Beyond Autobiography:

Hybrid Testimony and the Art of Witness

Matthew Boswell

Heavily influenced by the enduring legacy of dialectical thought in the post-World War Two era, theoretical writing about Holocaust representation has traditionally come to rest on a series of conceptual binaries such as silence and language, truth and lies, and testimony and fiction, wherein the first terms all correspond to the 'inside' of the genocide and the latter to the 'outside'. Yet the theorisation of these terms has generally offered little in the way of Hegelian synthesis; in fact, these binaries have tended to result in stubbornly polarised critical positions, enforcing the sense of division between inside and outside, meaning that from the 1960s to the 1980s, Holocaust fiction was widely considered to be, at best, a poor relation to testimony and, at worst, an ethically irresponsible form of literature spreading harmful falsehoods about the genocide. As Sue Vice observes, 'To judge by what many critics have to say, to write Holocaust fiction [was] tantamount to making a fiction out of the Holocaust.'[1] Despite the more nuanced approaches to the representation of the Holocaust by non-victims that have emerged from the 1990s onwards — such as 'proxy-witnessing' (Susan Gubar) and 'secondary witnessing' (Dora Apel) — the hold of these conceptual binaries has meant that the literary categories of testimony and fiction regularly continue to be linked to aesthetic judgements about good and bad literature and ethical judgements about right and wrong. Yet just as the 'inside' of the genocide plays host to a complex set of terms that often exist in

tension with one another — not least the two dominant categories of witnessing and silence, which are clearly at odds with one another, if not mutually exclusive — the 'outside' of the genocide and the world of fiction are not totally divorced from questions of historical truth. As Vice observes, intertextuality is one of the defining methods used by writers of such literature, who frequently draw on historical sources and documentary accounts.[2] When Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus* (1991) made the *New York Times* bestseller list for fiction, the nonplussed author famously wrote to the paper suggesting that this classification undermined the book's factual content, requesting the addition of a new category, 'nonfiction/mice'.[3]

Spiegelman's letter and the compound critical judgements that underpin responses to Holocaust literature raise questions about how to deal with forms of testimonial or autobiographical writing — which is to say literary genres — where clear distinctions between fact and fiction cannot be made. At issue is not simply where we place these texts in libraries or on a bestseller's list but, more fundamentally, how we read them. Robert Eaglestone has argued that genre is not simply a taxonomy or pigeon-hole for texts: it is a powerful, all-encompassing prism that defines how we connect 'texts with contexts, ideas, expectations, rules of argument' and thus 'a way of describing how reading actually takes place'.[4] Taking the example of testimony, Eaglestone cites Elie Wiesel's claim that the Holocaust 'invented a new literature, that of testimony', arguing that the genocide altered the way we read and assimilate this type of writing, even as he acknowledges that personal accounts of real historical events existed before World War Two.[5] For Eaglestone, genre influences the way that readers make certain imaginative connections and assumptions, creating a 'horizon of expectations' through formal and contextual signifiers within and around the text.[6] The media outcry that confidently greets any fraudulent memoir — from Benjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments* (1995) to examples outside the Holocaust context, such

as James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* (2003), a self-professed autobiography about drug addiction famously 'outed' as a fake by Oprah Winfrey on her American chat show — rests precisely on their failure to conform to our expectations of the genre, with authors lacking the legitimate lived experience required to authenticate their texts. Readers still need to know of these authors: Were they or were they not there? Is everything that they write in their books *true*?

This essay asks how we might approach forms of writing that offer eyewitness accounts of traumatic events that confound this traditional separation between autobiographical writing and literary invention, inside and outside, truth and lies, specifically considering works of historical memory that involve collaborative authorship, resting on the joint input of someone who was there and someone who was not. These texts are not hoax testimonies like *Fragments*, although they sometimes involve a certain degree of literary duplicity — for example, where the author named on the book's cover may not have written the words implicitly attributed to them through the text's first person narrative — and, as with *Maus*, they are often highly stylised. They involve overt and covert fictionalisation, altering chronologies, inventing scenes, and using non-realist literary forms. Suggesting the term 'hybrid testimony' as a more formal testimonial equivalent to 'nonfiction/mice', this essay argues that this literature can be thought of as high-stake, high-risk ghost writing, with author-ghosts taking quite different stances on the degree to which they should reveal their faces. It asks whether hybrid testimony should be considered a new genre in its own right, distinct from testimony in the traditional sense, with specific 'ideas, expectations and rules of argument' that shape the ways it is written and read. It also considers some of the social and political factors that inform its production and reception, highlighting multidirectional relationships between Western nations and decolonised countries in the developing world.

Holocaust literature is not replete with examples of such writing. Most obviously, this is because many of the European Jewish survivors were literate and well-educated with university backgrounds, meaning that celebrated works of testimony were produced by intellectuals who were either already skilled writers or who would go on to become authors of fiction in their own right. Works such as Wiesel's *Night* (1955), Primo Levi's *If This Is a Man* (1958) and Charlotte Delbo's *Auschwitz and After* (1985) are valued as documents of witness *and* as high literature. It is also reasonable to assume that the Wiesel-infused cultural zeitgeist of the mid-1950s to the 1980s, when many acclaimed works of Holocaust testimony were first being published, would not have looked favourably on an established author working collaboratively with a victim on an experimental memoir. Yet in the past decade, hybrid testimony has become a popular way of representing personal experiences of conflict, slavery and genocide in decolonised countries, notably in Africa. Along with literary fiction dealing with postcolonial history, these texts are widely read in the West. The same cannot be said for 'non-professional' testimonies written without authorial assistance, although such testimonies are also, of course, relatively uncommon, as the victims of atrocities in countries such as Rwanda, Cambodia and South Sudan often grew up in an oral rather than a literary culture and lack a formal education. Memorial site shops in these countries often stock first-hand accounts by native professional authors from the upper strata of society, but these are atypical of the victim population as a whole and not widely read outside that country. An example would be the fake copies of the 'national bestseller' *First They Killed My Father* (2000) by Loung Ung, the daughter of a high-ranking government official who was murdered by the Khmer Rouge, that are prominently on sale in the gift shop at the Choeung Ek killing field in Cambodia.

This essay discusses two testimonial responses to the civil wars in Sudan that took place after the country gained independence from joint British and Egyptian rule in 1956. By

considering the way that critical approaches to Holocaust testimony can shape our understanding of such texts, it addresses what Eaglestone terms 'the complex and contentious relationship between the Holocaust, colonialism, and genocide': a subject which has been the focus of increased critical attention following the publication of studies such as Michael Rothberg's *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (2009).[7] Rothberg notes that 'the period between 1945 and 1962 contains both the rise of consciousness of the Holocaust as an unprecedented form of modern genocide and the coming to national consciousness and political independence of many of the subjects of European colonialism'.[8] Mindful of such temporalities, Rothberg traces the ways that the Holocaust connects to colonialism through the dynamics of collective memory and group identity. In a similar vein, this essay aims to redress what Eaglestone regards as the failure of scholars of Holocaust representation to reflect on the way that debates around matters such as form, history and truth link to postcolonial texts and contexts, and on the way that the genre of testimony has evolved as a result.[9]

During the period from 1956 to the present, the former Sudan has been beset by conflict, famine and human rights abuses. While the exact figures vary, the BBC reports that the two rounds of the North-South Civil War cost the lives of 1.5 million people and that the continuing conflict in the western region of Darfur has driven 2 million people from their homes and killed more than 200,000.[10] In the period between May 1983 and January 2005 alone, over 4 million people were internally displaced in southern Sudan and nearly 2 million southern Sudanese took refuge in foreign countries.[11] Granted independence in 2011, South Sudan remains one of the world's least developed countries. It has the worst maternal mortality rate in the world. Most children below the age of 13 are not in school and 84% of women are illiterate. One in seven children dies before the age of five.[12] The popular representation of these events in Western literary culture therefore rests on the testimonies of

refugees who have found asylum in Europe and America and who have subsequently met, or actively sought out, established writers to help them tell their stories. The two examples discussed in this essay are *Slave: The True Story of a Girl's Lost Childhood and Her Fight for Survival* (2004), which was co-authored by Mende Nazer and the English writer Damien Lewis, and *What is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng* (2006) by the American writer Dave Eggers, which subtitles itself both 'The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng' and 'A Novel'.

Mende Nazer spent her childhood in a small village in the Nuba Mountains in central Sudan, close to the front-line of the Civil War between the Muslim-dominated government of the North and the rebels of the South. Nazer was abducted at around the age of 12 (her exact date of birth is unknown) by Mujahidin — armed Arab militia loyal to the government — who attacked the village on horseback, massacring inhabitants and capturing children to sell to the slave trade. Following the raid, Nazer was violently raped by her captors then bought by a rich Arab family living in the capital city of Khartoum, where she worked as a domestic slave for seven years. During this time Nazer was beaten, abused and made to sleep in a locked shed. She was not allowed to leave the confines of the family's home unaccompanied and never received payment for her work or a single day off. At around the age of 19 she was loaned to a relative of her master named Abdel Mahmoud Al Koronky who was living in London and working as a diplomat for the Sudanese Embassy. Following two years of domestic slavery in the heart of London, Nazer managed to escape with the assistance of a fellow Sudanese man who worked in a local garage. On the same day she met Lewis, an English journalist, author and filmmaker who had made a number of news documentaries about Sudan's slave trade and was known to members of the local Sudanese community. Lewis filmed a full interview with Nazer three days after her escape.

As they waited for the outcome of her claim for political asylum, Nazer and Lewis began the process of setting down her story in book form. The process was complicated by the fact that Nazer only spoke very basic English. In the afterword to *Slave*, Lewis writes:

> At first, I considered the idea of working with an English-Arabic translator, but I knew that so much of Mende's story was going to be deeply personal, difficult material to talk about. I knew that the key to her being able to tell me about her story from the heart lay in the closeness that would develop between the two of us. She would need to trust me with her most difficult, painful memories and fears.[13]

They therefore worked in English, using a dictionary where required. Lewis took Nazer to the country house of a wealthy friend, where they spent three uninterrupted months writing the first draft of the book, with Lewis typing while Nazer spoke, but with interjections that are reminiscent of Claude Lanzmann's probing, deliberately disruptive interviews in his testimonial film *Shoah* (1985):

> I would always ask her the same questions: 'What did you see? What did you hear? What did you say? What did you smell? How did you feel?'[14]

Lewis was impressed by 'the depth of the detail in which Mende remembered things' and ascribes this to the oral tradition of her culture:[15]

> Her tribe never wrote anything down, but relied on their memories and their skill at storytelling for a sense of who they are, their identity and their place in the world.[16]

After Nazer had finished recounting her story, the initial draft was reduced by two-thirds over a four month period that Lewis describes as 'an intensive stage of creative writing, involving six or seven different redrafts until it was finally complete' with Nazer continually reviewing and advising on the redrafts.[17] Lewis explains that her testimony underwent 'a creative process of selection, condensation and story writing, such that it may be read in an accessible, compelling form'.[18] Through this process, Lewis pared down the original text and began to

deploy the standard conventions of the popular literary memoir in order that it might reach as wide an audience as possible: in its language, style and form, *Slave* is very much of the era of the television book club. The narrative begins with a prologue entitled 'The Raid' that plunges readers straight into the drama of Nazer's capture. Events are thereafter recounted chronologically, beginning with Nazer's largely happy childhood in the Nuba hills, and each chapter is episodic, built around a key event or state of feeling: 'Death Threats', 'Revenge', 'False Hopes', 'Asylum'. The language of the first person narration is simple and to the point but there is little attempt to replicate Nazer's voice or phraseology or to Africanise the text, beyond the use of occasional Arabic words such as 'yebit', meaning 'the one who is not worth having a name', which is how Nazer's domineering mistress referred to her. Indeed, Lewis quite frequently deploys Western colloquialisms such as, 'By now, I knew what Rahab's husband was like. It was clear who wore the trousers in that household.'[19] A number of reference points and moments of humour are also wholly Western in nature and have no connection to Nazer's Sudanese culture or identity. For example, the final chapter is entitled, 'Desperately Seeking Asylum'.

These elements of structural and aesthetic stylisation characterise hybrid testimony and are even more emphatically brought to the fore in *What Is the What*, written by Dave Eggers, who rose to prominence following the publication of his first novel, the inventive, postmodern autobiography *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000). His third full-length literary work, *What Is the What*, was published two years after *Slave* and tells the story of Valentino Achak Deng who, like Nazer, was a young child when Arab militia attacked the rural village that was his family home. At the age of 7, Deng was forced to flee and in the midst of the Second Sudan Civil War he became one of the so-called 'lost boys' who were left to walk hundreds of miles on foot, crossing three deserts in three different countries, in order to find refuge from the conflict. During this time he was variously pursued

by militant groups, bomber planes and wild animals. Eggers draws attention to the continued persecution that Deng also faced when he escaped the refugee camps of Ethiopia and Kenya and settled in the United States: *What Is the What* begins with him being attacked and burgled in his Atlanta home.

Much like *Slave*, the book was born of a close relationship between the author and the eyewitness. Having been introduced to Mary Williams, the founder of the Lost Boys Foundation in Atlanta, Deng confided that he wished to tell the story of his life in book form. Williams wrote to Eggers directly, inviting him to meet some of the Sudanese refugees who were living in Atlanta. Over a period of around three years, Eggers regularly met with Deng to discuss his story, while also exchanging emails, tape recordings and phone calls. As Deng puts it in the preface, 'I told Dave what I knew and what I could remember, and from that material he created this work of art'.[20] The book styles itself in much this fashion, which is to say both fiction *and* memoir: the coming together of Dave Eggers, the famous American novelist, and the real Valentino Achak Deng. In an interview, Eggers describes it as 'a fictionalized autobiography, in Valentino's voice'.[21] The preface is ascribed to Deng writing at his college in 2007 and opens by stating that the book is 'the soulful account' of his life.[22] A short reflection on his experiences in Sudan and how he first came to collaborate with Eggers, the literariness of this opening passage, along with the distinctive, conversational voice of Deng that is recognisable from the main narrative, nonetheless make one suspect that Eggers had at least some hand in its construction.

Eggers and Deng both cite the technical impossibility of recalling and transcribing exact conversations that took place years before as a reason for terming the text 'a novel', but these obstacles hold for any work of autobiography or testimony.[23] Readers appreciate that the dialogue in *Night* and *If This Is a Man* is an approximation to actual conversations, not a verbatim reproduction. Where *What Is the What* differs from these accounts, however, is in

the many instances where the historical record and exact chronologies are *knowingly* altered: for example, some scenes are based on Western news reports of the Civil War, rather than Deng's personal history. Eggers acknowledges that he included 'invented scenes that were necessary to describe the whole sweep of those twenty or so years that the book covers'.[24] Deng puts it in the following terms: 'We live in a time where even the most horrific events in this book could occur, and in most cases, did occur'.[25] In interviews, both Eggers and Deng stressed that 'the parts of the book that seem most incredible are those that are most true'.[26]

The idea of a fictional autobiography is not uncommon but the same cannot be said of the idea of a *real* fictionalised autobiography, which so openly undermines the legalistic sense of what it means to testify, to bear witness. Centrally, the book breaks what the French literary theorist Philip Lejeune terms the 'autobiographical pact', which he defines as 'an implicit or explicit contract' between author and reader that allows the reader to trust in the author's sincere efforts to represent the true facts of their own life.[27] For Lejeune, that autobiographical pact 'determines the mode of reading of the text and engenders the effects which […] seem to define it as autobiography'.[28] While *What Is the What* attracted a great deal of acclaim on its publication, many critics were uncomfortable with the elements of overt fictionalisation that undermined the 'implicit or explicit contract' brokered through the autobiographical pact. Writing in *The New Republic*, Lee Siegel attacked Eggers for imposing his own attitudes, opinions and mannerisms onto the character of Deng, arguing that this led to the occlusion of Deng's Sudanese identity. Siegel writes:

> The worst aspect of *What Is the What* […] is that Deng's attitudes are tyrannically refracted through Eggers's reshaping of them. Deng does not represent himself. Eggers represents him. You never know whether the startling self-pity that Deng occasionally displays — when two other boys are eaten by lions, Deng laments his unluckiness — is his own or not. In Deng's own voice, these flashes from the

> underside of his ego might have been extenuated by irony or self-awareness. The same goes for Deng's hostile, suspicious, sometimes contemptuous attitudes toward American blacks. They might have been somehow vindicated in the full-throated revelation of his personality. Or maybe not. We will never know. In Eggers's hands, the survivor's voice does not survive.[29]

Siegel's mistrust of hybrid testimony and his wish to unknot the voices of survivor and writer hark back to the critical mistrust of Holocaust fiction expressed decades before.

While Lewis recognises that Mende Nazer's identity and her sense of 'her place in the world' were constructed within an oral culture, the more formulaic narrative devices employed in *Slave* do not approximate to a more authentic expression of the identity of the victim than *What Is the What*. Despite Lewis's protestations to the contrary, this is neither the voice nor language of Nazer herself. The language of entrapment even unwittingly surfaces in the final sentence of Lewis's afterword:

> The final product – *Slave* – remains an incredibly detailed account of Mende's life story. In it I hope I have captured the voice of a young Nuba child and then woman in a way that is authentic, compelling and real'.[30]

However well-meaning and exacting the author's intentions might be, hybrid testimony always lacks the authenticity of firsthand eyewitness accounts. Yet criticisms of this inauthenticity, such as Siegel's, misunderstand a complex mode of representation, because the first principle of hybrid testimony is that *the survivor's voice cannot survive*. These texts originate when an exiled survivor who lacks the necessary tools and cultural reference points to express their story in a Western literary form begins to work with a professional writer who can help them. The testimony is being delivered through a stylised medium that is wholly foreign to the survivor. That is a given.

Critiques which unbendingly focus on issues of autobiographical authenticity also rest on an overly narrow view of what constitutes testimony 'proper'. Recent approaches to testimony, such as Eaglestone's, follow from a prevalent sense that the Holocaust gave rise to a mode of writing that was distinct from anything that had preceded it, acknowledging the intensification of writerly, readerly and critical responses to trauma that took place in the wake of the Nazi genocide and the commensurate growth in sales of such literature. For Eaglestone, the inception of this literary genre from a defined historical moment involved techniques such as imagery, interruptions and narrative frames being employed by eyewitnesses to disrupt the normative ways that readers consume their writing, preventing them from thinking that horrific events are all too readily comprehensible.[31] This means that testimony is not composed solely of non-literary eyewitness 'voices' recounting objective facts in realist prose. In *First They Killed My Father*, for example, Ung offers long descriptions of things that happened to members of her family which she clearly did not witness, including her father's murder.[32] These italicised passages detail the way she *imagines* these tragic events taking place. She does not omit them because they might not have been factually true; rather, they are woven into the fabric of her testimony as a defining part of her reality, both as she experienced and remembered it.

Neither is testimony limited to the autobiographical memoir, based on the template of the nineteenth century realist novel and the associated claim that 'the clarity of realism gets as close to the "truth" of encounter as is possible in a written medium'.[33] Recently, critics of Holocaust representation have begun to expand our sense of the forms that testimonial writing can take. Antony Rowland, for example, observes that the lyric, and poetry in general, can also function as testimony. He notes that in the seminal book on the subject, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (1992), Shoshana

Felman and Dori Laub discuss poems by Stéphane Mallarmé and Paul Celan, as well as more traditional documentary forms, and argues that poetry offers unique testimonial insights:

> Poetic form is adept — particularly in the lyric — at conveying the epiphanic moment, truncated recollections, and the emotive space addressed to another that need not be repressed behind the (supposed) objectivity of facts. The time lapses, pauses and opportunities for concentration that the lyric can perform allow for reflection on traumatic experiences in a way distinct from prose.[34]

Against Susan Gubar's claim that fragmentary, stymied or broken testimonial poems enact a 'throttling of the testimonial utterance', Rowland argues that 'this "throttling" *is a testimonial act in itself*', engaging with confusion and disorientation in a way that contributes to, rather than negates, the testamentary function of Holocaust verse.[35]

If such insights suggest that Holocaust testimony represents a new genre in a new socio-historical context, then it seems that its logic has seeped into a wider historical moment, with writers and readers relating their experiences of the literature of the Holocaust to more recent atrocities, genocides and wars. Resting on the provocative notion that it conforms to the logic of the work of art as much as it does to the logic of the documentary, hybrid testimony nonetheless has much in common with the parental genre of testimony 'proper', evidencing the polymorphous, challenging and often experimental nature of a broad and all-too-relevant genre that has always combined factual and fictional elements.

While hybrid testimony can encompass very different literary styles, from conventional literary realism to postmodern invention and playfulness, these variously conceal and expose this element of invention, making this a genre that has strong connections to testimony but which is also to some degree at war with itself. What Rowland terms 'the pressure of the metatext' prevents facts from being engulfed by fiction into some kind of relativist, revisionist historical black hole.[36] But the idea that the end product is as much

fiction as fact — be it through scenes of explicit invention or through modes of narration — would not rest easily with all authors of hybrid testimony. Lewis's afterword to *Slave*, for example, emphatically emphasises its truth content. This conflict between fact and fiction, and the associated ambiguity of how to read the genre, might therefore be regarded as one of hybrid testimony's distinguishing features: the element of artistry being either radically foregrounded or radically occluded to the point where it is not obvious that a trauma memoir has involved a ghost-writer.

Another characteristic that hybrid testimony develops out of more traditional forms of testimonial writing is a concern with the nature of its own reception. In Holocaust testimony, direct forms of readerly address are used to draw us into an awareness of the writing's truthfulness or the limits of our historical understanding. Primo Levi, for example, reflects on how his testimonial writing will be received by readers and tries to guide this process in ways that are alternately persuasive and aggressive: 'Consider that this has been,' he writes in the poem 'Shemà' that opens *If This Is a Man*, 'Or may your house crumble,/ Disease render you powerless,/ Your offspring avert their faces from you.'[37] In *On Autobiography*, Lejeune recognises that the autobiographical pact relates directly to questions of literary reception. It is, he writes, 'a mode of reading as much as it is a type of writing'.[38] If more experimental and self-conscious works of hybrid testimony such as *What Is the What* expose this particularly trustful mode of reading as itself belonging to the realm of fiction, then they do this purposefully — and here the genre of hybrid testimony begins to individuate itself. For *What Is the What* is not simply, as Siegel would have it, 'one more instance of the accelerating mash-up of truth and falsehood in the culture'.[39] Rather, it aims to re-establish and renegotiate the terms of the autobiographical pact, inasmuch as it underpins hybrid testimony, forcing us to ask metatextual questions of the genre and challenging assumptions about the ways that we read, and the purpose of reading, such literature.

How, then, might we begin to define hybrid testimony as another 'new literature'? A distinctive characteristic of this mode of writing is that it originates in a process of literary production involving an eyewitness and a professional author. This is signalled within the texts themselves through subtitles, prologues, epilogues, afterwords, introductions and photographs, and it is easy to envisage a postmodern text inscribing references to such collaborations within its main narrative. A specific type of collaborative authorship thus engenders the genre and sometimes constitutes its content, suggesting the kind of definition that would prove helpful to the construction of taxonomies of different forms of testimony. However, the ways these texts are read, and the complex economic, political, historical factors that determine how they create distinct types of meaning, are more central to the way hybrid testimony functions as a genre in the wider sense offered by Eaglestone. Hybrid testimony is clearly not a documentary form concerned to establish bare facts, like a news report, nor is it a mode of engagement with the past that is born entirely of the imagination, like a work of fiction. It specifically demands that we navigate beyond the oppositional logic of silence and language, inside and outside, fact and fiction, truth and lies, that has dominated critical responses to Holocaust literature, refusing the absolute dominion of any of these terms. This resistance to clear epistemological categorisation links to the way that these works suggest meanings whose enormities are equally difficult to grasp: the narrative of *What Is the What* revolves around the fundamental impossibility of defining 'the what', with Deng's experiences, and the situation in Sudan more broadly, eluding the readers whom the narrator so desperately reaches for. But set against this pervasive ambiguity and incomprehensibility, this mode of writing emphasises the need for readers to engage with other people's pain, and readers are implicated in accounts that explore their own reception and non-reception just as much as they do their historical origins, with the Holocaust dictum 'never forget' seeming to pale, paradoxically and impossibly, before a call for imaginative

and political engagement on the basis of a 'what' that cannot be known. And this cuts to the chase of the project of hybrid testimony, a genre where *narrative and form are shaped not only by the real life experiences of their principal characters, but also by the complex ways that their stories will be received by Western readers.*

What Is the What concludes with a passage that acknowledges that without the active imaginative work of the reader, Deng's narrative would still only be aimed at 'the air, the sky' in a manner that would render him silent and 'utterly powerless'. The existence of a Western readership animates, invigorates and revivifies his life story:

> I speak to these people, and 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 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.[40]

Involving an act of faith that draws together writer and reader, this conception of storytelling might be construed as a challenge to the reader, asking us to identify some other substance to this text, a mode of thought or feeling or form of truth that permits the 'soulful' distortion of the historical record.

A challenging mode of address also characterises the main narrative, with Deng recurrently directing his story to the people whom he encounters in Atlanta. This is not simply an 'absurd narrative trick', as Siegel calls it, but rather an extension of an inner monologue that had been triggered by Deng's arrival in America. The character Deng says:

> When I first came to this country, I would tell silent stories. I would tell them to people who had wronged me. If someone cut in front of me in line, ignored me, bumped me or pushed me, I would glare at them, staring, silently hissing a story to them. *You do not understand*, I would tell them. *You would not add to my suffering if you knew what I have seen*. And until that person left my sight, I would tell them about Deng, who died after eating elephant meat, nearly raw, or about Ahok and Awach Ugieth, twin sisters who were carried off by Arab horsemen and, if they are still alive today, have by now borne children by those men and whoever they sold them to. *Do you have any idea?* Those innocent twins likely remember nothing about me or our town or to whom they were born. *Can you imagine this?* When I was finished talking to that person I would continue my stories, talking to the air, the sky, to all the people of the world and whoever might be listening in heaven. It is wrong to say that I used to tell these stories. I still do, and not only to those I feel have wronged me. The stories emanate from me all the time I am awake and breathing, and I want everyone to hear them. Written words are rare in small villages like mine, and it is my right and obligation to send my stories into the world, even if silently, even if utterly powerless.[41]

These inner monologues inform the entire narrative structure of *What Is the What*. The early account of Deng's childhood in Sudan, for example, is addressed to the young American boy who guards him when he is being held up in his apartment. Further monologues are addressed to a hospital receptionist, an ex-girlfriend and various members of a gym where he works. As Eaglestone notes, their unwillingness to grasp these events contrasts to 'the widespread community of the Sudanese diaspora — in contact by mobile phone and web — [which] is seen as supportive and understanding'.[42] Through applying the need-to-tell of the Ancient Mariner to the structure of the novel itself, Eggers's narration involves not only various

individuals who may or may not have wronged the real Valentino Achak Deng but, more importantly, a whole readership, indeed all the nations of the West whose colonial projects so wronged Sudan, dividing the country into an impossibly incompatible bipartite state.

The same feelings of social responsibility and, one might guess, historical culpability that led Eggers to take up Deng's cause would also seem to characterise the real and implied readers who take up Eggers's book. The popularity of hybrid testimony clearly links to much wider publishing trends in the early part of the twenty first century, which Eaglestone characterises as

> a sudden burst – almost like the eruption of a guilty conscience – of distressing and traumatic narratives from Africa. And, of course, this is an eruption of a guilty Western conscience that has too often passed over the particular and complex problems and difficulties in Africa.[43]

These works do not, therefore, tend to lapse into self-satisfied and ethically dubious self-congratulation. Rather, the wider political and historical context of oppression and imperialism is frequently acknowledged in the metatext of hybrid testimony and the politics of the mode of literary production are equally inescapable, with each new book conforming to the basic consumer logic of Western capitalism: the very system that underpinned the colonisation of Africa. The production of these books is thus grounded in the same commercial model that ultimately gave rise to the tragic events that form their content. Further ethical ambiguity is occasioned by the fact that these books are not written for a Sudanese readership, but for readers in the West whose lifestyles remain inextricably bound to global systems of mass exploitation and who consume such literature as a mode of entertainment. In this compromising socio-economic context, hybrid testimony might be construed as a secondary form of Western exploitation or victimisation, only this one being literary rather than governmental in nature.

This is not to say, however, that literature cannot challenge the political systems or social contexts within which it is produced and, to paraphrase Karl Marx, *the purpose of hybrid testimony is not to reflect the world as it is but rather to change it*. Works of hybrid testimony routinely spell out the direct political significance and purpose of their narratives, characterising the genre as a pressingly engaged form of literature. Renewing a Sartrean vision of literary commitment, *What Is the What* departs from the realities of the factual memoir and ideas about autobiographical and historical authenticity in order to tackle the crises of the present, framing Deng's childhood experiences in Sudan within narratives that centre on the violence and alienation he suffers as a refugee in the United States. It concludes by offering thanks to a long list of people and organisations and drawing attention to the ongoing educational work undertaken in Sudan by the Valentino Achak Deng Foundation. Similarly, the formal conservatism of *Slave* is dramatically counterpointed to the radical nature of its politics. Lewis's afterword and Nazer's acknowledgements survey the current humanitarian crisis in Sudan — with particular reference to the continuation of the country's widespread slave trade — and point the reader towards organisations that are working towards its alleviation.

The direct human significance of *Slave* was manifold: this is life-changing, even life-saving literature. The book was published in Germany one month before Nazer's asylum claim was refused and the popular success of the book on its initial publication won Nazer support from politicians, human rights campaigners and organisations such as Amnesty International and Anti-slavery International. The book and the publicity it attracted were directly cited by the Home Office as factors that influenced the reversal of their decision to refuse Nazer's asylum claim. A Home Office letter stated:

> In view of the widespread publication of her book and the high profile given to her claims both in Sudan and elsewhere, I am satisfied that Ms. Nazer would face

> difficulties which would bring her within the scope of the 1951 convention were she to be returned to Sudan. For these reasons it has been decided to recognise her as a refugee and grant her Indefinite Leave to Remain in the United Kingdom.[44]

Since the publication of *Slave*, Nazer's story has been retold as a Channel 4 film, *I Am Slave* (2010), and as a play that toured nationally in the United Kingdom, *Slave: A Question of Freedom* (2010). Both versions altered the text of *Slave* to greater or lesser degrees, with the film adding a series of implausible and obviously fictional plot twists, but each helped to raise awareness of slavery in Sudan and in England. In line with the principles of hybrid testimony, these alterations were driven by the imperative to engage with different types of audience and are characteristic rather than asymptomatic of the genre.

Hybrid testimony is thus an art of humanism that is largely geared towards social, political and inner transformation. The popular memoir style of *Slave*, which makes Nazer's personal plight accessible to a wide Western readership, and the ambitious addressivity of *What Is the What*, which implicates the Western reader in the ethical framework of the main narrative, constitute two stylistically contrasting expressions of the same underlying political commitment. The genre is also, of course, informed by the poetics of witness, fuelled by the victims' need to testify to their experiences, and its rules derive from an urgency born of the coming together of victims and perpetrators of conflicts such as the civil wars in Sudan, where 'perpetrators' are understood as those working within — and to some degree against — global economic systems founded on colonial exploitation. Hybrid testimony can therefore be thought of as a complex textual formation that is born of, and responsive to, colonialism, wherein traumatic individual experience meets with Western guilt, ultimately seeking redress in the thoughts and actions of the Western reader. This mode of testimonial writing is thus representative of *the history of a trauma* which, as Cathy Caruth writes in her introduction to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), 'can only take place through the listening of

another'.[45] The way that trauma addresses itself to, and historicises itself through, 'the listening of another' relates not only to individuals but also, Caruth argues, to whole cultures and what she terms a 'wider historical isolation' that determines the way that different cultures interact with one another.[46] She writes:

> This speaking and this listening — a speaking and a listening *from the site of trauma* — does not rely, I would suggest, on what we simply know of each other, but on what we don't yet know of our own traumatic pasts. In a catastrophic age, that is, trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures: not as a simple understanding of the pasts of others but rather, within the traumas of contemporary history, as our ability to listen through the departures we have all taken from ourselves.[47]

For Caruth, this intercultural conversation involves 'survivors of the catastrophes of one culture addressing the survivors of another'.[48] Hybrid testimony, as we have noted, does not involve conversations between survivors — being in part a perpetrator response, it cannot be said to link cultures through a mutual acknowledgement of their shared experience of trauma — yet the role that Western authors and readers play in the production and reception of hybrid testimony nonetheless demands a compassionate 'departure from ourselves' that provides the ethical foundations for this principled mode of testimonial writing.

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