

The Voices of Others: Dave Eggers and New Directions for Testimony Narrative and Cosmopolitan Literary Collaboration

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Dave Eggers is probably best known for his ironic playfulness and his preoccupation with middle-class US adolescence, so his sincere treatment of genocide in Sudan in his novel, *What is the What* (2006), the product of his collaboration with Valentino Achak Deng, at first seems a somewhat surprising departure. The novel, although it marks a shift in Eggers's style of narration, retains his faith in the enduring significance of childhood. More significant is Eggers's intervention into the construction and function of literature and the relationship of literature to nationalist identities through the text's juxtaposition of exile across Africa and exile within the US. Of course, literature has always played an important role in the production of nationalisms, among other forms of communal and individual identity. Nor are narratives testifying to or documenting human suffering something new. Even the collaborative process Eggers employs has precedence in the *testimonio*—documents created by Western academics and Central American political activists record the injustice underlying revolutions in Central America. What makes *What is the What* innovative is the playful flexibility Eggers applies to the boundaries of genre and authorship and the space his experimentation with novel, biography, and testimony creates for cosmopolitan collaboration between writers, readers, and speakers of wildly different racial, social, and political status.¹

What is the What, although marketed as a novel and titled an autobiography, more closely resembles a testimony narrative. Testimony narratives are collaborative acts involving a speaker who has witnessed injustice and violence and an academic or other professional writer in order to raise awareness in US or European readers.² Their mediated presentation of injustice demand further action on the part of a reading

audience otherwise far removed from conflict by boundaries of nationality, race, class, and gender by merit of the events described and the global inequality implied by the need for its speaker to seek mediation. Most critics theorize the genre as limited to Central American political struggles to the exclusion of narratives produced in other parts of the world.³ However, because political struggles are global and ongoing, and because collaborative narratives continue to emerge from them, the testimonial genre has the potential to fulfill a critical need in the development of a cosmopolitan society, with its explicit appeals for supranational human rights advocacy and transnational, micropolitical humanitarian action. Reconfiguring the testimony genre, and literature more broadly, as an ethically motivated cosmopolitan engagement with difference attributes to literature a materially productive function and expands its relevance beyond the constraints of any specific territorial or national boundary. Eggers's use of testimonial narrative is a powerful example of this potential for literature to engage in cosmopolitan activism.

To argue this point, I describe the generic qualities of and objections to testimonial narratives. I examine the grounds for charges against the testimony genre via an analysis of Elizabeth Burgos-Debray's construction of *I Rigoberta Menchú*. Burgos-Debray uses her text to argue that her text understands Menchú and that this understanding enables Western readers to empathize with the suffering of all indigenous people. I then contrast Burgos-Debray's methodology with Eggers's. In *What is the What*, Eggers actively forces the recognition that he and Deng worked collaboratively and places Deng in control of any economic or political power the text's success might garner. Eggers's novel, because it carefully avoids the tendencies of US representations of foreign nationals to stray into paternalistic descriptions more invested in promoting feelings of superiority and to position the US as a model source for aid to a troubled world to be copied by others, offers a positive model for the testimony narrative as a form of cosmopolitan humanitarian collaboration.

I. Testimonial Narrative as Cosmopolitan Text

Testimonies generally document the life of a single individual in first-person, but differ significantly from other forms of life writing in the

role their central figures play. Whereas biographies assume the significance of the individual and individual accomplishments and have the aim of replicating the values and behaviors of their subjects in readers, testimonies efface the ego of their central narrative consciousness as they proceed to material conditions with implications beyond the boundaries of any single self or community. "Autobiographies," Georg Gugelberger and Michael Kearney suggest, "are writings by selves which are impressed by their own unique significance" (9). The same can perhaps be said of fictional forms of life writing. What matters to writers and readers of biography is the development of an exceptional individual, not the description of an exceptional situation worthy of the reader's attention. Biography establishes an initial relationship of moral difference to the reader by treating the unique accomplishments of an individual subject as the products of superior individual behaviors.⁴ The biography suggests its subject as a model for ideal development while simultaneously fostering an Andersonian imagined bond between the subject, a community, and the reader. Through successful reform, or imaginative identification, the biography's threat of difference and exclusion shifts to an embrace of readers who come to recognize or impose coincidence with the subject. This bond is suited to nationalist projects because it directs readers' imagined affinities between themselves and the subject toward inward reconfiguration of self-identity without necessarily encouraging intervention or even participation in the political or economic operation of either their assumed community or its others. Testimony reading proceeds along different lines. A reader may perceive admirable qualities in the speaker of a testimony, but the primary consequence of reading is not identification. Instead, reading forces the recognition of unsightly conditions otherwise hidden from view beyond their immediate milieu. The practice of testimony reading recalls Bhabha's notion of unhomeliness, with its publication of uncomfortable difference. The unhomely reveals a boundary between insiders and outsiders but also that the ideas contained on both sides of this boundary exist in a state of constant commute (Bhabha 13, 5). This state of interchange is compounded in the case of testimony narratives since, as Kate Douglass suggests, readers become a second-person witness to the text's traumatic events and "in this act

of reading, the second person sanctions and empowers the testimony” (149). The recognition of the disparity and injustice the enforcement of such a boundary requires suggests a reevaluation of the values determining boundaries of communities and the flow of resources across them and transfers attention from the buttressing of national identity toward cosmopolitan, collaborative projects of limited duration and scope.

Unlike legal testimony, which derives authority from an assumed exact correspondence with a single testifying individual’s experience, testimonial narratives gain meaning and authority to the extent that they create a flexible portrait of an entire community or culture.⁵ Robert Carr observes that testimonies “tak[e] on value as capital in the fund for agendas of national reconceptualization” not exclusively because narrated individuals claim representative status, although they often do, but because academics “assume an easy metonymic relationship between the subject of testimonial and the ethnic group from which she or he comes” (157). When texts constructed allegorically are published, Carr argues, they “celebrate the reader’s ignorance as the group is conversely constituted as infinite duplicates of the ‘original’ subject presented in the pages of the testimonial” (157).⁶ Metonymic readings become a limitation to testimony narratives when the presence of the supposedly objective writer becomes too successfully effaced from the narrative text or conflated with the first-person voice of the narrator, an effect Kimberley Nance describes as fusion. If, as Douglass suggests, testimony narratives rely upon a second-person reader to validate the experiences they record through the act of reading and subsequently, of empathizing, the merit of such experiences lies in their ability to provoke the proper reaction in a remote audience. While the production of empathy for suffering individuals is an admirable goal, such means of attaining this response are not entirely satisfactory for the purposes of testimonial narrative, which is concerned with action rather than validation or identification. As Sharon Crowley points out, readers forming opinions of a traumatic text “interpret [their] emotional response,” or the empathy Douglass cites, “imagined or actual—as experience, thus conflating [their] beliefs with ‘reality’” (84). Equating the perspectives of writer and narrator allows the writer as he or she hears a testimony and later “the reader to move from address to a shared sub-

ject position,” to find their situation is like that of the narrator, and to evade the need to intervene in a cause or alter personal beliefs (Nance, “Disarming Testimony” 573). The conventions of testimony narrative assume a narrator sacrifices the integrity of his or her personal experience in order to more fully relate communal concerns and to describe an exceptional situation, not an individual, worthy of the reader’s attention and action. Testimony narratives’ use of a metonymic representative of collective identity discourages voyeuristic readings and misplaced identification with their narrators, both effects that if left unaddressed would enable the reader to escape an ethical commitment to act (Braebek 255).

As an agent of the community, the narrator of a cosmopolitically oriented testimony, like Deng in *What is the What*, appeals to the reader to intervene in a specific political cause without requiring the identification or emulation that biography encourages. The demand for active relationships among disparate peoples distinguishes the genre from other literary forms depicting or speaking for others. Applying cosmopolitan practice to the testimony narrative reimagines the relationship between members of differing national communities such that the national other is not so much a point of contrast one uses to form the boundaries of his or her own identity, but a collaborative partner in the ongoing narrative process of identity construction. Cosmopolitan testimony makes its readers aware of injustice and burdens them, as members of a markedly different and frequently more privileged community, to act in collaboration with the narrator in a political project, creating a momentary cosmopolitan perspective that supersedes and exceeds national affiliations.

II. *I Rigoberta Menchú* and Misappropriation of Voice

Without doubt, the most well known testimony narrative is *I Rigoberta Menchú* (1983), created in collaboration between Menchú, the Maya-Quiche activist and anthropologist, Elizabeth Burgos-Debray. Although already well known, when Stanford included the text in its required Western Civilization courses, *I Rigoberta Menchú* became the canonized exemplar of the testimony narrative. Indeed, it is difficult to find a discussion of testimony that does not address Menchú. While Menchú’s and Burgos-Debray’s narrative does fit the generic qualities of testimony

narrative, the circumstances of its production, particularly the relationship Burgos-Debray constructs between herself and Menchú, and herself and readers in her introduction, undermines the cosmopolitan spirit of collaboration. Instead the result is a sense of competition for the authority to address a Western audience. Following the book's publication, the relationship between the two deteriorated to the point that Menchú denounced her collaborator entirely. If public infighting were not enough, the book became the subject of an infamous debate in the late 1990s when anthropologist David Stoll accused Menchú of fabricating elements of her testimony.⁷

While the political challenges to the veracity of Menchu's account are dubious, Burgos-Debray's role in the text's production is more worthy of critique. In her introduction, Burgos-Debray notes that when she transcribed her interviews with Menchú, "nothing was left out, not a word" (xix). However, she confesses slightly later that she "had to insert linking passages if the manuscript was to read like a monologue" and that this has been done silently (xx). These supplementary materials are entirely the product of her imagination and their extent remains otherwise undisclosed. Despite her admission that even after working with Menchú, she has "never studied Maya-Quiche culture" or "done field-work in Guatemala," Burgos-Debray contends that her elaborations in no way alter the substance of Menchú's narrative and that her lack of familiarity with the country in no way limits her ability to formulate such passages or to speak for the desires and demands of all Guatemalan Mayans (xix).

Like many testimony narrators, Menchú begins by explaining that her story is "not only my life, it's also the testimony of my people" and that it is important for readers to realize "that what has happened to me has happened to many other people too: My story is the story of all poor Guatemalans. My personal experience is the reality of a whole people" (1). The universalism of this statement is the source of much of the controversy surrounding Menchú. Within the context of the *testimonio*, however, her claim takes on a different valence than the factual equivalence testimony ordinarily implies. She is her people's representative and her experience evokes, but does not encompass or exhaust, the reality of many others.⁸ Burgos-Debray affirms Menchú's claim, but treats her

narrative as a juridical document corresponding exactly to her individual experience. Where Menchú champions the cause of poor indigenous Guatemalans, Burgos-Debray, in her introduction, claims that “the voice of Rigoberta Menchú,” a textual entity she had a hand in creating, and rather than Menchú, herself, “allows the defeated to speak,” and that “she speaks for all the Indians of the American continent” (xi). Burgos-Debray describes herself as acting as no more than a passive receptacle of experience during the interview process, “Rigobeta’s listener” and “her instrument, her double” but her active interpretation of Menchú effaces the existence of an entire hemisphere full of ethnic groups (xx). She implies here, that she is entirely unbiased, neutral, and just as good as a substitute to the reader for actual contact with Menchú, who in turn, is a substitute for contact with the people she claims to represent and further still for the people Burgos-Debray claims Menchú represents.

In the years following the publication of *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, Burgos-Debray’s desire to claim ownership of the text’s and Menchú’s success has become more evident. Despite plans to transfer royalties to Menchú, Burgos-Debray, initially citing financial technicalities and later their falling-out, has apparently kept all income from the book’s various editions (Burgos 59). When Menchú rewrote her story with a new team of collaborators after winning the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize, Burgos-Debray responded by disparaging Menchú’s ability to narrate her experience. Of the second book, she indignantly writes, “[Rigoberta] has limited herself to producing a mirror image, taking the first book as a model with the sole object of supplanting it ... [it] is a pallid reflection that does not withstand comparison” to her original text (60). Contradicting earlier affectations of selfless, self-effacing listening, Burgos-Debray here expresses her desire to be Menchú’s mouthpiece, providing, but also limiting, access between Menchú and Western audiences.

Burgos-Debray clearly played a role in the production of Menchú’s narrative and has self-serving interests in her connection to the text’s material success. The violence Burgos-Debray commits against Menchú in her effort to transform her into a narrated identity is by no means unique. Within politically powerful societies, there is the tendency to conflate an inability to accurately narrate one’s own traumatic experiences with the

authenticity of victimhood, hence necessitating intervention on the part of activist academics. Slavoj Žižek usefully describes this tendency arising from the unexamined assumption that “the very factual deficiencies of the traumatised subject’s report on her experience bear witness to the truthfulness of her report, since they signal that the reported content ‘contaminated’ the manner of reporting it” (4). His account of the narration of violence reveals the consequence that our process of recognition deliberately prevents unsightly victims from contributing to the narration of any national identity. David Jefferess makes a similar claim about framing humanitarian benevolence in terms of global citizenship. Global citizenship, he argues, requires “an Other who needs to be known, understood, and ultimately uplifted or saved” (31). The benevolent actor’s insistence upon disparity as a component for global action “mask[s] the material relationships that produce some as privileged, and hence capable of being active global citizens, and some as in need of support” (31). Burgos-Debray’s treatment of Menchú allows her to serve as an emblem for ethnic vengeance or justification for the intellectual domination of dehumanized others, but does not concede to her the ability to adequately narrate her condition, history, or to reconstruct a stable, cohesive identity. As the inability to articulate and live an independent identity in a culturally oppressive state was the source of Menchú’s frustration, Burgos-Debray’s perhaps inadvertent mistreatment of Menchú simply mirrors the conditions she sought to speak out against.

Inderpal Grewal indicts human rights discourse, particularly European and US narratives, for exploiting the image of suffering, and for arousing the desire to intervene abroad in order to further establish the dominance of their own nationalisms within inter- or transnational space (158). She writes, “the very concept of the ‘international’ as a neutral or supranational space has maintained the link between the geopolitics of a universal human rights negotiated unequally between powerful states ... and the biopolitics of a cosmopolitan, humanitarian self concerned with the welfare of untold populations of poor, disenfranchised women” (161). Grewal goes on to argue that “dominant representations of human rights discourse in refuge asylum constructed Europe and North America as the primary destination of refugees and thus as primary ‘havens’ that

'protect' those escaping human rights violations" (168). Human rights literature therefore limits rights by enforcing the "American role as the world's policeman" (171). Burgos-Debray's rhetorical justification of her act of speaking for Menchú conforms neatly to Grewal's description of humanitarian discourse. Although Burgos-Debray may have initially had good intentions, her representation of Menchú manages to exemplify nearly every pitfall of the testimony genre.

While writers must exercise discretion and sensitivity as they present the voices of their subaltern witnesses, it is still far better to speak out on their behalf than to leave injustices against subaltern groups unacknowledged. As Linda Alcoff puts it, an unquestioned prohibition against speaking for others "assumes that an individual *can* retreat into her discrete location and make claims entirely and singularly within that location that do not range over others" (108). Assuming such insularity further enables one to assume "that I am unconnected to others in my authentic self or that I can achieve an autonomy from others" with the "sole effect of allowing me to avoid responsibility and accountability for my effects on others" (Alcoff 108).⁹ Likewise, Beck insists on a cosmopolitan commitment to dialogue with difference, arguing that an imposed "incommensurability ... between cultures" releases "one from the labour of dialogue, leading with a degree of inevitability to imperialism and the clash of civilizations" (143). Testimony narratives, when constructed judiciously and compassionately, because they force readerly recognition or concession of the speaker's equality and the formation of an active political-economic collaboration, creates a discursive practice with which one may speak for another in a more acceptable way.¹⁰ The task of inspiring politically and economically privileged readers to move beyond passive empathy for the oppressed to activism remains an important one. Indeed, despite Burgos-Debray's failings as a collaborator, Menchú's testimony has done a great deal to raise awareness in the US of political conditions in Guatemala.

III. *What is the What* and Transnational Collaboration

Dave Eggers's *What is the What* offers a potential counter to Burgos-Debray's failure and creates a more balanced relationship between writer,

narrator, and readers. Like most testimony writers, Eggers's stated goal is to "[empower] those most closely affected by contemporary social injustice" specifically by using "oral history" to "depict human rights crises in the United States and around the world" (Eggers 2009; 348).¹¹ However, Eggers's book differs from typical testimony narratives by moving beyond simply reporting injustice to a reading audience in the hope that awareness will lead to ideological change to directly funding aid organizations. All profits from the first edition of *What is the What*, for which Eggers assumed all financial risk by publishing it with his press, McSweeney's, and all future author's proceeds, fund development initiatives in Sudan through a nonprofit organization that Deng oversees independently (Eggers, *Zeitoun* 539; The Valentino Achak Deng Foundation website). Further, Eggers and Deng contest the notion that the US is socially and politically superior to Sudan by continually returning to images of Deng's ongoing persecution within the US.

Since Eggers's *What is the What* follows the life of a single individual, Valentino Achak Deng, and does so in order to engage readers in a larger cause, it is vulnerable to metonymic readings. However, Eggers employs a collaborative methodology that actively discourages the simplistic sort of allegorization that Carr describes and that Burgos-Debray's claims encourage. Unlike most testimonials, and despite its subtitle, "The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng," *What is the What* is marketed as a novel, not nonfiction. The word, autobiography, in Eggers's lexicon signals the impossibility of objective or accurate description of the consciousness of self or other. He approaches his own memoir, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000) with similar reservations.¹² As he explains on that book's copyright page, it is a work of fiction "in that in many cases, the author could not remember the exact words said by certain people" but immediately undermines this assertion by claiming ironically that he "had no imagination whatsoever for those sorts of things and could not conceive of *making up* a story or characters" anyhow. In the book's preface, he suggests that instead of contemplating the philosophical complexities of nonfiction, readers ought to simply "Pretend it's fiction" or insert their own names in place of his, that his life "can be about *you!* You and *your* pals!" (xxi, xxii). Although lighthearted,

Eggers evokes the tendency of readers to reconstruct imaginatively real people from a text's characters, regardless of the objectivity or gravity with which they are presented. As readers, we are able to empathize with others, or representations of others, his authorial stance suggests, because we are able to extract from their specific, local, and unique experiences values and beliefs we imagine to be more universal. Of course, in typically ironic fashion, the universal Eggers sees readers discovering is often no more than a convenient stand-in for "like myself." Just as Eggers's readers can substitute themselves in his life story, they may imagine Deng standing in for all Sudanese refugees. However, as the tone of Eggers's "Preface" and the title of his memoir make clear, to make such an assumption is to commit an act of absurd egocentricism.

Rather than attempting to pass off the narrative of *What is the What* as an authoritative document encapsulating Sudanese struggle, Eggers challenges the ability of narratives mediated by outsiders, or any single representation by anyone, to achieve facticity. In the "Preface," which is the only portion of the book not written by Eggers, Deng points out that, although labeled a work of fiction, "it should be noted that all of the major events of the book are true ... and the world I have known is not different from the one depicted within these pages" (xiv). Unlike Menchú, whose narrative follows Burgos-Debray's statement of authorization and who privileges her experience as universal, Deng, when asked if he believes *What is the What* is "representative of the experience of the Sudanese refugees in the United States," responded firmly that "this is my story and not the story of the thousands of Lost Boys in America. There are many experiences in the story that we all shared ... [but] my life is different in many ways. This is a story of my life, not everyone's life. We are all different people" ("Interview"). If readers choose to view Deng as an emblem for all Sudanese refugees, such treatment is the product of assumptions they bring to the text.

In the book's supplementary "Reader's Guide," Eggers further challenges readings of his interpretation of Deng's oral testimony as an authoritative or comprehensive example of Sudanese experience. To help fill in the gaps in Deng's childhood memories, Eggers, like Burgos-Debray, made use of other materials. While preparing for the book, though,

Eggers travelled to Deng's hometown, Marial Bai, interviewed other Sudanese refugees and aid workers in Ethiopia, Kenya, and the US, and researched official documents from the British colonial period as well as more recent governments (Larsen). He explains that in order to give Deng's account detail and dialogue, he blended it with his "imagining, and reports, maybe a human-rights report or another Lost Boy's account" (Larsen 13). Further, rather than attributing the experiences of others to Deng, Eggers depicts him interacting with others who add their voices to his first-person recollection of their lives. The result of these dialogues is a polyvocal, intertextual narrative. For example, shortly after reaching an Ethiopian refugee camp, the Deng of the novel learns about Sudanese history in the camp's school. A youth leader explains official British colonial policy to Deng and his friends. The passage, which the "Reader's Guide" identifies as lifted directly from "a secret Khartoum Dispatch from 1945," appears in the text formatted as a block quotation and in italics in order to set it apart from other dialogue (Larsen 11; Eggers, *What* 193). While the narrative uses Deng's voice, it is not a transcription of his conversations with Eggers, nor is it strictly a reproduction of his discrete experience. It is a narrative of many people's experiences stylized according to his speaking voice. Rather than solely reconstructing Deng's exploits, Eggers shows him interacting with diverse communities and with diverse people who are the justification for his narrative. Although Deng is the book's central figure, he is not its sole contributor. In this way, the Deng of *What is the What* remains metonymic but in a way different from the production of static, duplicate individuals.

The use of Deng's experience in tandem with the variety of sources Eggers lists, because it occurs openly and strategically, prevents readers from arriving at the conclusion that the text reveals the "truth" of life in Sudan. On the contrary, Deng explains that he feels he is only "an example of atrocities many successive governments of Sudan committed" and later points out that "I haven't suffered as much as these people who have faced the atrocities for the last sixteen years" (Eggers, *What* xiv; Larsen 15). Eggers reminds readers "how complete life is [in Sudan] and how it's not so different in terms of what the people there want, and the pleasures of life that they enjoy" (Larsen 15). Eggers's and Deng's

open recognition of the collage work going into the construction of the narrative reveals the degree of mediation between Deng's lived experience, which was only a small part of events occurring in the nation, and the recorded testimony and makes him limited as a substitute for the reader's contact with the actual place and its population. So, while the Deng of *What is the What* is undeniably fictional, because he admits that his own voice and experience are inadequate on their own to narrate the national atrocity and Eggers is transparent about his even greater inability to know fully what he represents, the text forces readers to recognize the presence of many other voices waiting to be heard. It does so because Deng "wanted to reach out to others to help them understand Sudan's place in our global community" (xiv). However, unlike Jefferess's critique of global citizenship, which imagines the privileged acting as citizens by giving to the poor, Deng depicts a mode of collaboration in which "since you and I exist, together we can make a difference" (xv). Jefferess warns against simplistic enthusiasm for humanitarian intervention. Campaigns "focusing on what the global citizen must do to or for the Other," he suggests, "rather than conceiving a global ethics in terms of understanding our relationship with others," generate an ethical obligation premised upon "the symptoms of global inequality and not the causes" (34). This one-way relationship, of a transfer of goods and services in exchange for permission to continue to turn away from suffering and inequality, is precisely the sort of relationship Deng and Eggers combat. In addition to Deng's insistence upon a reciprocal relationship, one in which he improves the lives of his readers as much as they have the potential to do so in Sudan, Eggers's interrogation of the history of conflict in Sudan reveals the scope of the situation in broader terms. Eggers finds that contemporary social conditions are the result of a Western desire to intervene, namely in colonial mismanagement of the British Sudanese colony, which forced the national unification of autonomous tribal groups (Eggers, *What* 192–5). Eggers's conclusion is nearly identical to Jefferess's—even Westerners with good intentions would do well to think carefully before acting.

On a narrative level, Eggers refutes entirely the notion that the US is the utopian refuge and haven for exiles that Grewal worries humanitar-

ian discourse has created. In the novel, Eggers frames Deng's narrative of his flight from Sudan to Kenya and Ethiopia as a memory he recalls from his new home in the US. Deng opens the novel by opening his door to "a tall, sturdily built African-American woman" who asks to use his phone after experiencing car trouble. Deng lets her in his home, only to discover she and a friend are robbing him at gunpoint. After beating and tying him up, the gunman, who personifies simplistic metonymic assumptions, tells him that because "You're from Africa, right ... that means we're brothers" (5). Deng is "unwilling to agree," and tries to think of a "time when I last felt this betrayed, when I last felt in the presence of evil so careless" (5). The robbery took place during the writing of *What is the What* and Eggers recalls "the complaint card that the police had given him" was just "a business card with a phone number on it. That was the extent of their worry about a gun to the head of an immigrant from Sudan. They would not, it was clear, be investigating the crime" (Eggers, "Just Boys Walking"). The analogue to violent crime in the US that Deng finds is, of course, his childhood of trials in Sudan, though he feels his sufferings in the US are more outrageous and inexplicable, since here people have more than everything they could possibly need while in Sudan there was at least a material explanation for crime. In contrast to expectations of "a land without war ... a land without misery," and dreams of "peace and college and safety," Deng and his fellow refugees have found themselves in a state of limbo—neither citizens, nor aliens exactly. They are not a part of US society and cannot return home. Living as exiles, they "have found ways to spend the time," though not in any particularly rewarding way. Deng has "held too many menial jobs," most recently working as a greeter at a health club, and "after five years" of study in a junior college, "still do[es] not have the necessary credits to apply to a four-year college" (8). Throughout the narrative, Deng periodically returns to the brutality inflicted upon him by his assailants and to everyday indignities experienced in interaction with the normally oblivious public. Eggers's frame story of brutality in the present and in the US continually reminds readers that while Deng's past in Sudan may have been horrific, the US is also the site of ongoing violence, exploitation, and racism and is equally in need of social reform.¹³

From the project's inception, Eggers and Deng "agreed that all the author's proceeds from the book would be [Deng's] and would be used to improve the lives of Sudanese in Sudan and elsewhere" (Eggers, *What* xiv). To this end, prior to publication, Eggers and Deng formed a non-profit organization, The Valentino Achak Deng Foundation, whose mission is "to provide educational opportunities for those affected by the conflict in Sudan" (539). The majority of the Foundation's work has been carried out in Marial Bai where Deng has built several schools, a community center, and a teacher training program. It is always possible to make the argument that, because Eggers mediates our interaction with Deng, the book, and Eggers, have transformed Deng's voice, or prevented him from speaking fully. Eggers's willing return of the book's proceeds and Deng's leadership role with his Foundation, more than anything else, however, resists charges that testimonial narratives and resulting transnational activism only enforce paternalistic and imbalanced power relations. On the contrary, the two manage to reach a balanced partnership. Deng's testimony does not falsely herald him as a great revolutionary leader, nor the agent of sweeping change. He is not simply the object of Western readers' sympathy, nor a plain indictment of corruption in the US. Instead, consideration of Deng's existence requires that readers acknowledge his existence alongside their own and reconfigure ideas of community according to a cosmopolitan perspective.

Cosmopolitan Humanitarian Collaboration

The reading of testimonial literature I have described has as its goal the production of cosmopolitan, rather than national or multicultural, bonds of solidarity and community between narrators and readers. By implicating a global readership in local activist projects, the testimony narrative collapses the imagined boundaries dividing individuals across national territorial lines. In contrast to national literatures, which enjoy the dubious luxury of pretended insularity, cosmopolitan literatures involve encounters between peoples of differing national origins. Deliberately nationalist literatures generally bolster a sense of common identity in order to unify a group of people against others, to create a feeling that these individuals belong together for some purposeful reason. Cosmopolitan

literatures employ contingent commonalities to unify temporarily heterogeneous individuals on the basis of involved activism. Whereas the imagined bonds of national community come from our interaction with static, textual bodies, cosmopolitan communities are often the result of spontaneous face-to-face interaction with the shifting cast of people in the surrounding environment. Deng makes his readers partners in his struggle against the oppressive conditions he has experienced. They do not come to resemble Sudanese. To read a narrative like Deng's, or even Menchú's, is to accept responsibility for the collective action the text envisages. Despite the reality that they often focus on superficial qualities, which may or may not actually be shared among members of a community, national literatures are a powerful unifying force, sometimes even capable of contradicting more personal encounters with difference within and beyond the boundaries of a community. With cosmopolitan texts, however, it is often the case that authors create a sense of discomfort and disjointedness by revealing the arbitrariness of national identities and by forging bonds between people across national borders rather than within them. Political theorist Michael Hanchard describes the formation of transnational political alliances (his terminology) as a process of coagulation. Coagulate political bonds, he explains, "produce coalitions that within their immediate environment ... increase the likelihood of positive political outcomes for the actors involved" and whose "implications and consequences ... are limited to the immediate circumstances of the political environment therein" (Hanchard 33–34). In a coagulate community, individuals identify in one another temporary commonalities that enable them to address some pressing concern. Cosmopolitan communities are not the product of shared cultural appearances, as this is something easily manipulated and distorted, but instead come together on the basis of active participants' shared ethical commitment toward one another.¹⁴ The bonds of politically engaged transnational communities, Hanchard's coagulation model suggests, operate as temporary points of identification between individuals in a greater and ongoing process of negotiating identity that is distinctly cosmopolitan. This is the sort of bond Deng creates when he imagines the presence of his readership and which readers renew by engaging with his narrative.

A cosmopolitan politics expands the boundaries of a community beyond the nation with the result that it is no longer defined in terms of characteristics distinct to nationality. Literary cosmopolitanism requires a similar transformation between author and reader. Under a national model like Benedict Anderson's famous "imagined communities," in which literature arrives in the present unified as a coherent body by merit of a mythological and long-ago determined teleological project, the authors of works contributing to the collective national identity are at a remove from the consuming public whom they in part define. In a cosmopolitan community, the author, or in the case of testimony narrative, the narrator and writer, is burdened with the task of recruiting the allegiance of an audience assumed to be heterogeneous through a much more active act of reaching out across the text. In an essay explaining the continuing relevance of fiction, Michael Chabon succinctly describes the relationship between authors and readers as predicated upon the desire for entertainment. Literary entertainment for Chabon does not principally imply the fulfillment of desire, but refers to "[t]he original sense of the word," which is "a lovely one of mutual support through intertwin[ing], like a pair of trees grown together, interwoven, each sustaining and bearing up the other ... a kind of midair transfer of strength, contact across a void, like the tangling of cable and steel between two lonely bridgeheads" (15). The condition of interdependence is heightened in testimonial narratives as writers must depend upon their narrators to produce the content of the narrative and narrators likewise must trust writers to textualize faithfully and market their oral accounts. The testimony, as a cosmopolitan artifact, bridges gaps of received culture and lived experience in order to form active connections between otherwise distant and disconnected people. The empathetic bonds formed through communication across transnational spaces require readers to respond with a reorganization of beliefs and actions.

Testimony's assumption of a cosmopolitan audience demands great respect on the part of readers and writers alike for the difference of experience that occurs across national boundaries. Unlike national literatures, however, cosmopolitan literatures do not make of such differences an impassable divide between people. Just as Chabon describes

readers and writers in a relationship of imaginative support, Deng finds “almost unbelievable strength” in the knowledge that “you [the reader] are there” (535). His act of narration collapses the space between him and his readers and makes him unable to “pretend that you do not exist” just as much as it is “impossible as you pretending that I do not exist” (535). Testimony narratives, which insist on the implication of privileged readers in the poverty and suffering they detail, are a good example of these partnerships. Cosmopolitan literature, by emphasizing the span of human connectedness across formal geopolitical boundaries and by continually exposing one national readership to the literary consciousnesses or voices of other nationalities, implies a constant ethical concern for all people with whom we come into contact. It enables us to realize a humane imagination of others. Cosmopolitan literature demands that privileged Western readers entertain voices like Deng’s rather than simply turning to literature for edification or the more ordinary, onanistic sense of entertainment.

Notes

1 Brennan prefers the term internationalism to cosmopolitanism because certain kinds of cosmopolitanisms envision “a ‘world state’ not explicitly built in the name of any existing power, but factually serving its interests in decently mediated disguise” (83). Internationalism, by comparison, “seeks to establish global relations of respect and cooperation, based on acceptance of difference in polity as well as culture” (77). His framing of the term has the advantage of explicit alignment with subaltern populations and concerns of social reform. I have chosen to retain “cosmopolitanism,” however, because, as Beck points out, “international” retains an implication of communities segmented along arbitrary national lines. For Beck, a cosmopolitan perspective transcends the “‘either inside or outside’ that underlies the distinction between national and international,” tending towards a recognition of being “both inside and outside” (143). Cosmopolitanism allows for an increased fluidity and spontaneity of action that is not easily described as constrained in frameworks of national or international exchanges. Nationalism, internationalism, and transnationalism depend upon the stability of the concept of nation and on the centrality of that concept to the identities and purposes of those involved in collaboration. Cosmopolitanism lends itself more readily to acts of resistance and compassion because it does not force an artificial and inflexible difference between people on the basis of nationality, while also refraining from forcing the erasure of difference within communities aligned on the basis of common practice or aims.

- 2 Testimony narratives, because they are theorized within a Central American context typically employ the Spanish term, *testimonio*. As I am arguing for a broader application of the genre, I will instead refer to such texts as testimonies.
- 3 Beverley goes so far as to argue that the form's moment of relevance has passed because Latin America is no longer in a state of revolution ("Real Thing" 281). His argument may hold true if testimony narratives are theorized geographically or according to party politics.
- 4 Braebeck suggests a biography's emphasis on individual achievement invites the reader to "impose his/her identity on top of the hero," or to fantasize about being in the place of, or replacing, the text's hero (255). For a more extensive discussion of biography and autobiography, see Egan.
- 5 For a discussion of the definitions and distinctions between modes of legal testimony, see Kusch, 336–8.
- 6 Carr places the burden of responsibility for the testimony's reception principally upon its writer, whose ethos encourages readers to approach a narrator metonymically or allegorically. Beverley, however, associates this sort of writerly agency with ethnography and oral history, whereas he finds testimony narratives depend heavily on "the intentionality of the *narrator*" ("Margin" 14). Neither critic accords authority for a text's meaning to its readers, however.
- 7 Stoll suggests that Menchú was not as involved with indigenous groups as her narrative suggests. Radical Conservative writer Dinesh D'Souza amplified Stoll's claims that details of Menchú's biography were elaborated to argue that her entire experience and the history of ethnic violence it chronicles were highly exaggerated fabrications. Regarding the comprehensive picture of life Stoll's notes capture, Stephen damningly comments, they cover "his one year in Nebaj, almost eight years after Menchú fled" (229). For a more comprehensive treatment of the Stoll controversy, see *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy*. This volume collects many of the most significant responses to Stoll's critique, ranging from editorials in Guatemala's national paper, *La Prensa Libre*, to both defenses and rebuttals from academics in the US.
- 8 Beverley could just as well describe these represented individuals as otherwise subaltern. The narrating subjects of a *testimonio* would otherwise be considered subaltern because, as Spivak argues, the subaltern subject occupies a position of being unable to reach an audience with narrative. The subaltern is not exactly incapable of speaking to, or addressing, a Western audience, he or she, or a population *in toto*, is just perceived as not worth paying attention to (Spivak 273). The *testimonio* narrator, because legitimized by a Western academic collaborator, becomes no longer subaltern, but remains uniquely able to speak of subaltern conditions, striving towards both aspects of representation (*darstellung*, and *vertreten*) that Spivak discusses, to a Western audience. The practice of testimony narrative, its transformation of oral story into text and its mediation between readers and witnesses by a Western academic, is not what Spivak finds irksome

- about privileged individuals' interventions on behalf of those less so when she writes of the problem of subalternity. Instead, it is "the first-world intellectual masquerading as the absent nonrepresenter who lets the oppressed speak for themselves" (292).
- 9 Tierney puts the issue in more literary, less pragmatic terms thusly, "[the] point of *testimonio* ... is against the creation of a modernist nostalgia of the romanticized identity. But its purpose is also antithetical to a postmodern notion that identity is so fragmented that one can speak for no one other than one's self and that knowing is impossible outside of one's own experience" (107).
- 10 Eaglestone questions the possibility of any non-native writer to create "African trauma narratives" out of any motive other than "the eruption of a guilty conscience" (75). More universally, Spivak finds that collaboration between subaltern people and Western writers presents so many opportunities for distortion that the subaltern subject can never truly speak openly. Beverley addresses these concerns and suggests that testimonial literature, when practiced conscientiously, unlike other forms of international representation, "can serve as both an allegorical figure for, and a concrete means of, the union of a radicalized (Marxist) intelligentsia with the subaltern" ("Second Thoughts" 4). "Moreover," he argues, "it is a relationship in which neither of the participants has to cancel its identity as such" because "[testimonies] have become ... a discursive space where the possibilities of such an alliance can be negotiated on both sides without too much angst about otherness or 'othering'" (4).
- 11 This mission statement is taken from the "Voice of Witness" series that Eggers inaugurated in order to extend the work he began with *What is the What*, and which he edits along with Lola Vollen through the School of Journalism at University of California (Berkeley). *Zeitoun* (2009), is also a collaborative testimony narrative. *Zeitoun* describes the unjust treatment of a Syrian-American Muslim following Hurricane Katrina and critiques US exceptionalism more directly by explicitly treating the US as a site of moral and ethical decay in contrast with Syria, a nation we consider underdeveloped and hostile.
- 12 See Smith and Watson for an engaging discussion of Eggers's distrust of biographical and autobiographical representation.
- 13 Eaglestone describes *What is the What* as a "western-facing text," and an example of a white liberal "guilty conscience," but reluctantly concedes that Eggers has framed the story in a way that prevents excessive glamorization of the US (76, 75, 80).
- 14 In almost direct contradiction to national literatures, which create meaning and identity through the exclusion and dismissal of others, Levinas argues that our individual identities become meaningful only through our willingness to face others as human. He explains, "the past of the other and, in a sense, the history of humanity in which I have never participated, in which I have never been present, is my past" because, "from the start, the encounter with the Other" principally involves "my responsibility for him, that is the responsibility for my

neighbor, which is, no doubt, the harsh name for what we call love of one's neighbor," or "the taking upon oneself of the fate of the other"(115, 103).

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