has been able to speak at international events and raise awareness about his life experiences, the current situation in Sudan, and the importance of education.

Other books recounting the lives of Lost Boys also attempt to make a humanitarian impact. However, in no other case was a foundation created directly from the book's proceeds, and no other author has gone unpaid for his labor. Mark Bixler's book, *The Lost Boys of Sudan: An American Story of the Refugee Experience*, comes the closest to following in *What is the What's* footsteps. Bixler imitates Eggers' proceeds donation policy, but to a lesser degree. In the preface, Bixler explains that "[a]s a gesture of gratitude to them [the Lost Boys], a portion of the proceeds of this book will support two-month refugee-orientation sessions at Jubilee Partners, a Christian community in Comer, Georgia." Bixler goes on to explain that an additional portion of the proceeds "and contributions from the public will go to the IRC Sudanese Assistance Fund to benefit Lost Boys and other Sudanese refugees resettled in Georgia" (xv). Like Eggers, Bixler founded an organization, the International Rescue Committee Sudanese Assistance Fund, which helps with textbook and tuition cost for Sudanese refugees enrolled in school (xv-xvi).

While Bixler seems to be imitating many of Eggers humanitarian acts, he is critical of Eggers work. Twice in his book he mentions the famous author with whom Mary Williams, the controversial founder of the Lost Boys Foundation, "struck a deal" to write the story of one of the Lost Boys (146). Bixler lists Eggers work with Deng among other plots he claims Williams used to gain money and fame out of the Lost Boys' plight. Bixler seems to miss the point and simply criticizes Eggers' association with Williams instead of praising the awareness of Sudan and the Lost Boys brought on by the publication of *What is the What.* Bixler also ignores the fact that, no matter Williams' motives, Eggers does not make a profit from the proceeds of the book sales. Bixler goes on to criticize The Lost Boys foundation as being irrelevant in the daily

lives of the refugees and partially blames Williams' work with Eggers, claming that that it, along with other publicity ventures, took up too much of her time (233).

Though Bixler's claim makes Eggers' work with Deng seem trivial and fame-driven, in actuality, Deng was lucky to find Eggers. The Lost Boys of Sudan entered the United States with nearly no knowledge of the Western world. As they discovered stairs, flush toilets, and refrigerators, they were dependent upon the kindness of aid workers and volunteers. In this situation, it would have been easy for many of the refugees to be used or exploited, and some were. In Eggers, Deng found someone eager to help, who would not exploit Deng or his story.

The admission of 3,800 unaccompanied young people with little knowledge of modern life was a first for the US federal government (Bixler xii). While the United States did something other countries were not when it opened its borders to Sudanese refugees, the aid was not completely free. The "Lost Boys" all must reimburse the United States for the cost of their air travel from Sudan (*God Grew*). Furthermore, the US only gave the refugees three months of financial support before they had to become entirely self-sufficient. Without a GED, most took multiple minimum wage paying jobs so they could afford rent, utilities, food, and be able to send money back home. Miniscule paychecks being stretched to their limit leave little money for an education. It was not the picture of America the Lost Boys had in their minds before they arrived in the US. One refugee, Abraham Yel says, "When we came here, we had our own expectations, to go to school…We were discouraged because the Americans had their own expectations for us, to enroll us in work and make money" (Bixler 168). The VAD Foundation hopes to lessen this discouragement and helps Sudanese immigrants "attain college educations by awarding scholarships and supporting programs that are already working to serve the Sudanese diaspora" (*VAD*).

Financial and educational problems are not the only struggles the Lost Boys face today. After interviewing the Lost Boys, psychologists "reported findings that rank them among the most war-traumatized children in a world with no shortage of wars that injure, maim, and kill" (Bixler 12). Many suffer from flashbacks, visual and auditory (Bixler 70). Some are plagued by nightmares, and experience other symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. In addition, often Lost Boys in the United States experience extreme feelings of guilt because their living conditions are far superior to those of their friends and family back in Sudan (Bixler 138-139). Though the US government may see the Lost Boys as fully self-sufficient after three months in the Western world, there are underlying struggles they still face today.

The Bridging the Gap Project, Inc., which "strives to improve the quality of life in Georgia 's ethnically diverse communities by forming partnerships that overcome cultural barriers and promote understanding between residents, law enforcement, educators, and other service providers," worked with some of the Lost Boys when they first came to the US (*The Bridging*). However, when I asked Jeremy S. Kart, The Bridging the Gap Project, Inc.'s Civics Program Coordinator and Instructor, over the phone about any services aimed at the current stuggles of the Lost Boys today, he said The Bridging the Gap Project no longer works with the Lost Boys because the Comprehensive Peace Agreement means they are no longer refugees. Adjusting to a completely new way of life is not a quick process. The emotional and mental challenges of the Lost Boys did not disappear when they reached America and can impede the realization of their educational and professional dreams. When many others have forgotten about the Lost Boys, due to Comprehensive Peace Agreement, signed in 2005 by the SPLA and the Sudanese government, and because most of the refugees have been in the United States for

over six years now, The Valentino Achak Deng Foundation continues to aid, encourage, and advocate for this special group ("It Was Just").

In his book, John Bul Dau says "[t]he best way for Americans to help Africans, I believe, is to get Africans in the United States to oversee any philanthropic redevelopment" (264). Since African refugees in America have had to learn how to succeed in the Western world, they can combine their Western knowledge with what they know of their homeland to create the most effective philanthropic endeavors (264). Though Eggers and Deng co-founded The VAD Foundation, Deng is leading the projects in Africa. As a native of Marial Bai, he knows his town, his country, and his continent better than Eggers.

However, Deng has not assumed he knows what is currently best and most needed in Marial Bai. He has taken the time to return, after years of living in Ethiopia, Kenya, and the United States, to ask those now living in Marial Bai what they most need to improve their quality of life. Deng, with a desire to know how he could best help his people, met "with dozens of community leaders, students, parents, government officials, and community groups" and determined "that the best way for the Foundation to support the community is through the construction of a secondary boarding school, a library, a community center, and athletic fields, as well as the establishment of a micro-loan program" (*VAD*). Deng's dedication to helping the people of Marial Bai in the best way they see fit has paid off. Local chiefs have given him a plot of land on which to build. Furthermore, Deng has not left the people of Marial Bai out of the building project. During Deng's most recent trip to his hometown, there "was a community-organized ceremony to bless the land and to begin clearing small shrubs and bushes to prepare the land for construction" of the school (*VAD*). There were over 200 people present for the celebration which included a feast and dance performances. In addition, "[t]he youth—many of

whom will eventually enroll at the new school—were recruited to work on the land for a couple of hours" (*VAD*).

Deng's understanding of his homeland and the people living there, combined with his knowledge of the US and his American-based foundation, allow him to best help his countrymen. For example, he based the construction of the secondary school around the rainy season, getting as many of the supplies ready before the rains came. Then, at the beginning of this year, actual construction began (*VAD*). Deng splits his time between the US and Sudan. When he is not enrolled in classes in Pennsylvania or touring the country speaking out about his story and the current situation in Darfur, he is in Marial Bai, actively participating in the construction process he has designed (*VAD*).

Deng is not content with simply repairing his homeland. He struggles to make the rest of the world aware not only that Sudan exists, but that it is a country in need of support from outside powers if there is ever to be a lasting peace. John Bul Dau states in the movie, *God Grew Tired of Us*, "We are here like ambassadors in this country." Deng takes his ambassadorial duties seriously and has traveled the country speaking about his experiences, the book, the foundation, and the importance of education. When he moved to America, Deng knew he wanted to share his story. After meeting Eggers, Deng said that "[h]e wanted his story to serve as the specific that might illuminate the universal—the lives of the 20,000 or so young Sudanese who had also seen what he had seen of the war…If his story was told and told well, he though, it might convey to the world the realities of the conflict and its effect on the people there" ("It Was Just"). With Eggers help and a best-selling book (*What is the What* spent eight weeks on USA Today's Top 150 Best-Selling Books list in 2007), Deng's dream is coming true.

What is the What differs from other books about Sudanese refugees in that it does not stop once its audience is aware of the problem. It pushes the reader, to take the next step. Once the projects in Marial Bai are finished, The VAD Foundation plans to construct similar projects in other southern Sudanese towns and hopes that "[w]ith support from contributors, the Foundation can become a permanent partner in creating educational infrastructure and opportunities for the people of southern Sudan" (*VAD*).

Thus far, Eggers and Deng have succeeded in avoiding many of the problems other African aid organizations encounter or create. They have not exploited Deng's story to make a large profit, and they have not assumed they know what is best for the southern Sudanese natives. Though the book started a foundation and spawned a global book tour, Deng's hope for the future remains the same as it was when he first arrived in America: "I hope that it [the book] will help people understand Sudan, and why the conflicts continue there" (*VAD*). Deng plans to build a teacher's college, a high school, a community center, and a library in his hometown of Marial Bai. He is not dropping bombs or signing treaties. He is doing what one person can, which, based on Africa's track record, seems to be the only way to accomplish anything in the war-torn, abused, and misunderstood continent.

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